



DCPsych thesis

**Understanding of therapists' experiences and perceptions of equine facilitated psychotherapy, an interpretative phenomenological study**

**Salah, F.A.**

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Doctorate of Counselling Psychology (DCPsych)

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**Research Title**

**Understanding of Therapists' Experiences and Perceptions of  
Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, An Interpretative  
Phenomenological Study**

Primary Supervisor: Dr. Julie Scheiner

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Iliana Stamogiannou

**DECLARATION**

Student number: M00653423

**I declare that Understanding of Therapists' Experiences and Perceptions of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, An Interpretative Phenomenological Study is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged utilizing complete references.**

\_Fatine Salah\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_3 October 2024\_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE

DATE

(NAME)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is a form of animal-assisted therapy that seeks to address mental health issues. Previous works have been centered on what the clients experience, this interpretative phenomenological analysis study focuses on the lived experiences of six EFP therapists. It aims to bring out how they were affected personally and professionally by being part of EFP approach.

Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis: EFP as an "Arena of Growth," an "Unconventional Therapy Session," a personal growth via "Living the Experience, Learning from Equines," and a field presenting unique "Challenges." Participants highlighted the transformative power of the horse-human bond, the experiential nature of EFP sessions, and the profound personal development they experienced through their work. They also identified challenges related to equine welfare, environmental limitations, financial accessibility, and the need for further research to substantiate EFP's efficacy.

These results provide useful information about what it means to be an EFP therapist which can help in understanding this new area better. They highlight some areas that should be investigated by future researchers including how different methods work together with EFPs and looking at long term effects on well-being and professional growth among therapists involved in such

programmes. Moreover, there is need for wider recognition through stronger evidence base showing its efficacy as a therapeutic approach.

### **KEY TERMS:**

Equine facilitated psychotherapy, counselling, psychotherapy, equine assisted therapy, mental health, therapists, embodiment, animal assisted therapy, psychotherapy, therapy.

### **STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION:**

#### Chapter 1: Introduction:

This chapter introduces the research context, providing a foundation in EFP terminology and outlining the study's objectives and significance within the field.

#### Chapter 2: Literature Review:

This chapter examines the existing literature on EFP, exploring definitions, models, professional organisations, implementation, current research, therapists' perspectives, theoretical orientations, and the benefits and limitations of the modality.

#### Chapter 3: Research Methodology:

This chapter details the qualitative research design and sampling procedures employed in the study. It describes the data collection instruments

(semi-structured interviews), analytical procedures (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis), and measures taken to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations and the researcher's reflexivity process are also discussed.

#### Chapter 4: Findings:

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis, organised into four main themes that emerged from participants' narratives: An Arena of Growth, Unconventional Therapy Session, Personal Growth, and Challenges.

#### Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretations:

This chapter offers an in-depth interpretation and discussion of the findings in relation to the study's aims. The meanings and implications of each theme are explored, drawing connections to existing literature and highlighting unique insights from the participants' experiences.

#### Chapter 6: Implications, Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusion:

This chapter discusses the study's implications for EFP practice and research, acknowledges its limitations, and provides recommendations for future studies. The researcher's reflections on the research process are also presented, offering a personal perspective on the study's journey and impact.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Animal-Assisted Therapies (AAT) are a group of various therapeutic methods that exploit the impact produced by human-animal relationships on human health. Within these forms, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is an approach that offers hope to people with mental, physical or psychological problems and those who want to develop themselves further. This method employs a team consisting of at least one qualified mental health professional, an equine specialist certified by one of the recognized bodies such as EAGALA, PATH Intl., and horses.

The equine specialist's knowledge of horse behaviour and handling ensures the safety of both animals and clients. The mental health professional contributes clinical expertise, guiding the therapeutic process and facilitating personal growth in individuals seeking their support. Together, these professionals create an environment where clients can interact with horses in ways that are authentic and genuine towards their own feelings and those of others around them (EAGALA, 2009).

Schultz et al. (2007), Lentini & Knox (2009), and Tyler (1994) have investigated this model because it uses deliberate equine activities for emotional growth and learning rather than just having fun with the animals as some might do during recreational trips. In relation to different types of mental illnesses like depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and attention deficit



hyperactivity disorder, among others, horses are believed to give immediate feedback based on their intuitive nature coupled with non-verbal communication skills, thereby reflecting clients' emotions back at them, which could help promote self-awareness about oneself and emotional self-regulation too.

## **1.1 TERMINOLOGY**

The field of equine-assisted interventions employs various terminologies, often interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, the term Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) will be used to refer to the specific therapeutic approach involving a qualified mental health professional, an equine specialist, and horses working together to achieve psychotherapy goals. While similar terms like Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) exist, this study aligns with the definition of EFP proposed by Karol (2007), emphasizing the use of "existential action-oriented and experientially based psychotherapeutic methods" that utilize clients' real encounters with a horse as the basis for therapeutic investigation.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Horses have been used therapeutically for centuries, and a number of equine-assisted interventions have become popular in recent years. Research has shown that working with horses can help people build confidence, improve self-

esteem, and learn emotional regulations (Burgon, 2011; Trotter et al., 2008). It is within this context that EFP has emerged as an effective complementary or alternative therapy for individuals with mental health problems where conventional methods might have failed. Despite the increasing interest around it and positive results from its application, there is a lack of studies investigating what therapists' experiences who use EFP approach, and what may go through while implementing such untraditional approach.

Most studies have concentrated on what clients perspectives and experiences in EFP therapy but not much attempt has been made to investigate the views and experiences of EFP therapists. This gap in knowledge creates difficulty for future therapists or clinicians to fully understand different issues that motivate therapists to practice EFP, challenges they could face, as well as how practicing EFP could affects their personal lives and careers.

### **1.3 PERSONAL INTEREST**

The present study reflects my love for horses and my practice as an equine-facilitated psychotherapist. Having interacted with horses throughout my life, I have a personal relationship with them, as they have influenced me physically, mentally, and socially. My 15-year experience as a psychologist, trainer, mental health advocate, and therapeutic riding instructor has given me a solid foundation in EFP. My academic background in psychology and existential therapy prompted

me to become qualified in EFP through the EAGALA Institute. This has enabled me to incorporate my academic understanding into a somatically based clinical practice. Moreover, having personally experienced EFP as a client during my own trauma treatment, I have witnessed firsthand the benefits of this unique therapeutic approach. I experienced increased self-awareness, emotional regulation, and a deeper connection with my own emotions. The non-judgmental presence of the horses and the experiential nature of the therapy fostered an untraditional safe space for me to explore and process difficult emotions, ultimately leading to personal growth and healing.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION**

This study is guided by the following research question: What are the perspectives and experiences of therapists in using equine-facilitated psychotherapy?

#### **1.6 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of therapists' lived experiences with EFP and how it influences their personal and professional lives. By examining their perspectives, motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits of EFP, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in this field and inform future practice and research.

## **1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH**

Different stakeholders within the EFP and wider mental health community can benefit from the findings of this research. For instance, EFP practitioners can gain valuable insights into the lived experiences and challenges faced by their colleagues, potentially leading to improved practice, enhanced self-awareness, and a stronger sense of community within the field. This deeper understanding can inform the development of targeted support systems and professional development opportunities tailored to the unique needs of EFP therapists. This study could also benefit individuals and clients seeking scientific information on EFP as a potential therapeutic approach. By shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of EFP therapists, this research can provide valuable insights into the therapeutic process, helping potential clients make informed decisions about their treatment options.

Accordingly, this study into therapists' experiences of EFP offers a valuable resource for potential practitioners, providing an in-depth look at the professional landscape, including the challenges and rewards associated with this field. This information can empower aspiring therapists to make informed decisions about their career paths and develop strategies for navigating the complexities of EFP practice.

Additionally, the study can be used by practitioners already involved in the field who may have unique perspectives on the nature of therapeutic interaction

between humans and horses offering a platform for reflection and dialogue to enhance their practice.

Moreover, the study's findings could help researchers to know which areas to navigate further. It is worth noting that these findings may also be relevant for policy makers and organizations that work in mental health sector, considering such aspects as deeper understanding of therapy provided by horse-human bond and how this particular method can be integrated into traditional forms of mental healthcare.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The current study aims to explore and understand therapists' experiences with equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP). By focusing on the therapist's perspective, rather than the client's, this research will contribute a unique viewpoint to the existing body of literature on EFP as the existing studies have focused on. The research will address questions about the lived experience of being an EFP therapist, the influence of working with horses on therapists' personal and professional lives, the perceived benefits and drawbacks of this work, and the challenges encountered in this emerging field.

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature on how and why therapists use EFP. It encompasses the historical progression of animal-assisted therapy, the rationale for incorporating horses into therapeutic settings, an inventory of different models utilised in equine-related interventions, and a review of professional organisations dedicated to equine therapy. Additionally, the chapter delves into the specific characteristics of EFP, including session structure, the current state of EFP research, therapists' perspectives, existential perspectives on EFP, prevalent theoretical orientations, and the perceived advantages and limitations of this modality.

### **2.1.1 Accessed Resources**

The literature review for this study drew upon a variety of sources, including academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, as well as relevant books and articles on equine-assisted psychotherapy, animal-assisted therapy, interpretative phenomenological analysis, therapists' perspectives, and existential therapy. Boolean operators were used to search for connections between these topics.

In addition, the study utilised a compilation of scholarly articles and research studies compiled by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). While these sources predominantly focus on the EAGALA Model, they offered valuable insights into research methodologies employed in EFP, the benefits and drawbacks associated with EFP, and the broader context of the field.

## **2.2 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY (AAT)**

Understanding the historical evolution of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) provides a foundational context for comprehending the emergence and development of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) as a distinct therapeutic modality. A review of AAT's history offers insights into the gradual recognition

of animals as valuable partners in promoting human well-being, setting the stage for appreciating how EFP evolved into its current practice.

People have employed animals for millennia, whether for food, transportation, or companionship (Pugh, 2010). However, animal therapy, at least in its current organised form, is a much newer field. According to Kemp et al. (2013), animals are also considered an essential emotional bridge for establishing therapeutic relationships. The York Retreat in England, during the 18th century, is credited as the first documented instance of using animals in psychotherapy and as socialisation agents for patients with mental illness. The psychiatric hospital's inner courtyard was filled with small, free-roaming animals, allowing patients to interact with them (Serpell, 2010).

Florence Nightingale, a renowned English nurse, recognised the therapeutic potential of animal companionship for people with severe physical disabilities in the nineteenth century. The notion that animals facilitate socialisation survived into the nineteenth century (Abrams, 2013). Animals as a therapeutic aid re-emerged in the mid-twentieth century when child psychotherapist Boris Levinson asserted that animals might facilitate a therapeutic interaction between patient and therapist (Serpell, 2010). Levinson (1997), the first person to articulate professional ethics within the field of AAT, stated that "a relationship to animals enhances the human condition" (p. 1).



Black, Chur-Hansen, and Winefield (2011) conducted a quantitative research study to investigate the effects of dogs in therapy sessions. Their findings demonstrated that the presence of a therapy dog significantly increased rapport and trust between participants and counsellors. Participants in sessions with a dog present reported feeling more comfortable, relaxed, and open to sharing personal information. The benefits of using therapy dogs extended beyond the immediate effects on the participants, also reducing stress and anxiety in the counsellor, which can improve their ability to provide effective therapy.

Clients perceived companion animals as conduits of unconditional positive regard, expressing love and offering comfort through gentle touch and warmth in ways that therapists and psychiatrists were unable to replicate. The participants in the study believed that the presence of a companion animal helped in the establishment of rapport and building of trust in counselling sessions, allowing clients to explore and discuss difficult emotions or topics with greater ease and openness (Black, Chur-Hansen, & Winefield, 2011).

### **2.3 THE UNIQUE THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL OF HORSES**

While AAT encompasses a variety of species, the incorporation of horses into therapy presents unique possibilities due to their distinct characteristics as prey animals. This section explores how these inherent traits, honed through evolution, contribute to their effectiveness in therapeutic settings.

Horses, as prey animals, have evolved to be hyper-vigilant to their surroundings. Their wide field of vision and ability to perceive subtle changes in the environment (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005; Irwin, 2005) enable them to detect and respond to even the slightest shifts in human emotions and behaviours. This heightened awareness allows horses to serve as a mirror, reflecting the emotional and physical states of those they interact with (Green, 2013; Trotter, 2011). In EFP, this mirroring effect can facilitate clients' self-awareness and emotional regulation, as they observe the horse's reactions to their own behaviours.

Horses communicate primarily through non-verbal cues, which aligns with the emphasis on embodied experience within EFP. Their inability to deceive or manipulate through language (Green, 2013) fosters an environment of authenticity and trust. Masini (2010) characterises horses as "biofeedback machines," reflecting people's emotional and cognitive reactions in a direct and unfiltered way. This immediate feedback can be particularly valuable in therapeutic settings, as it allows clients to gain insight into their own internal states and develop healthier coping mechanisms.

Expanding on this, Cody, Steiker, and Szymadera (2011) found that horses not only reflect emotional states but also respond more positively to authentic emotions, potentially encouraging clients to engage in a more genuine way during therapy. This ability to discern authenticity underscores the horse's role as a co-facilitator in the therapeutic process, offering a unique form of support and

guidance that complements the therapist's role. Additionally, the horse immediately displays a person's consistency. As a result of the horse's reaction and the analyses of the therapy group, the individual may become more conscious of their emotional and cognitive processes and attain more congruence (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).

Beyond their heightened awareness and non-verbal communication, other equine characteristics contribute to their therapeutic value. The horse's size and strength can create opportunities for exploring themes of power, vulnerability, and control (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Additionally, the act of caring for and interacting with horses can foster a sense of responsibility, empathy, and nurturing (Bachi et al., 2012), contributing to clients' overall well-being. Kohanov (2000) has also explored the concept of resonance in equine therapy, suggesting that horses and humans can achieve a state of emotional synchrony that enhances the therapeutic process. While this concept is intriguing, it requires further empirical investigation to fully understand its mechanisms and potential benefits.

While the literature highlights numerous potential benefits of utilising horses in therapy, it is important to note that the empirical evidence supporting these claims is still evolving. Many studies have methodological limitations, such as small sample sizes and lack of control groups (Johnson et al., 2015). Further research is needed to establish a more robust evidence base for EFP and to

explore the specific mechanisms through which horses facilitate therapeutic change.

## **2.4 MODELS OF EQUINE RELATED INTERVENTIONS**

In the field of equine-related interventions, various therapeutic approaches have emerged, each employing unique methodologies and emphasising different aspects of the horse-human relationship. These models encompass a wide range of interventions, including physical therapies such as hippotherapy, which utilises the movement of the horse to improve neurological function and sensory processing, and therapeutic riding, which focuses on developing physical strength, balance, and coordination through riding activities. Additionally, cognitive-behavioural interventions like equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) and equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) incorporate horses into psychotherapy sessions to address mental health challenges such as trauma, anxiety, and depression. Finally, personal development frameworks such as equine-assisted learning (EAL) utilise horses to foster personal growth, leadership skills, and communication abilities in individuals and groups.

Understanding these diverse models is crucial for comprehending the breadth of therapeutic possibilities offered by equine interactions and the nuanced approaches employed by therapists. By recognizing the unique contributions of each approach, researchers and practitioners can better tailor interventions to the

specific needs of individuals and populations, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and impact of equine-related therapies.

To provide a comprehensive overview, the following table outlines the key characteristics, theoretical basis, and target populations for four prominent Equine related interventions models:

**Table 1: Overview of four prominent equine related interventions models**

Model	Key Characteristics	Theoretical Basis	Target Population
Hippotherapy	Focuses on physical rehabilitation, utilising the horse's movement for therapeutic effect.	Sensory integration theory, motor learning principles	Individuals with physical disabilities, neurological conditions, etc.
Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP)	Experiential psychotherapy incorporating horses as co-facilitators.	Diverse theoretical orientations (CBT, psychodynamic, etc.)	Individuals with mental health concerns, trauma, etc.
Equine-Assisted Personal Development (EAPD)	Emphasises personal growth and empowerment through horse-human interaction.	Holistic, experiential learning, self-efficacy theory	Individuals seeking personal development, self-esteem enhancement, etc.
Equine Experiential Learning (Epona Model)	Integrates horses into experiential learning and personal growth processes, with a focus on sensory and emotional awareness and spiritual connection.	Resonance theory, embodied learning, shamanic traditions	Individuals seeking personal growth, spiritual connection, etc.

#### **2.4.1 Hippotherapy:**

This model focuses on physical rehabilitation, utilising the horse's movement to improve coordination, posture, and balance (Casady & Nichols-Larsen, 2004). While research suggests promising results for individuals with neurological and physiological conditions (Hammer et al., 2005), further investigation is needed to establish its efficacy for a broader range of populations and conditions.

#### **2.4.2 Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP):**

EFP is an experiential psychotherapy model that incorporates horses as co-facilitators in the therapeutic process. It is grounded in various theoretical orientations, including cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy, and others (Corsini & Wedding, 2005). However, the effectiveness of EFP in treating specific mental health conditions requires further empirical validation.

#### **2.4.3 Equine-Assisted Personal Development (EAPD):**

EAPD emphasises personal growth and empowerment through horse-human interaction. While proponents advocate for its holistic benefits and potential for self-esteem enhancement (Irwin, 2005), the model lacks robust scientific evidence and relies heavily on anecdotal reports and practitioner testimonials.

#### **2.4.4 Equine Experiential Learning (Epona Model):**

This model integrates horses into experiential learning and personal growth processes, drawing upon resonance theory, embodied learning, and shamanic traditions (Kohanov, 2001). However, its reliance on non-empirical concepts and lack of rigorous scientific validation limits its applicability within mainstream therapeutic settings.

In conclusion, and while each model offers unique therapeutic possibilities, it is crucial to critically evaluate their theoretical weaknesses and the quality of evidence supporting their effectiveness. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish the evidence base of the EFP model which is based on proven theories in psychology and an increasing number of studies to foster its growth within the equine therapy field as well as establishing clear guidelines for best practices.

## **2.5 EQUINE THERAPY PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS: FOSTERING STANDARDS AND COLLABORATION**

The development of horse-centred therapies has been accompanied by the emergence of professional organisations that play a crucial role in establishing ethical guidelines, training standards, and promoting the recognition of EFP as a legitimate therapeutic modality. Examining these organisations offers valuable insights into the diverse landscape of EFP practice and training, highlighting both the strengths and potential areas for growth within this emerging field. This section will review five key organisations relevant to this study: PATH

International, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), Epona Equestrian Services, LEAP, and the HERD Institute. Understanding their unique contributions and areas of focus can help contextualise the experiences of therapists interviewed in this study and shed light on the ethical and professional considerations inherent in EFP practice.

To facilitate a clear comparison of these organisations, Table 2 presents a summary of their key characteristics, including their founding dates, primary focus, certification offerings, and geographical reach.

**Table 2: Comparison of Equine Therapy Professional Organisations**

Organisation	Founded	Primary Focus	Certification Offerings	Accreditation Process	Geographical Reach
PATH International	1969	Safe and effective practice of therapeutic horseback riding and other equine-assisted activities	Instructor and centre accreditation	Adherence to PATH Intl. standards, completion of training courses, passing of exams, ongoing adherence to code of ethics and standards	United States and Canada
EAGALA	1999	Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) and equine-assisted learning (EAL)	Therapist and equine specialist certification	Completion of approved training programme, demonstration of competencies through written and practical assessments, ongoing adherence	International



				to code of ethics and standards	
Epona Equestrian Services	1997	Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP)	Professional development seminars	Not a certifying body; offers professional development seminars for a variety of professionals	International
LEAP	2009	Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP)	Practitioner certification	Completion of comprehensive training programme covering theory, practice, and ethics; demonstration of competencies through assessment and case studies; ongoing supervision and professional development	United Kingdom
HERD Institute	2011	Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning (EFPL)	Certification in EFPL for mental health practitioners, coaches, educators, and training professionals	Completion of classroom instruction and hands-on experiential learning with horses; demonstration of competencies through assessment and case studies; ongoing adherence to ethical guidelines and professional development requirements	International

### **2.5.1 Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship**

#### **International (PATH Intl.)**

Originally known as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), PATH International is dedicated to promoting the safe and effective practice of therapeutic horseback riding and other equine-assisted activities. Their comprehensive programme includes instructor certification and centre accreditation, ensuring adherence to rigorous standards and ethical practices (PATH Intl., 2016).

### **2.5.2 Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)**

EAGALA, established in 1999, focuses on equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) and equine-assisted learning (EAL). Unlike PATH International, EAGALA does not emphasise equestrian skills, but rather, experiential activities and verbal processing as the primary means of facilitating personal growth and therapeutic change (Giraldez Carter, 2015; Trotter, 2012; Jarrell, 2005).

### **2.5.3 Epona Equestrian Services**

Founded by Linda Kohanov in 1997, Epona is an organisation that focuses on equine-assisted psychotherapy. Their approach involves integrating horses into the therapeutic process to promote sensory and emotional awareness, to transform dysfunctional self-perceptions, patterns, and negative emotions. Epona's development programme seminars have attracted a diverse range of participants,

including educators, mental health professionals, teachers, riding instructors, and individuals from the military (Epona Equestrian Services, 2012).

#### **2.5.4 LEAP Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning/Facilitator Training**

LEAP (Learning Equine-Assisted Practices) is an organisation dedicated to offering comprehensive and standardised training for practitioners in the fields of Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Its primary objective is to equip graduates with the necessary expertise to conduct client sessions that are ethical, secure, and therapeutic in nature (Epona Equestrian Services, 2012). LEAP places great emphasis on providing high-quality and regulated training, ensuring that practitioners possess the skills required to deliver effective and impactful interventions to clients. LEAP has been a pioneer in the field of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning for nearly ten years and stands as the longest-standing organisation in the UK dedicated to this area of practice. Since 2012, it has been leading the way in providing professional and ethically oriented training, setting the standard for excellence in the industry.

LEAP's method and certification begin with inner knowledge and body language in human-human and human-horse communication and therapeutic Arousal Control. Therapists learn to assess clients' needs, strengths, emotional states, and problems to create a personalised treatment plan. Therapists also learn

appropriate boundaries and energy fields via horse-based exercises. Using energy and body-based awareness approaches, they improve client-horse trust and partnership. Learners will detect traumatic EFP content and learn how to engage with it safely.

LEAP's framework and methodology are the outcomes of significant experience with adults, adolescents, and corporate groups since 2009. Over a thousand clients have graduated from LEAP's rehabilitative and learning programmes, and countless more are part of its ever-expanding Graduate network.

### **2.5.5 HERD Institute**

The HERD Institute® was founded by Dr. Veronica Lac in 2011, a licensed clinical psychologist and expert in equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) (Lac, 2017). Dr. Lac's approach to EFP involves a collaborative partnership between the therapist, the client, and the horse, with the horse serving as a co-therapist and a mirror for the client's emotions and behaviours (Lac, 2017). The HERD Institute®'s model is based on the principles of humanistic and experiential psychotherapy, which emphasise the importance of empathy, authenticity, and the therapeutic relationship (HERD Institute®, n.d.). The model also incorporates mindfulness practices and somatic awareness, which emphasize the mind-body connection and the importance of being present in the moment (Lac, 2017).

The HERD Institute® offers certifications in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning (EFPL) for mental health practitioners, coaches, educators, and training professionals (HERD Institute®, n.d.). The programme includes both classroom instruction and hands-on experiential learning with horses and is designed to help participants develop the knowledge and skills needed to incorporate horses into their therapeutic or educational practices (HERD Institute®, n.d.). Upon completion of the programme, participants will be equipped to offer EFPL as a therapeutic or educational service to their clients (HERD Institute®, n.d.).

While these organisations contribute significantly to the field by providing training, standards, and advocacy, there remain areas for further development. For instance, the lack of a universally accepted definition for EFP and related terms can lead to confusion and inconsistency in practice. Additionally, the varying emphases and approaches of different organisations may make it challenging for aspiring practitioners to choose the most suitable training path. Furthermore, while these organisations offer valuable certifications, the question of whether certification alone guarantees competence and ethical practice remains open for debate.

## **2.6 THE EVOLUTION OF EQUINE FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY**

### **(EFP)**

While the diverse models of equine-assisted interventions discussed in section 2.4 all involve interactions with horses, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) distinguishes itself through its specific focus on mental health treatment. This section explores the historical development of EFP, highlighting key milestones and the emergence of professional organisations that have shaped its practice.

EFP emerged in the mid-20th century, building upon the growing recognition of the therapeutic potential of the human-animal bond (Levinson, 1997). While early equine-assisted therapies often focused on physical rehabilitation or therapeutic riding, EFP sought to harness the unique qualities of horses to address mental, emotional, and social challenges.

The establishment of professional organisations played a crucial role in formalising EFP practice and establishing standards for training and certification. In 1969, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), now PATH International, was founded to promote safe and effective therapeutic horseback riding (PATH Intl., 2016). This marked a significant step in legitimizing equine-assisted interventions and establishing guidelines for practitioners.

The 1990s saw a rapid expansion of EFP, with the establishment of the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) in 1996 and the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) in 1999 (Frewin &

Gardiner, 2005). These organizations sought to further professionalise EFP by offering training and certification programmes, developing standardised protocols, and advocating for the recognition of EFP as a legitimate therapeutic modality.

In the 21st century, EFP continued to evolve, with the emergence of new organisations and approaches. The HERD Institute, founded in 2011, championed an Existential-Humanistic and Gestalt-informed approach to EFP, emphasizing the importance of embodied experience and the therapeutic relationship (Lac, 2017). LEAP, established in 2009, became the longest-standing EFP training organisation in the UK, offering comprehensive training and certification in both Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) and EFP (Epona Equestrian Services, 2012).

Despite this progress, the field of EFP still faces challenges, including a lack of consistent terminology and a limited research base (Hallberg, 2008). However, the growing interest in and recognition of EFP as a therapeutic modality, as evidenced by the increasing number of certified practitioners and specialised training programmes (Burgon, 2011), suggests a promising future for this field. The continued development of EFP hinges on ongoing research, collaboration between practitioners and researchers, and a commitment to upholding ethical standards and ensuring the well-being of both clients and horses.

## **2.7 THE CURRENT STATE OF EFP RESEARCH: A CRITICAL REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS**

Identifying the existing research landscape in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is essential for locating this study's contribution and identifying areas for future investigation. This section examines the various methods employed in EFP research, focusing on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches, with a particular emphasis on the role of systematic reviews in synthesising the available evidence. It aims to highlight both the strengths and limitations of existing research, thereby identifying gaps in knowledge and informing future guidance for EFP research.

### **2.7.1 Quantitative Research**

In terms of quantitative studies in EFP, the main focus is on testing interventions using experimental and quasi-experimental methods that often involve pre-test/post-test designs and incorporate surveys (Creswell, 2009). Standardized tools such as the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Alfonso et al., 2015) and the Beck Depression Inventory-II (Davenport et al., 2017) have been used in such investigations to measure changes in specific outcomes. For example, EFP has proved effective for treating generalized anxiety disorder (Thiel, 2014), anxiety with post-traumatic stress disorder (Earles et al., 2015), and eating disorders (DeZutti, 2013). Moreover, Anestis et al. (2014) underscore its potential for better overall mental health status. Furthermore, scientists have



examined neurobiological consequences of EFP by applying brain imaging methods as demonstrated by Zhu et al. (2021) who discovered that clinical improvement in PTSD symptoms was associated with changes in brain connectivity among veterans.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the potential benefits of EFP, several limitations have been observed. Many studies are limited by small sample sizes, impacting the generalisability of findings (Renson, 2010; Bachi et al., 2012; DaBelko-Schoeny et al., 2014). For example, DaBelko-Schoeny et al.'s (2014) conducted a randomised pre-test/post-test, and while the design is a strength, the small sample size (n=16) and convenience sampling limit the study's generalisability to the broader population with dementia. Additionally, the over-reliance on self-reported outcomes and the lack of control groups in some studies raise questions about the strength of the evidence.

Additionally, the emphasis on measurable outcomes often fails to reflect the subjective experiences of therapists and clients that are essential to understanding what makes EFP effective. For instance, Coakley and Mahoney (2009) found that mood disorders improved significantly after EFP sessions but did not elaborate on specific therapeutic factors responsible for change, resulting in a lack of comprehending the mechanisms. Furthermore, Kruger and Serpell (2006) discovered that EFP enhances patients' cognitive, social, physical and emotional domains by developing a bond between horse and patient. However,

their quantitative study demonstrated the multidimensional advantages of EFP without revealing how these improvements happen.

### **2.7.2 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research in EFP has endeavored to rectify the limitations of quantitative approaches by focusing on the participants' lived experiences and points of view. Studies by Ewing et al. (2007) and Yorke et al. (2008) have shown the importance of the human-animal bond, trust, and empowerment in EFP, enriching our understanding of the therapeutic process. In this context, Ewing et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study that explored the experiences of three young boys taking part in an equine-facilitated learning (EFL) programme. Their study aimed to understand the impact of EFL on the boys' self-esteem, locus of control, and social skills. Through observation, interviews, and analysis of the boys' journals, Ewing et al. (2007) recorded positive changes in the participants' behaviour, emotional expression, and relationships with others. They highlighted the unique ability of horses to create a non-judgemental and supportive environment that fostered emotional growth and development. The study also emphasised the importance of individualising interventions and tailoring them to the specific needs and goals of each participant.

Yorke et al. (2008) using grounded theory approach claimed that the effectiveness of EFP could be based on the formation of supportive relationships

with horses that are similar to the client-therapist relationship. However, as with several other qualitative EFP research, this study employed some theoretical frameworks without having sufficient empirical data which would have led to direct cause and effect relationship between human-animal bonding and benefits derived from this interaction.

Similarly, Charlton & Dladla (2016) explored the experiences of adolescents participating in equine-assisted therapy (EAT) using a phenomenological approach. They focused on understanding the essence of the therapeutic experience from the participants' perspectives. Their findings revealed that adolescents experienced EAT as a unique and powerful intervention that fostered self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. The non-judgmental presence of the horses and the experiential nature of the therapy were highlighted as key factors in the participants' positive experiences.

Various qualitative methodologies have been employed in EFP research, including phenomenology (Wilson et al., 2015), narrative inquiry (Lee & Makela, 2018), and grounded theory. These approaches offer a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of therapists and clients, uncovering nuances and complexities that may be missed in quantitative studies. For instance, Wilson et al. (2015) used a phenomenological approach to explore therapists' perspectives on equine-related interventions for adolescents with depression and anxiety, revealing the unique challenges and rewards of this work.

Likewise, Lee and Makela (2018) employed a constructivist narrative approach to examine the process of skill development and meaning making in EFP sessions, highlighting the importance of ongoing learning and reflection.

In addition, thematic analysis is a valuable tool commonly employed in qualitative EFP research to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data. This approach offers a deeper understanding of the complex interactions and dynamics at play in EFP. For instance, Lee & Makela (2018) used thematic analysis to examine the experiences of therapists working with horses in a therapeutic riding program. Their findings highlighted the importance of non-verbal communication, the horses' role as co-facilitators, and the transformative potential of therapeutic relationship.

McNamara (2017), on the other hand, applied thematic analysis to explore the experiences of individuals with autism spectrum disorder participating in equine-assisted therapy. Key themes that emerged from their study included increased self-confidence, improved social skills, and a heightened sense of emotional well-being.

### **2.7.3 Mixed Methods Research**

Mixed methods research, which combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches, has also been utilized in the EFP field, offering a more holistic understanding of the complex phenomena involved. For instance,

Gibbons et al. (2017) employed a mixed methods design to evaluate the effectiveness of a three-day equine workshop for at-risk Guatemalan youth. Their study involved pre- and post-workshop questionnaires measuring leadership and emotional regulation skills, alongside qualitative interviews exploring the participants' experiences. The quantitative data revealed significant improvements in both areas, while the qualitative data provided insights into the specific ways in which the workshop fostered personal growth and resilience. However, the small sample size of 12 participants limits the generalizability of these promising findings.

Similarly, Ferruolo (2015) used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of a short-term EFP intervention on veterans. The study combined standardized questionnaires assessing psychological well-being with qualitative interviews exploring the participants' experiences. The quantitative data indicated improvements in self-discovery, spiritual connection, trust, and respect, while the qualitative data offered deeper insights into the personal meaning and transformative nature of the experience. However, the sample size of 10 veterans raises concerns about the generalizability of these results. Additionally, the study's report mentions that participants "exhibited adequacy" in various areas, but the precise meaning of this term remains unclear without further elaboration from the author, limiting the interpretability of the findings.

#### **2.7.4 Systematic Reviews**

In the synthesis of the EFP evidence base and locating areas for further research, systematic reviews play an essential role. While more than one systematic review has now been carried out, their findings usually bring out shortcomings in existing literature. For instance, Anestis et al., (2014) and Kendall et al., (2015) found that various EFP studies are characterised by methodological limitations such as small sample sizes; no control groups and self-reported outcomes. A recent systematic review conducted by Nurenberg et al., (2020), examined how equine-assisted interventions affected several mental health outcomes including trauma-based disorder, anxiety, and depression. The review found that there is a certain degree of evidence suggesting that EFP can be beneficial to these conditions, but due to methodological limitations, it is not adequate to establish a quality level of evidence.

#### **2.7.5 The Need for Continued Research**

The current state of EFP research, while promising, emphasizes the need for further exploration and methodological refinement. Thus, future studies should focus on larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and blending both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide an in-depth understanding of the processes and long-term consequences of EFP. Moreover, inclusion of control groups and independent assessors in quantitative studies may

ensure stronger findings and reduce any potential biases that might arise from this approach. In qualitative research it would be important to explore specific mechanisms underlying human-animal bond as well as consider opinions from different populations for a more sophisticated understanding of EFP's healing effects.

This study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by addressing these gaps. By incorporating participants from diverse EFP organisations and modalities, this study will provide a richer and more representative understanding of the field. Furthermore, by prioritising a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study will delve deeper into the subjective experiences and meaning-making processes of therapists. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study will specifically explore the mechanisms by which therapists perceive EFP to work, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the therapeutic process and the role of the horse-human bond. Thus, contribute to the ongoing refinement of research methodologies and practices within this evolving field.

## **2.8 THERAPISTS' PERSPECTIVES ON EFP: INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH**

Previous research examining therapists' perceptions of EFP has yielded valuable, yet limited, insights into the diverse practices, motivations, and outcomes associated with this modality. This section critically reviews existing studies, highlighting areas where further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of therapists' lived experiences and inform the development of best practices within the field.

Scheiner (2011) conducted interviews with six UK-based therapists, finding that despite variations in session format and client populations, therapists consistently reported positive client benefits from EFP. One participant succinctly summarised it as offering "quick therapy with long-term, impactful advantages." While this small sample size is typical of qualitative research, it limits the study's statistical generalisability. However, the richness of the data and the consistency of reported themes suggest potential for theoretical generalisability or transferability. These findings may resonate with therapists working in similar contexts, offering insights into the potential mechanisms and benefits of EFP. To further explore and confirm these themes, future research could utilise larger sample sizes, diverse settings, and multiple EFP models, enhancing the applicability of the findings to a wider range of therapeutic practices.

Building upon this initial exploration, Johnson et al. (2015) synthesised seven studies on equine-guided therapy (EGT), encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This review highlighted therapists' beliefs regarding the



therapeutic value of horses, including their capacity to offer immediate feedback, symbolise aspects of clients' lives, facilitate emotional expression, and help clients understand boundaries and leadership. The study revealed a diverse range of perceived benefits, but it also underscored the need for more rigorous research to understand the mechanisms underlying these effects and to address the lack of standardisation across EFP practices.

Furthermore, Wilson et al. (2017) used a phenomenological framework to investigate the subjective experiences of eight EAGALA-certified therapists in Australia. Their findings indicated positive outcomes for young clients suffering from anxiety and depression, among these outcomes is the improvement in self-esteem, confidence, and a reduction in inadequate behaviours. However, while the study offers valuable insights into therapists' experiences, the study's exclusive focus on the EAGALA model of EFP may not capture the diverse perspectives of those practising other approaches. Furthermore, the absence of a comparison group makes it difficult to discern whether the reported benefits are unique to EFP or could be attributed to other factors within the therapeutic relationship. This limitation highlights the need for future research to explore therapists' experiences across a variety of EFP models and to incorporate comparative elements to isolate the unique contributions of equine-facilitated interventions.

Further contributing to the understanding of EFP practice, Peterson (2017) conducted a pilot study in Australia, examining the therapeutic practices of ten

EFP practitioners working with children and adolescents. The study found that while EFP was seen as effective in improving problem-solving skills, there was a lack of consistency in how the EAGALA model was implemented. This highlights the need for a more theoretically sound and standardised approach within EFP models, as well as further research into the specific mechanisms through which EFP facilitates change.

Lastly, in a recent study by Turner and Anderson (2018), they employed constructive storytelling as an approach to understanding the way eight mental health professionals perceive benefits of equine interventions. Their results underscored EFP's potential to assist clients in attaining their goals within various sectors such as social work, education and personal exploration. However, this research mainly concentrated on cognitive processes rather than the physical, emotional, and relational dimensions of EFP that are usually emphasized elsewhere. Consequently, this gap calls for more studies that would investigate therapists' subjective experiences including their feelings as well as personal well-being under the influence of EFP.

In conclusion, these studies provide insight into therapists' perspectives about EFP and at the same time emphasize the importance of future investigation on small size samples and potential biases. In addition, more research needs to be conducted concerning the way in which EFP functions by investigating such aspects as change mechanisms including embodiment, horse bonding and

specifics of unique therapeutic settings that allow for changes or positive transformations to happen.

The current study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore the lived experiences of EFP therapists in greater depth. By focusing on the subjective meaning's therapists ascribe to their experiences, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which EFP shapes their personal and professional lives, ultimately informing the development of best practices and advancing the field.

## **2.9 EFP SESSION STRUCTURE: A DYNAMIC AND PROGRESSIVE APPROACH**

Understanding the structure of EFP sessions is essential for both current practitioners and those considering incorporating this modality into their practice. The use of horses in therapy and how therapists adapt activities within therapy process can be explored through qualitative research to give more understanding uncovering possible areas for improvement leading to best practices (Ewing et al., 2007). This understanding is essential for this study, as it seeks to capture the enlightened experiences of EFP therapists and their perspectives on the unique therapeutic environment created by the horse-human dynamic.

These foundational activities serve multiple purposes. They allow clients to observe horse behaviour, learn safe handling practices, and gradually increase their comfort around large animals. However, as Shultz et al. (2007) note, the seemingly simple tasks of grooming and tacking can become complex when a client is nervous or agitated. The horse's sensitivity to the client's emotional state becomes evident as it may react adversely, potentially mirroring the client's unease. This dynamic interaction highlights the importance of emotional regulation and self-awareness in EFP, as clients learn to approach the horse in a calm and receptive manner, fostering cooperation and trust (Karol, 2007).

Once clients have acquired basic skills and feel comfortable, they are introduced to the practice of leading, which involves using a halter rope to guide a horse. During this process, the handler walks alongside or slightly ahead of the horse (Rothe et al., 2005; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Leading often evokes a range of emotions in clients when the horse does not cooperate, providing an opportunity for transference (Rothe et al., 2005; Yorke et al., 2008). Some clients may lead tightly, attempting to control the horse's movements, while others may lead loosely, allowing the horse more freedom. The horse responds accordingly, either resisting the restraint or taking the lead, reflecting the client's struggle to find a balance (Rothe et al., 2005).

Leading acts as a catalyst for more challenging activities in EFP, such as navigating obstacle courses or mazes. Groundwork, a more demanding activity, is

performed without a lead rope. In a small, enclosed arena, clients utilise verbal and nonverbal communication to direct the horse in specific tasks or movements (Rothe et al., 2005). Effective communication requires clients to project confidence and clarity. If their communication is uncertain or hesitant, the horse may disregard the request. Conversely, when clients are confident and clear in their communication, the horse responds attentively (Porter-Wenzlaff, 2007). Groundwork proves to be a challenge for many EFP clients, particularly those with behavioural and mental health disorders who struggle to express and often suppress their emotions. Successful groundwork necessitates clients tapping into these suppressed emotions (McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Sexauer, 2011). While this process can be intense, it is essential. By addressing these emotions and the associated memories, clients become more open to forming emotionally intimate connections with other living beings (McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Porter & Wenzlaff, 2007).

On the other hand, mounted equestrian activities, which involve engaging in exercises while riding the horse, are less frequently employed in EFP compared to activities conducted on the ground. Typically, clients undergo multiple EFP sessions before advancing to mounted exercises, as these exercises are tailored for individuals who feel at ease and confident in the presence of horses. Horses embody qualities such as power, grace, and vulnerability. When positioned on the horse, individuals have the opportunity to personally encounter and connect with

these attributes, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-confidence. While the horse serves as a pillar of support, the rider can explore new sensations within a non-critical environment. Through mounted exercises, clients who initially harbour doubts and reservations gradually nurture their self-assurance and confidence, as supported by prior investigations (Anderson & Thomas, 1999; Baker et al., 2007).

## **2.10 THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS IN EFP: A DIVERSE LANDSCAPE**

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy is a versatile modality that can be integrated with various theoretical orientations to address a wide range of client needs. This section examines how different therapeutic approaches have been applied within EFP, highlighting their potential benefits, limitations, and areas for further research. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of EFP is crucial for therapists seeking to integrate it into their practice and for researchers seeking to evaluate its efficacy.

### **2.10.1 Gestalt Therapy and EFP: Embracing the Here and Now**

Gestalt Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (GEFP) combines the experiential and holistic focus of Gestalt therapy with the embodied presence of horses. By emphasizing awareness, contact, and growth (Frame, 2006), GEFP

encourages clients to focus on the "here and now," exploring unresolved issues, core beliefs, and projections in the present moment (Kirby, 2010). The horse, as a co-facilitator, provides immediate and honest feedback, acting as a mirror for the client's emotions and behaviours (McCorey, 2013).

Existing literature suggests that GEFP can be effective in addressing trauma, anxiety, depression, and relationship difficulties (McCorey, 2013). However, more research is needed to explore the specific mechanisms by which GEFP facilitates change, particularly in relation to the integration of Gestalt principles with the horse-human relationship.

### **2.10.2 Experiential Therapy and EFP: Embodied Learning and Transformation**

Experiential therapy, with its emphasis on personal experiences and emotional awareness, aligns closely with the embodied nature of EFP. The integration of these two approaches creates a powerful therapeutic environment where clients can actively engage with their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours through interactions with horses (Martin & Davis, 1992; Jones, 2010). Horses are seen as catalysts and symbols in experiential EFP, aiding in the revelation of clinical concerns and promoting self-awareness (Turner et al., 2012).

While research has shown promising results for experiential EFP, particularly in addressing unresolved emotional issues and fostering positive behavioural change (Klontz et al., 2007; Smith, 2013), the mechanisms

underlying these outcomes remain under-explored. Future studies could investigate how specific experiential techniques, such as mindfulness and somatic awareness practices, are employed within EFP and their impact on client outcomes.

### **2.10.3 Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and EFP: Changing Thoughts and Behaviors**

CBT, a goal-oriented and evidence-based approach, focuses on modifying negative thoughts and behaviors (Johnson, 2014; Parker et al., 2011). Integrating EFP with CBT offers a unique opportunity to combine the power of cognitive restructuring with the experiential learning and emotional regulation fostered by horse-human interactions. This integrated approach can be particularly effective for clients struggling with anxiety, depression, and trauma, as the horse's presence can create a safe space for exploring and challenging negative thought patterns (Sapir, 2007).

While a pilot study by Williams et al. (2008) demonstrated promising results for the integration of EFP and CBT in treating eating disorders, more research is needed to validate its effectiveness for other mental health concerns. Future studies could explore the specific CBT techniques that are most effectively integrated with EFP, as well as the impact of this combined approach on long-term outcomes.



#### **2.10.4 Psychodynamic-Object Relations Theory and EFP: Uncovering Early Relationships**

Psychodynamic-object relations theory emphasizes the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping an individual's personality and interpersonal relationships (Gabbard, 2014; Winnicott, 1960). Within EFP, the horse can serve as a symbolic representation of early attachment figures, providing a safe space for clients to explore and process unresolved emotional issues related to these relationships (Frame, 2006; Kern-Godal et al., 2015). The non-judgmental and accepting nature of horses can also help clients develop trust and empathy, which are crucial for healthy relationships.

While anecdotal evidence suggests that EFP can be a valuable tool for uncovering and working through early object relations, more research is needed to establish empirical evidence for this claim. Future studies could employ qualitative methodologies, such as case studies or in-depth interviews, to explore the specific ways in which EFP facilitates the exploration and resolution of early attachment issues.

#### **2.11.5 Systemic Therapy and EFP: Exploring Family Dynamics**

The systemic approach to psychotherapy views individuals as part of interconnected systems, such as families, and emphasizes understanding the patterns of interaction within these systems (Human, 2006; Becvar & Becvar, 2009). Integrating EFP with systemic therapy allows for the exploration of family

dynamics and their impact on the individual client's mental health (Kaiser et al., 2018).

The horse, in this context, can serve as a metaphor for the family system itself, with its movements, interactions, and responses mirroring the dynamics at play within the family unit. The therapist observes these interactions and facilitates discussions about family communication patterns, roles, and relationships. However, the effectiveness of this metaphorical interpretation is highly dependent on the therapist's skill and the client's willingness to engage with this symbolic representation.

While EFP offers a unique environment for observing and exploring family dynamics, research in this area is limited. Future studies could investigate the specific ways in which the horse-human interaction can facilitate systemic change and whether this approach is effective for different types of family systems and presenting issues.

#### **2.10.6 Polyvagal Theory (PVT) and EFP: Understanding the Nervous System's Role**

Polyvagal Theory (PVT) provides a framework for understanding how the autonomic nervous system (ANS) regulates emotional states and social behavior (Porges, 2011). This theory posits that individuals can transition between states of fight-or-flight (sympathetic nervous system) and rest-and-digest (parasympathetic nervous system) based on perceived safety and threat. EFP is hypothesized to

facilitate a shift towards the parasympathetic state, characterized by relaxation and social engagement, through the calming and regulating presence of horses (McNamara, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017).

Research supporting this connection is emerging, with studies like DePauw et al. (2016) showing increased heart rate variability (HRV) – a marker of emotional regulation and resilience – in participants engaging in equine-assisted activities. However, these findings are preliminary and require further investigation to establish a causal link between EFP and changes in the ANS. Moreover, individual differences in nervous system reactivity and the diverse nature of EFP interventions warrant further exploration to understand how PVT can best inform EFP practice and research.

### **2.10.7 The Internal Family Systems (IFS) and EFP: Integrating Parts and Self**

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model views the mind as a system of subpersonalities or "parts," each with its own unique perspective and role (Schwartz, 1995). Integrating IFS with EFP allows for the exploration of these internal parts in the context of the horse-human relationship. Horses, with their non-judgmental presence and ability to mirror emotions, can help clients identify and interact with different parts of themselves, fostering greater self-awareness and self-acceptance (Horn et al., 2018).

While preliminary research suggests positive outcomes for an integrated IFS and EFP approach (Horn et al., 2018), the evidence base is still limited. Future studies should explore the specific mechanisms by which the horse-human relationship facilitates IFS work, as well as the long-term impact of this integrated approach on client outcomes.

The review of these varied therapeutic modalities as integrated with EFP reveals how EFP can be a versatile modality for use in addressing the diverse needs of clients and therapeutic goals. Nevertheless, further studies need to be done in order to investigate how exactly it brings about therapeutic change within different theoretical frameworks.

This study aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation by exploring the lived experiences of EFP therapists themselves. By understanding their perspectives, challenges, and perceived benefits of integrating EFP with various theoretical orientations, this research can provide valuable insights for both practitioners and researchers in the field.

### **2.11 EXISTENTIAL THERAPY AND EFP: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP**

As an existential therapist, the researcher finds that existential therapy offers a valuable framework for understanding the transformative potential of EFP. By examining the philosophical underpinnings of existentialism and its

alignment with the experiential nature of EFP, this section aims to shed light on the unique ways in which EFP can address existential concerns and foster personal growth. Drawing upon the existing literature, this exploration highlights the potential of EFP as a complementary approach to existential therapy, offering a framework for understanding the transformative power of the horse-human relationship in addressing fundamental questions of meaning, purpose, and authenticity.

Existential counselling offers a distinct approach to addressing emotional concerns in individuals grappling with diverse psychological issues. It has been observed that specific techniques employed in existential counselling can be advantageous for clients navigating a range of mental and existential challenges (Johnson, 2016). The significance of existential counselling is comparable to and influential in conjunction with other forms of psychotherapy (Peterson et al., 2014). Moreover, existential counselling recognises a fundamental aspect of human nature, namely the yearning for connection with spiritual, social, and physical dimensions of existence (Centre for Existential Practice, 2021). Frankl (2008) described existential counselling as the acknowledgment that "Human beings are not simply passive victims of their circumstances; they are active agents who have the freedom to choose how they respond" (p. 35). This perspective underscores individuals' autonomy in initiating change based on their own aspirations. Deurzen (2008) further emphasised that effective therapy entails

a sensitive yet transformative intervention in one's life, necessitating a commitment to truth and the pursuit of an authentic existence (Deurzen, 2008, p. 93).

A pivotal element of existential counselling is the significance it places on the therapeutic alliance between client and therapist, which plays a crucial role in facilitating positive therapeutic outcomes (Goldfried & Wampold, 2019). Aligned with Buber's (1958) "I-Thou philosophy," it has been observed that a strong therapeutic bond not only encourages clients to be fully present in the therapeutic encounter but also engenders a fresh and heightened understanding of living in the present moment. Ultimately, this assists clients in pursuing a more genuine and purposeful way of life (Weinberg & Cooper, 2012).

Various sources concur that engaging with horses in therapy encompasses both experiential and existential dimensions (Berget & Ihlebæk, 2011; EAGALA, n.d.; McConnell, 2010; Peterson, 2010). The principles of Existential-Integrative (EI) psychotherapy are deeply rooted in the notion of relational encounter, underscoring the therapist's presence throughout the client's journey of healing (Schneider & Krug, 2010). The primary objective of EI is to cultivate an environment where existential inquiries can arise, fostering the development of a fresh perspective on challenging life experiences (Bryan & Morrow, 2011). Schneider (2008) suggested that the promotion of freedom of choice and the maximisation of personal autonomy constitute essential components of EI.

Existential therapists are known to assist their clients in recognising the inherent limitations or constraints associated with freedom. There appears to be an ongoing tension between the need for stability and adaptability within oneself and in relation to others. The concept of "Being in the world," coined by Heidegger (1962), captures the essence of human existence. It signifies that humans are fundamentally situated within the world, actively participating in a meaningful context that encompasses people, ideas, places, objects, and events. As experiential beings, humans continuously engage and interact with the world. This underscores the significance of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), where the presence of another living being, such as a horse, becomes the foundation for fostering resilience and personal growth.

Furthermore, to find value by submerging oneself in the interface with society and incidents entails that a person needs to be accessible at mental, emotional, and spiritual levels but ought to be in balance by synchronising with the present time (Bond, 2002). When existential issues affect individuals, it can be very challenging for them to be present in the moment, which also affects their ability to connect with others; this is where the role of EFP comes into play (Renson, 2010). In an EFP session, communication with horses naturally provides an opportunity to teach how a person's attitude, thought processes and energy affects a horse's behaviour, which requires the client to be fully present at the moment (Symington, 2012).

As per Buber (1967), communication can be categorised into: “genuine dialogue, technical dialogue, and monologue.” Genuine dialogue, also known as “silent communication,” occurs when a person “considers the other or others... and turns to them to establish a mutual relation between himself [herself] and them” (Holba, 2008, p. 19). Developing the conventional relationship between horse and individual not only provides liberty to individuals to learn from the subsequent proficiencies in the presence of equines but also offers an opportunity for personal growth, assisting clients in ascertaining that robustness exists within themselves (Holba, 2008).

Mendelowitz and Schneider (2008) analysed the “existential therapy” of Rollo May and Irvin Yalom to underline that “existential psychotherapy is an attitude that encompasses all available theories but focuses on the phenomenological moment, a genuine moment, between client and therapist” . On the other hand, Scheiner (2011) stated that, according to the theory of resonance, the bond between the horse and the client is equal to having a coherent relationship aided by the therapist. This can be corroborated by the fact that equines help develop a strong link with clients, making the client free to associate with horses.

Lac (2017) conducted a case study applying existential-integrative theories by assimilating equine-facilitated psychotherapy to treat anorexia nervosa. This



takes into consideration the phenomenological approach, which includes aspects like human feelings and behaviour, along with how a client can use the presence of a therapist and a horse to respond to a particular situation. Lac (2017) concludes that the combined approach of Existential Integrative I and EFP, when applied as a model to Amy (client), not only increased her awareness of the present but also included the feeling of interpersonal connection as the basis of life, thereby instigating the significance of authentic living and the balance of body and mind.

Lastly, Redman (2013) conducted a project demonstrating an application of interpretive phenomenological analysis using an existential psychology perspective coupled with a quantitative survey for veterans to question if veterans' existential issues would arise during an EFP session. She concluded that equine-assisted activities and learning (EAAL) are inherently experiential, existential, and gestalt. Horses have been documented to respond to the felt energy of human beings. They communicate nonverbally by approaching the client with their ears moving, for example. That requires the human to be fully present while interacting with them. When applied to the client's specific situation, the horse's behaviours become a metaphor for how the client operates in their own life. Meaning-making is unique to the client or group that is being facilitated.

Despite the growing interest in the existential applications of EFP, the current research base remains limited, primarily consisting of case studies and

anecdotal reports (e.g., Lac, 2017; Redman, 2013). These studies offer compelling examples of how EFP can facilitate existential exploration and growth, but their lack of experimental rigor and generalisability necessitates further investigation.

To fully understand the potential of EFP as an existential intervention, future research should prioritize rigorous quantitative and qualitative studies that explore the specific mechanisms by which EFP addresses existential concerns, as well as the long-term impact of this approach on clients' well-being and sense of meaning in life. The current study aims to contribute to this burgeoning field by delving into the nuances of the therapists' experiences, this research will shed light on the complex interplay between existential philosophy and the transformative power of the horse-human bond, ultimately enhancing our understanding of EFP as a therapeutic modality and its potential to address the existential issues faced by therapists.

## **2.12 LIMITATIONS OF EFP: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), while demonstrating potential therapeutic value, faces several limitations that warrant critical consideration. Understanding these challenges is crucial, as they inform not only future research directions but also the design and implementation of EFP programmes. This section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of these limitations, drawing

upon existing literature and highlighting areas where further investigation is needed.

A primary limitation of EFP lies in the scarcity of rigorous research. Much of the existing evidence base consists of individual case studies and pilot studies, often with small sample sizes and a lack of control groups (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). While these studies suggest potential benefits, they often suffer from methodological flaws that limit the generalisability of findings (Johnson et al. 2015, Paquette, 2010). Furthermore, there is a dearth of information on the specific therapeutic techniques employed within EFP programmes, hindering the ability to identify the most effective approaches and refine EFP practice (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013).

Another significant limitation is the cost associated with EFP. Session fees can range from £65 to £100 for a 45-60 minute session (EAGALA, 2014), with many programmes requiring multiple sessions per week. This financial burden, coupled with the lack of insurance coverage due to limited research on EFP's effectiveness for various conditions (World Health Organization, 2004), can create significant barriers to access for many individuals. This lack of accessibility raises ethical concerns about the equitable distribution of EFP services and highlights the need for research that can establish a more robust evidence base to support insurance coverage and increase affordability.

Liability concerns also arise due to the inherent risks involved in working with horses, particularly with clients who may have mental health challenges (PATH, 2014). This necessitates careful attention to safety protocols and the implementation of adequate insurance coverage, which can further increase the cost of providing EFP. Additionally, EFP is not suitable for all patients (Bachi, 2012). Therapists must carefully assess each individual's needs and circumstances to determine the appropriateness of EFP and ensure the safety and well-being of both clients and horses.

Furthermore, conducting therapy in unconventional settings, such as those found in EFP, presents additional ethical and practical considerations. Maintaining client confidentiality, upholding professional standards (APA, 2012; Cepeda, 2011; PATH, 2012), and ensuring the well-being of therapy horses (PATH, 2012; Rothe et al., 2005; Trotter, 2012) are paramount concerns.

In addition, the literature raises concerns about the well-being of therapy horses. Traditionally viewed as tools (Lundgren, 2017), horses are increasingly recognised as sentient beings with individual needs (Bekoff & Pierce, 2017). Research has shown that while many horses adapt well to therapeutic work, some exhibit signs of stress (Merkies et al., 2018). Longitudinal studies (Malinowski et al., 2018) suggest individual differences, such as personality traits, may influence horses' susceptibility to stress and burnout. Additionally, Kaiser et al. (2019) found that horses with higher neuroticism and lower extraversion are more prone

to stress in therapeutic settings, highlighting the potential value of personality assessments in selecting suitable equine partners.

This overview of limitations serves to contextualise the current study, which aims to explore the lived experiences of EFP therapists and shed light on the challenges they encounter in their practice. By understanding the difficulties practitioners face, this research can inform future efforts to address these limitations, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective, accessible, and ethically sound EFP programmes.

### **2.13 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the existing literature on Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), providing a foundation for understanding its historical context, theoretical underpinnings, diverse applications, and current research landscape.

Beginning with the historical evolution of animal-assisted therapy (AAT), the chapter traced the gradual recognition of animals as valuable partners in promoting human well-being, culminating in the emergence of EFP as a distinct therapeutic modality. The unique characteristics of horses, including their heightened sensitivity, non-verbal communication, and authenticity, were explored as key factors contributing to their therapeutic potential. The discussion of various EAI models, such as hippotherapy, EAPD, and the Epona model,

highlighted the diversity of approaches within the field, while also emphasizing the need for further research to establish their efficacy and clarify their underlying mechanisms.

The role of professional organisations in shaping EFP practice and standards was also examined. Organisations like PATH International, EAGALA, Epona, LEAP, and the HERD Institute were identified as key contributors to the development of EFP, offering training, certification, and advocacy for the field. However, the lack of a universally accepted definition for EFP and the varying emphases of different organisations were identified as areas for further development and standardisation.

The chapter then delved into the specific history of EFP, tracing its evolution from its roots in therapeutic riding to its current status as a distinct and evolving field of practice. The rise of professional organisations and the growing recognition of EFP as a legitimate therapeutic modality were highlighted as key milestones in this development.

The current state of EFP research was critically reviewed, encompassing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. While existing research suggests promising results for EFP in addressing a range of mental health concerns, the limitations of this evidence base were also acknowledged. Many studies suffer from methodological weaknesses, such as small sample sizes, lack of control groups, and reliance on self-reported outcomes. This underscores the

need for more rigorous research to establish a stronger empirical foundation for EFP.

Therapists' perspectives on EFP were explored through a synthesis of existing studies. These studies highlighted the importance of the horse-human bond, experiential learning, and the unique therapeutic environment in fostering personal growth, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. However, there remains a need for further research to explore the specific mechanisms of change within EFP and to understand the diverse experiences of therapists across different EFP models and theoretical orientations.

The chapter also examined the integration of EFP with various theoretical orientations, including Gestalt therapy, experiential therapy, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), psychodynamic-object relations theory, systemic therapy, Polyvagal Theory, the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, and existential therapy. These integrations offer diverse perspectives on how EFP can be utilized to address a wide range of client needs, highlighting the adaptability and flexibility of this modality. However, the limited research on the effectiveness of these integrated approaches underscores the need for further investigation to validate their efficacy and inform clinical practice.

Finally, the chapter concluded with a critical discussion of the limitations of EFP, including the need for more robust research, concerns about equine welfare, the financial accessibility of EFP, and the challenges associated with

practicing in an unconventional setting. These limitations, while significant, also present opportunities for growth and development within the field.

The following chapter will outline the qualitative methodology employed, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore their perspectives in depth. This approach seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which EFP shapes their personal and professional lives, ultimately informing the development of best practices and advancing the field.



## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter delves into the methodology employed in this research. With an aim on delving into therapists' experiences and perspectives in using Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) utilizing qualitative research method. The chosen methodology is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which aligns well with the study's objectives. IPA is adept at eliciting comprehensive and nuanced data that can be interpreted to discern participant perspectives. This approach is rooted in philosophical frameworks such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Following an outline of the research design encompassing qualitative research principles, the chapter will elaborate on the philosophical foundations of IPA and the goal of using it to serve the research's aim. Details regarding sampling, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods will be provided. Lastly, mechanisms aimed at ensuring trustworthiness of the research will be underscored.

### **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This study sought to delve into the lived experiences of therapists practising Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Given the emphasis on understanding subjective experiences and the meaning-making processes of

participants, a qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate. As Smith and Osborn (2008) note, qualitative approaches are well-suited for exploring complex phenomena like therapists' experiences, as they allow for an in-depth examination of perceptions, emotions, and thought processes. Specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the research design due to its alignment with the study's objectives and its ability to elicit rich, nuanced data that could be interpreted to discern participants' perspectives (Smith, 1996).

The decision to adopt a qualitative approach was informed by the understanding that perceptions are often culturally derived and time-bound. The interpretivist epistemological stance underpinning this study acknowledges that multiple meanings, ways of knowing, and realities exist and are influenced by individuals' personal, social, and cultural contexts (Crotty, 1998). As such, the researcher's role is not to discover a single objective truth, but rather to interpret and understand the subjective experiences of participants within their unique contexts.

While quantitative approaches, such as surveys used by Redman (2004) to gather data on variables related to therapeutic development, are valuable for measuring and predicting outcomes, they often fall short of capturing the depth and complexity of human experience. In contrast, qualitative research offers a more holistic and in-depth understanding of individuals' motivations, emotions,

and thought processes, which are crucial for understanding the impact of EFP on therapists' lives (Ashworth, 2003; Draper, 2004; Willig, 2013). This is particularly important in a field like EFP, where the therapeutic relationship is deeply intertwined with the unique dynamics between humans and horses.

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach, with roots in pre-World War I Germany (Dowling, 2007), seeks to uncover the essence of human experience in relation to a particular phenomenon. While Immanuel Kant first used the concept in his 18th-century publications (Dowling, 2007), Franz Brentano is often credited with inspiring the work of Edmund Husserl through his use of descriptive phenomenology. Husserl's (1900) focus on participants' conscious feelings, emotional states, and recollections aligns with the aims of the current study, which seeks to explore, understand, and attribute meaning to the use of EFP as described by certified EFP practitioners (Giorgi, 1997).

IPA, in particular, offers a rigorous and systematic approach to phenomenological inquiry. It involves a double hermeneutic process, where the researcher interprets both the participants' experiences and their own interpretations of those experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This reflexive process helps to ensure that the analysis is grounded in the participants' perspectives while acknowledging the researcher's role in shaping the interpretation of the data. The choice of IPA for this study was driven by its ability to provide a rich and detailed account of each participant's unique

experience, rather than simply aiming to construct a comprehensive theory based on their accounts (Giorgi, 2008) as discussed in following section.

### **3.3 INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA): A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING LIVED EXPERIENCES**

This study sought to delve into therapists' lived experiences with Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). To achieve this, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the methodological framework due to its unique ability to illuminate the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences. IPA, as described by Smith and Osborn (2008), "elucidates the human lived conscious experience of phenomena but psychologically in its analysis of meaning-making...[and] hermeneutic interpretation" (p. 62). This approach, rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, offers a rich and nuanced understanding of how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds.

#### **3.3.1 Philosophical Underpinnings of IPA**

The philosophical foundations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) lie in phenomenology, a movement initiated by Edmund Husserl (1900). Phenomenology, as a research philosophy and method (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), seeks to uncover the essence of human experience by focusing on participants' conscious feelings, emotional states, and recollections (Giorgi, 1997). In the context of IPA, this translates to a deep exploration of how

individuals perceive and interpret their experiences, rather than seeking to impose pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Smith et al., 2009).

The work of Franz Brentano, a predecessor to Husserl, also played a significant role in the development of phenomenology, particularly through his emphasis on descriptive phenomenology (Dowling, 2007). Brentano's work paved the way for Husserl's more systematic and rigorous approach, which sought to identify the essential structures of consciousness.

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is another cornerstone of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). It emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which experiences occur and the role of the researcher's own interpretations in shaping the research findings. This aligns with the "double hermeneutic" process inherent in IPA, where both participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations are subject to analysis and reflection. This process is also influenced by the works of influential hermeneutic theorists like Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009). Schleiermacher emphasized both grammatical and psychological meanings in interpretation, Heidegger focused on uncovering latent or hidden meanings, and Gadamer highlighted the role of history and context in shaping interpretations.

Ideography, the focus on individual cases and their unique perspectives (Rose, 2016; Smith et al., 2009), is the third key element that shapes IPA. While

IPA does not preclude generalization, it prioritizes understanding the specific experiences of each participant within their particular context.

Given these underpinnings, IPA is a fitting lens for EFP research. As a form of experiential therapy, EFP inherently focuses on the subjective experiences and personal meanings that individuals derive from their interactions with horses (Bachi et al., 2016). IPA, with its emphasis on capturing lived experiences and exploring how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2003), provides a fitting lens for this research. IPA aims to capture live understandings and appraise how people appreciate their private and societal worlds; the implications that clients attach to specific incidents are regarded as the "main currency" of IPA study (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Furthermore, IPA's emphasis on subjective meaning-making allows for a deeper exploration of therapists' motivations, emotions, and thought processes within the context of their EFP practice (Smith & Osborn, 2008). By delving into the unique perspectives and interpretations of EFP therapists, IPA can offer rich insights into the complex dynamics of this therapeutic approach.

While other qualitative approaches, such as Grounded Theory, were considered for this study, IPA was ultimately chosen due to its alignment with the research aims and its ability to illuminate the unique and individual perspectives of therapists. Unlike Grounded Theory, which prioritizes the development of a theoretical framework from the data, IPA emphasizes the in-depth exploration of

individual experiences, allowing for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Notably, Smith et al. (2009) highlight that IPA shares concerns with discourse analysis approaches, such as Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Discursive Psychology (DP), in recognizing the contextual and connected nature of human thinking, while still maintaining a focus on individual interpretation. However, while FDA and DP emphasize the role of language and discourse in constructing reality, IPA delves deeper into the personal meaning-making processes of individuals, making it a more suitable approach for understanding the subjective experiences and interpretations of EFP therapists.

### **3.3.2 Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions of IPA**

IPA is situated within an interpretivist epistemological framework, which posits that knowledge is constructed through the interpretation of data rather than the discovery of objective truths (Crotty, 1998). This contrasts with the positivist assumption that truth is observable from a neutral, disconnected viewpoint. IPA's ontological assumptions are rooted in a social constructionist perspective, which views reality as being shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. This perspective aligns with the understanding that therapists' experiences in EFP are not isolated events but are embedded within a broader social and cultural landscape. The interpretive phonological analysis (IPA) is an epistemology,

which means that the formation of knowledge is based on the interpretation of facts. When researching therapists' experiences in using EFP, adopting this viewpoint is beneficial since it enables a more in-depth comprehension of the individual's experience of the condition.

While IPA offers a powerful lens for exploring the lived experiences of EFP therapists, it is important to acknowledge its potential limitations. As an EFP therapist, the researcher is aware of the possibility that personal experiences and perspectives may influence the interpretations of the data. To mitigate this potential bias, reflexivity techniques have been employed and are discussed in section 3.8.

Additionally, the in-depth nature of IPA interviews and the personal nature of EFP topics may evoke strong emotions in both the participants and the researcher. This can be challenging to manage and may require additional grounding tools. The “reflection on research process” section 6.2 discusses strategies for addressing potential emotional impact.

Despite these potential limitations, the strengths of IPA, such as its ability to capture the richness and complexity of subjective experiences, make it a valuable tool for this research. By embracing the strengths of IPA, this study offers a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the therapists' unique experiences in EFP, thereby contributing to the growing body of knowledge in this emerging field.



### **3.4 DATA COLLECTION: ONLINE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

Data for this study were collected via online semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its alignment with qualitative research principles and the specific aims of this study. As King and Horrocks (2010) noted, interviews are a widely employed and valuable method for qualitative data collection, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. The online format, utilising the Zoom platform, enabled the inclusion of participants from diverse geographical locations (UK and USA) and offered convenience and accessibility for both researchers and participants. This was particularly important given the dispersed nature of EFP practitioners (Johns, Bobat, & Holder, 2016) and the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interview Approach**

Smith and Osborn (2008) highlight that semi-structured interviews offer a valuable approach where the researcher utilises a predetermined set of questions as a flexible guide during the interview. This format, while structured, allows for open-ended inquiry and encourages participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words. It also provides opportunities for probing and clarification, allowing the interviewer to follow emerging themes and delve deeper into participants' responses (Hancock, 2007). Such flexibility is crucial in IPA research, which aims to understand the unique and nuanced ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences.

The interview guide (Appendix C) served as a flexible framework for the interviews, outlining key topics related to the research questions while allowing for spontaneous exploration and in-depth discussion. The questions explored therapists' motivations for choosing EFP, their training and professional development, their experiences working with clients and horses, the impact of EFP on their personal and professional lives, and the challenges and limitations they encountered in their practice. Each interview, lasting approximately one hour, was audio-recorded with participant consent (Appendix C) and then transcribed verbatim.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the interview data, a pilot interview was conducted with an experienced EFP therapist (Participant A). This pilot study served as a valuable opportunity to assess the feasibility of the research design, refine the interview questions, and test the data collection and analysis procedures (Calitz, 2009; Klontz et al., 2007). The pilot revealed areas where questions could be clarified to elicit richer data and ensured that the language was free of unintended bias. For instance, a question about how therapists' views of horses changed after practising EFP was revised to be more open-ended and less suggestive. The pilot also informed the decision to use the Temi online transcription service for accuracy and efficiency, followed by a manual review by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Furthermore, the pilot study helped determine

the most efficient way to code and analyse the data, with the researcher opting for a manual coding process using Microsoft Word.

The semi-structured interviews in this study were designed to be a collaborative process, mirroring the therapeutic nature of EFP itself. By fostering a safe and supportive environment, the researcher aimed to encourage participants to share their experiences openly and authentically, allowing for a deep and nuanced exploration of their lived experiences with EFP.

### **3.5 SAMPLING AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS: INCLUSION CRITERIA AND APPROACH**

This study employed purposive criterion sampling, a qualitative method that targets participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Maree, 2010). In this instance, participants were selected based on their firsthand knowledge of and experience with EFP as practising therapists. The inclusion criteria required participants to be fully registered mental health professionals with accreditation from recognised EFP training organisations such as PATH, HERD, LEAP, or EAGALA. This ensured that participants had undergone formal training and possessed the necessary expertise to provide meaningful insights into their EFP practice.

Research recommends a sample size of six for a qualitative research design (Morse, 1992). However, several factors influence the appropriate sample

size in any given study. These factors include the quality and richness of the data, the scope of the research, the nature of the topic, and the specific qualitative methodology employed. In this study, a sample size of six participants was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation and provide a comprehensive understanding of the research question.

The researcher contacted the participants through email based on an advertisement posted on the organisations' official social media accounts. Upon receiving replies from prospective participants, the researcher conducted a Skype call to discuss the details of the project. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, scheduled depending on the availability of the respondents for a maximum duration of one hour.

Table 3: Participants' Profiles—six Practitioners

Name	A	B	C	D	E	F
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F
Age	65	43	28	33	35	41
Years of experience as a therapist	25	7	3	6	6	11
Years of experience as EFP therapist	20	3	1:5	2	3	4
Location	UK	USA	USA	UK	UK	USA

Accredited EFP body	Eagala	Herd Path	Herd	Eagala Leap	Herd	Eagala EquiLateral
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Table 4: list of the training organizations that participants are accredited by, adapted from Schote (2018):

Approach	Titles and/or Scopes of Practice	Location	Training / Certification Details	On the ground, mounted, or table work?	Website
<b>EAGALA</b> Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association	EAGALA Accredited. Proficient EAGALA Accredited. Available to practitioners in mental wellness and equine expertise.	International	Entry-level accreditation (5-day training program and online coursework); Enhanced accreditation (8-day training program). Supplementary prerequisites encompass compiling a portfolio, fulfilling an online evaluation, accomplishing facilitation and mentoring hours, submitting articles, attending conferences/gatherings, and submitting an application form.	Ground	<a href="http://www.eagala.org">http://www.eagala.org</a>
<b>PATH International</b> The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship	Equine Practitioner for Emotional and Cognitive Well-being. Mandatory for accredited programs/facilities recognized by PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) (while also beneficial for other Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning	USA	Certification process: becoming a member, meeting prerequisites, completing required education (typically over 100 hours, including workshops and online courses), and passing both written and practical exams. Maintaining certification requires ongoing continuing education.	On-foot activities. Engaging in mounted exercises necessitates possessing qualifications as a therapeutic riding instructor.	<a href="https://www.patintl.org/">https://www.patintl.org/</a>

	approaches and programs).				
<b>LEAP</b> Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL) and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP)	Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) practitioner (available to mental health specialists) Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL) practitioner (accessible to professionals from diverse fields)	UK	EFP certification program: A comprehensive training of 370 hours involving coursework and self-directed study. EFL training course: An intensive 8-day program supplemented with independent study, supervised practical experience, and mentorship.	Ground	<a href="http://www.leapequine.com">www.leapequine.com</a>
<b>HERD Institute</b> Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) and Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL)	Certification in Equine-Facilitated Practice (EFP) and Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL): Accessible to professionals from diverse fields such as mental health, coaching, education, and training.	UK and USA	EFP: Comprehensive training program spanning 20 days. EFL: Online modules consisting of 2 modules and a three-day immersive session.	Ground	<a href="http://herdinstite.com/">http://herdinstite.com/</a>
<b>EquiLateral</b> Equine Assisted EMDR	Approach focusing on understanding and addressing trauma, with specific training available to mental health professionals skilled in EMDR therapy.	USA	Comprehensive training program consisting of 30 hours, including a combination of online modules spanning 3 hours and in-person sessions over the course of 3 days.	Ground and mounted	<a href="http://www.dragonflyinternationaltherapy.com/EAEMDR/about-sarahjenkins/">www.dragonflyinternationaltherapy.com/EAEMDR/about-sarahjenkins/</a>

### **3.6 DATA ANALYSIS: INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA)**

The data analysis process in this study was grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology that prioritises understanding the participants' psychological realm, encompassing their attitudes, perceptions, and narratives of experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In the context of EFP, this entailed examining how therapists understand and interpret their lived experiences within this modality, acknowledging that their narratives may also reflect aspects of their professional identity.

Rather than quantifying the frequency of specific themes or concepts, IPA emphasizes exploring the depth and richness of meanings ascribed to experiences. The analysis followed a systematic, yet flexible, process outlined in Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999), which included multiple readings of each interview transcript. During these readings, detailed notes were taken in the margins, highlighting significant observations and emergent themes.

This iterative process involved a constant interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning. The participants' accounts often brought forth unexpected insights, prompting the researcher to conceptualise these issues through a theoretically informed lens. Existing psychological theories were thus used to illuminate the data, but also challenged and modified as the analysis progressed, in line with the hermeneutic principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

The analysis moved beyond mere description, delving into different levels of interpretation while ensuring a clear distinction between the participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations. This was achieved through a close textual reading of the transcripts, paying particular attention to the nuances of language, emotional expressions, and the underlying meanings embedded within participants' narratives.

The culmination of this iterative process was a table (Table 5) summarising the central themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis of all interviews. Each theme was accompanied by illustrative quotes, ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the participants' own words. This table, a product of the rigorous and systematic IPA process, allows for an independent audit of the analysis, ensuring transparency and trustworthiness of the findings (Smith, 1996).

The final stage of data analysis involved crafting a narrative account that weaves together the interpretive activity with the participants' accounts of their experiences. This narrative synthesis serves as a culmination of the analysis, offering a rich and nuanced understanding of the experiences of EFP therapists.

### **3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout this research process, guiding every decision from study design to data analysis. The study was



approved by the NSPC research ethics subcommittee (Appendix E) and adhered to the ethical guidelines of Middlesex University and the British Psychological Society (Danchev & Ross, 2014). This commitment to ethical practice involved fostering an open, trusting, and collaborative relationship with participants while maintaining critical reflexivity throughout the research journey (Finlay, 2011).

Upon receiving ethical approval, the researcher prioritized the safety and well-being of participants. This entailed ensuring informed consent through a comprehensive information sheet (Appendix B) and a consent form (Appendix C), detailing the study's purpose, voluntary nature of participation, right to withdraw, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants were also informed of potential benefits and risks, including the possibility of minimal psychological discomfort given the sensitive nature of the topic. While no discomfort was reported following the interviews, the researcher was prepared to offer support and empathy if needed.

To address potential concerns regarding time commitment, interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience and kept to a maximum of one hour. The researcher aimed to minimise any inconvenience while maximising the value of participants' contributions by creating a space for meaningful dialogue and exploration of their experiences. The insights gleaned from these interviews have the potential to contribute to the ongoing development and refinement of EFP as a therapeutic modality, ultimately benefiting both practitioners and clients.

### **3.8 REFLEXIVITY**

Reflexivity, as defined by Malterud (2001), is "an attitude of paying systematic attention to the context of knowledge construction, especially the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process" (p. 484). In this study, reflexivity served as a guiding principle, acknowledging the inevitable interplay between the researcher's subjectivity and the research process. As a certified EAGALA equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) practitioner with positive personal and professional experiences with EFP, I recognise the potential for inherent biases to influence my interpretations. My deep-rooted belief in the efficacy of EFP and my pre-existing relationship with horses could inadvertently sway my understanding and analysis of the data.

Moreover, my identity as a female therapist living in Saudi Arabia also significantly shaped this research. Here, horses are often viewed primarily as animals for riding or show, rather than therapeutic partners, and therapy sessions are typically expected to occur in traditional office settings or health institutions, not at stables or farms. The environmental challenges of conducting EFP in a hot climate further complicated matters. These cultural and environmental factors starkly contrasted with the experiences of the participants residing in the UK and USA, and where EFP is more established and integrated into therapeutic practices. These differences highlighted the importance of reflexivity in acknowledging and navigating the diverse perspectives and contexts that shaped

this research, a process I will further elaborate on in the "Reflecting on the Research Process" section in chapter 6.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to completely separate the self from the research process. As Heidegger (1962) noted, "It is impracticable to separate the self from this world: every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought." However, by acknowledging and engaging with my own subjectivity, I aimed to enhance the research's clarity and integrity (Grimes, 2018).

Existing research distinguishes between different forms of reflexivity, including personal, theoretical, epistemological, methodological, ethical, relational, and embodied reflexivity (Finlay, 2011; Langdridge, 2007; Willig, 2013). While personal reflexivity is often emphasised, it is important to recognise that these different forms of reflexivity are interconnected and can influence each other. In this research, I primarily focused on personal reflexivity, acknowledging and exploring how my personal experiences as a horse owner and equine therapist, beliefs in the effectiveness of EFP, and cultural context as the first Arabian woman practicing EFP in Saudi Arabia have influenced my research decisions and interpretations. However, I also considered ethical reflexivity, particularly in relation to power dynamics between myself and the participants, as well as relational reflexivity, recognising the importance of establishing rapport and trust in the interview process. By engaging in these forms of reflexivity, I

aimed to ensure the rigour and integrity of the research while maintaining a respectful and empathetic approach towards the participants.

In light of these considerations, employing IPA as the research methodology allowed reflexivity to play a pivotal role in shaping the depth of the analysis. By systematically paying attention to the context of knowledge construction, I navigated potential biases and ensured a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of therapists' experiences and perspectives. Through reflexive practices such as maintaining a reflexive journal, undergoing peer review of my interpretations, and engaging in reflexivity exercises such as self-interviewing and discussing my assumptions with colleagues, I actively worked to minimise the impact of personal biases on the research findings.

Furthermore, my background as a therapist informed by existential philosophy naturally led me to explore the inherent existential themes embedded within EFP, such as being in the world, freedom, and authenticity. This lens allowed me to delve deeper into the therapeutic relationship between therapist, horse, and client, and examine how EFP might facilitate personal growth and transformation.

In conclusion, by acknowledging and addressing my personal biases discussed above, I believe this research offers a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of EFP from the perspective of therapists. While my positionality may have influenced the research process, my commitment to reflexivity has

ensured that the findings remain grounded in the data and the lived experiences of the participants.

### **3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOUR IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research, including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), hinges on establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Anney, 2014). In addition to these criteria, this study aimed to demonstrate sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and the overall impact and importance of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Yardley, 2007).

#### **3.9.1 Credibility and Reflexivity**

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in the truthfulness of the research findings (Anney, 2014). In qualitative inquiry, credibility is established through rigorous methodology, researcher transparency, and a commitment to understanding the participants' perspectives (Patton, 2002). Given the researcher's background as an EFP practitioner and horse owner, reflexivity was a critical component in maintaining credibility. Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document personal biases and assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1994) and engaged in a reflexive interview with a colleague to explore potential influences on data interpretation.

#### **3.9.2 Transferability and Confirmability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied to other contexts or populations (Anney, 2014). While this study focused on certified mental health professionals, the findings may resonate with other practitioners working with horses in therapeutic settings. The detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and the use of illustrative quotes enhance the study's transferability, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own contexts.

Confirmability, the extent to which findings can be corroborated by others, was addressed through multiple strategies. First, the research process was thoroughly documented, from data collection to analysis, ensuring transparency and replicability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Second, the researcher sought continuous feedback from dissertation supervisors, engaging in peer debriefing to enhance the study's rigour and address potential biases. Third, the emergence of recurring patterns and themes across participants' narratives contributed to the confirmability of the findings.

### **3.9.3 Dependability and Sensitivity to Context**

Dependability, referring to the stability of findings over time, was established through a robust research design and multiple readings of the interview transcripts to ensure consistent interpretations (Anney, 2014).

Sensitivity to context, which involves acknowledging the sociocultural setting and the participants' unique perspectives (Yardley, 2007), was demonstrated through

the use of open-ended questions, the researcher's willingness to explore alternative interpretations, and a deep engagement with the relevant literature.

#### **3.9.4 Commitment, Rigour, and Impact**

The researcher's commitment to rigorous data collection and analysis, coupled with a thorough understanding of IPA methodology, contributed to the study's overall rigour. The in-depth engagement with participants' narratives and the resulting rich, descriptive accounts demonstrate a commitment to capturing the essence of their lived experiences.

The impact and importance of this research lie in its potential to inform EFP practice, training, and research. By providing a deeper understanding of therapists' experiences, this study can contribute to the development of evidence-based practices, ethical guidelines, and further research that can expand and refine this promising therapeutic modality.

### **3.10 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter detailed the methodological approach employed to investigate therapists' experiences and perceptions of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Given the emphasis on understanding subjective experiences and meaning-making, a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was adopted. The chapter began

by justifying this choice, highlighting IPA's strengths in capturing nuanced individual experiences and its alignment with the study's research questions.

The data collection process, which involved online semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, was then described. This approach allowed for flexibility and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while addressing the practical challenges of conducting research with geographically dispersed participants. The use of a pilot interview to refine research procedures and ensure the quality and relevance of the data was also discussed.

Participant selection criteria and the rationale for using purposive criterion sampling were detailed, emphasizing the importance of selecting participants with specific expertise and experience in EFP. The demographic characteristics of the six participating therapists were presented, showcasing a diverse range of ages, experience levels, and geographical locations.

The chapter then delved into the specific steps involved in data analysis using IPA, including transcription, coding, and theme development. The iterative and reflexive nature of this process was highlighted, along with the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness, such as member checking, peer debriefing, and an independent audit.

Finally, ethical considerations were addressed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the researcher's reflexivity. The researcher's



positionality as an EFP practitioner and horse owner was acknowledged, and steps taken to mitigate potential biases were discussed.

In sum, this chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology, laying the groundwork for the subsequent presentation and discussion of the findings in Chapter 4. The chosen methodology, guided by IPA principles and rigorous qualitative practices, aims to illuminate the lived experiences of EFP therapists and shed light on the complex interplay between their personal and professional lives within this unique therapeutic modality.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This phenomenological research study using an IPA design has been conducted to discover more about certified mental health therapists' perspectives, experiences, and insights using EFP as a therapeutic modality. A semi-structured Zoom online interview was used to respond to the subsequent research question:

*What are the perspectives and experiences of therapists in using equine-facilitated psychotherapy modality?*

The interview questions (refer to Appendix D) were designed to directly target the research inquiry and prompt participants to provide detailed and comprehensive accounts of their experiences, viewpoints, perspectives, and beliefs regarding EFP. The aim was to ensure that the questions would enable participants to convey a complete and nuanced understanding of their involvement in this therapeutic approach.

The themes derived from the interpretative phenomenological analysis are discussed in the following section. The interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. The themes emerged directly from the content of the interviews and the researcher's notes. They were analyzed and

presented to this research's supervisors to provide constructive feedback. The analysis produced four connected superordinate themes (Table 3).

To ensure clarity and comprehension, the identified themes were subdivided into sub-themes for organizational purposes. It is worth noting that certain themes displayed overlapping characteristics across different categories. In such instances, the placement of these themes was determined based on the category that most aptly aligned with the emphasis and significance highlighted by the respective participant.

**TABLE 5:** The superordinate themes and their corresponding sub-themes

<b>Superordinate theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>
Theme 1: An Arena of Growth	1 -Passion Match, Source of Inspiration 2-Lifelong learning 3-Relaxing Into the process 4-Integrative practice

Theme 2: Unconventional therapy session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1-Experiential learning, transferable to the human arena</li> <li>2-The horse as fundamental to the experience of EFP</li> <li>3-Open structure</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Living The Experience, Learning from Equines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1-Self-Awareness</li> <li>2-Living the Here and Now</li> <li>3-Authenticity</li> <li>4-I-Thou Experience</li> <li>5-Embodiment</li> </ul>
Theme 4: Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1-Horse well-being and boundaries</li> <li>2-Environment</li> <li>3-Affordability for clients</li> <li>4-Lack of Supported studies</li> </ul>

#### **4.2 SUPERORDINATE THEME 1: AN ARENA OF GROWTH**

The theme "An Arena of Growth" emerged from a focused exploration of how Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) influences therapists' professional lives. Participants' responses analysed and interpreted into four distinct subthemes

that illuminate the diverse ways EFP shapes therapists' experiences, insights, and overall career development.

#### **4.2.1: PASSION MATCH, SOURCE OF INSPIRATION**

A strong personal connection to horses and a belief in their therapeutic potential emerged as a powerful motivator for therapists engaging in EFP (Parish-Plass, 2013; Schultz et al., 2017). This resonated with participants who overwhelmingly described an early and enduring passion for horses as a driving force behind their career choice.

One participant (A) recounted how a childhood immersed in the equine world nurtured her passion for EFP:

*Since I was a young child, horses have always been a part of my life ... I am glad I get to practise what I am passionate about ... it does not just work for me ... it is much much more. (A)*

This sentiment was echoed by another participant (D), whose lifelong connection with horses naturally led to a career as both an equine therapist and instructor:

*Horses have been a part of my life for 25 years, I mean the majority of my life.. no wonder I' ve become an Equine therapist and instructor as well. (D)*

For some, like participant (C), personal experience of the therapeutic benefits of horses solidified their career path:

*I have interacted with horses all my life and I have seen the result on myself, especially when I was grieving ... I know it is working ..it has worked for me..it has worked for my clients. (C)*

Witnessing the positive impact of horses on others also played a crucial role. Participant (B) described a childhood intuition that horses could "shift" lives, which was confirmed through their professional experience:

*Since I was a kid, I had an instinctive feeling that horses would shift my life and others ... but didn ' t have the how.. until I joined EAGALA and became certified. (B)*

For participant (E), the allure of the human-animal bond ignited a lifelong curiosity that led to their current career:

*I was attracted by the relationship between me and horses even when I was twelve years old ... That desire is what set me in this current field. (E)*

This passion was not simply a personal preference but an integral component of their professional identity. Participant (F) articulated how integrating their love of horses with their therapeutic work created a sense of authenticity and purpose:

*I brought human growth and the passion for horses together in the field of equine-assisted therapy because I have a strong love and respect for horses. I've been working in this profession for ten years, researching many EAP approaches before settling on one that felt more authentic to me and was more thorough and useful for my clients. (F)*

These narratives illuminate the multifaceted nature of passion within EFP. It is a driving force, a source of inspiration, and a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of the horse-human connection. This passion, nurtured through personal experiences and a profound understanding of equine nature, underpins the effectiveness of EFP therapists and is central to their professional identity.

#### **4.2.2: LIFELONG LEARNING**

The dynamic and evolving nature of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) necessitates a commitment to lifelong learning. As a relatively new and expanding modality (Hallberg, 2008), EFP requires therapists to continually update their knowledge and skills to remain effective practitioners (Lentini & Knox, 2015). This commitment to ongoing learning emerged as a significant theme in the participants' narratives.

One participant (A), despite having 15 years of experience in EFP, emphasised that there is "always room for learning" in this field:

*I have been for the last 15 years. And during the same time, I did lots of training in terms of the equine work... but there will always be room for learning.*

(A)

Another participant (D) succinctly captured the essence of mastery in EFP:

*So there is one simple answer to master this ... a lot of training and continuous learning. (D)*

The challenges inherent in EFP were also acknowledged. Participant (B) highlighted the need to demonstrate EFP's efficacy alongside more established therapeutic approaches, requiring dedication to professional growth:

*It is quite challenging to be an Equine therapist where you need to show that this modality is as effective as one-to-one clinic settings. This requires lots of learning, reading, and practice to be a professional EFP therapist. (B)*

The importance of staying abreast of the latest developments in the field was emphasised by another participant (F):

*It is like any therapeutic approach out there, we need to keep ourselves updated with what is new in the Equine therapy domain and how to deliver it as best as we can. (F)*

These narratives illustrate that lifelong learning is not merely a desirable trait but an essential component of professional practice in EFP. Regardless of experience level, therapists recognised the value of continuous learning to refine their skills, adapt to new research, and ultimately, provide the most effective care



for their clients. This reflects the field's ongoing development, with evolving practices and research necessitating a commitment to growth and adaptability.

#### **4.2.3: RELAXING INTO THE PROCESS**

Through ongoing practice, EFP therapists become more attuned to horses' behaviour and develop a remarkable ability to read and interpret their nonverbal cues (Lentini & Knox, 2015). This heightened sensitivity, combined with increased confidence gained from practice, allows therapists to relax into the process, fostering a more natural and intuitive therapeutic approach.

One participant (A) described how 15 years of experience led to a significant shift in her practice:

*How things work. And what I did in 2002 is not necessarily what I do now. I do a lot more hands-off, a lot more standing back, a lot more allowing the client to find their own way. (A)*

This transition to a more "hands-off" approach reflects a growing trust in the inherent wisdom of the therapeutic process, allowing clients to discover their own solutions with the horse as a guide.

Other participants also noted a similar progression towards a more intuitive and less structured approach. Participant (C) emphasised the importance of gradually "easing up" on rigid structures and rules:

*We don't have to obey all the rules .. we have to do boundaries and to do all those things. But then gradually, gradually, as we go along, we think we can just ease up on that and let go of that a little bit. (C)*

The development of confidence and trust in the process was often linked to experience and practice. Participant (D) highlighted the correlation between practice and confidence:

*It is one of the approaches that the more you practise the more you become confident in running the sessions around horses ... but [it] takes lots and lots of practice.. after 9 years of practice, I can say I am more relaxed in doing equine therapy sessions than any other approaches. (D)*

This emphasis on practice underscores the significance of experiential learning in developing a deeper understanding of EFP and the horse-human dynamic. As therapists gain experience, they become more adept at reading subtle cues from both horses and clients, enabling them to tailor interventions more effectively.

The "Relaxing into the Process" theme highlights the transformative journey of EFP practitioners as they evolve from novice to experienced facilitators. Through continuous learning, practice, and a deepening understanding of the therapeutic relationship, participants reported cultivate a greater sense of ease and confidence, allowing them to embrace the inherent unpredictability of EFP and trust in the therapeutic potential of the horse-human relationship.

#### 4.2.4: INTEGRATIVE PRACTICE

The adaptability of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) allows for seamless integration with various therapeutic approaches, enhancing its effectiveness and offering a more holistic approach to client care (Geher, 2012; Masini, 2010). This flexibility was a key theme highlighted by participants, who demonstrated the diverse ways in which they weave EFP into their existing therapeutic frameworks.

Participant B, for instance, illustrated how EFP can be tailored to specific client needs and presenting issues, incorporating Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or mindfulness practices as appropriate:

*Pluralism means thinking about what type of intervention might be good for what client. So I work with CBT sometimes with the horses, if that is appropriate for the presenting issue... I might work in a mindfulness way with another client... I might work in a psychodynamic way... So it just depends on the presenting issues, the client on what the client wants really. (B)*

For participant A, the integration of EFP with her 22 years of experience as a therapist has led to innovative and effective treatment methods:

*I have been able to combine my 22 years of experience as a therapist with the unique abilities that horses have... through this integration, I have discovered innovative and effective methods to assist my clients. (A)*

This highlights how EFP can complement and enhance existing therapeutic skills, rather than replace them.

The integration of EFP with other modalities can also lead to a deeper understanding of clients' needs. Participant C found that combining EFP with Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2018) facilitated a more holistic approach to client recovery:

*Since we primarily access the cognitive aspect of the client's self in traditional therapy, I've discovered that my practice is much deeper. For example, when applying the polyvagal method in an Equine session, I've noticed that people experience a deeper, more holistic recovery because it also affects their physical, emotional, and spiritual selves. I now have a more deep understanding of a person's thoughts and feelings. (C)*

The unique dynamics of EFP sessions also lend themselves to the integration of other modalities. Participant F described how the qualities of horses align with the principles of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, making Equine Assisted EMDR particularly effective for trauma survivors:

*Many of the skills required to consciously progress through the stages of EMDR therapy are taught by horses. Horses — believe it or not — "get it." Numerous trauma survivors have told me that Equine Assisted EMDR "feels just "different" from in-office EMDR; they have said, for instance, that horses demand*

*a "realness" that trauma recovery calls for. In reality, the majority of my clients who have experienced significant trauma and dissociation work with me on equine assisted EMDR. (F)*

This integrative approach allows therapists to leverage the strengths of both EFP and other modalities, tailoring interventions to meet the diverse needs of their clients. The organic nature of EFP sessions, which often involve spontaneous interactions and emotional responses, creates a fertile ground for integrating various therapeutic approaches, as participant D illustrated:

*In EAGALA Model, we apply solution-focused [therapy] and seeing it working for clients where they figure out the best solutions for themselves was different from office sitting.. immediate with quick results.. I managed to only give them the opportunity to discover the solutions with the help of horses, rather than to instruct or direct[ing] solutions. (D)*

The "Integrative Practice" theme demonstrates the participants' perspectives and experience on how EFP is not a standalone therapy but a versatile tool that can be seamlessly integrated with various therapeutic modalities. This flexibility allowed them to create bespoke treatment plans, harnessing the strengths of different approaches to provide comprehensive and effective care for their clients.

#### **SUMMARY OF THE FIRST THEME:**

The theme "An Arena of Growth" encompasses four subthemes that emerged from the participants' experiences and insights, shedding light on the influence of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) on their professional and career development. These subthemes provide a deeper understanding of how EFP has shaped their professional journeys and contributed to their growth.

The first subtheme, passion match, reveals that therapists are drawn to EFP by a deep-rooted love for horses and a profound belief in their therapeutic potential. This passion fuels their work, fosters a deeper connection with clients, and serves as a wellspring of inspiration. The second subtheme focused on the importance of lifelong learning in the dynamic and evolving field of EFP, requiring therapists to embrace continuous professional development to stay abreast of emerging research, refine their skills, and adapt their practices. With experience and practice, therapists develop a greater sense of ease and confidence, as highlighted in the third subtheme. They learn to trust the therapeutic process, allowing it to unfold organically and adapting their approach to the unique needs of each client. The final subtheme emphasizes EFP's flexibility, allowing seamless integration with various therapeutic modalities, such as CBT, EMDR, and Polyvagal Theory. This integrative approach enriches therapists' practice, providing a more comprehensive and holistic treatment framework for clients.

In sum, "An Arena of Growth" underscores the multifaceted ways in which EFP fosters professional development and personal fulfillment for

therapists, highlighting the interplay of passion, learning, adaptability, and integration in shaping a fulfilling and impactful career within this unique therapeutic modality.

## **2.3: SUPERORDINATE THEME 2: UNCONVENTIONAL THERAPY SESSION**

The theme "Unconventional Therapy Session" emerged from participants' reflections on their experiences practising Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) in contrast to traditional therapy sittings. Their narratives revealed three distinct subthemes that illuminate how EFP diverges from traditional therapy, impacting both the therapeutic process and client outcomes.

### **2.3.1: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, TRANSFERABLE TO THE HUMAN ARENA**

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) inherently embodies the principles of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), providing clients with a unique opportunity to engage in embodied learning through direct interaction with horses (EAGALA, 2009). This experiential approach fosters a deeper understanding and integration of therapeutic insights, extending beyond verbal communication.

Participants in the study emphasised the distinction between cognitive and embodied learning in EFP. One therapist (D) observed how clients not only understand concepts intellectually but also experience them somatically:

*Experientially clients will not only 'get it' cognitively but also something happens in their body. So they get it in their body. So if some of the experiential learning that a client gets is it's actually hitting their body, that's very good news because we can't heal just with cognitive processes or thoughts in the world. (D)*

This sentiment was echoed by another participant (A), who highlighted the active nature of EFP compared to traditional talk therapy:

*It is not about talking...they actually go out and they do not just talk because they go experience it. (A)*

Participant (B) further emphasised the importance of "learning and doing" within the experiential setting of EFP, stating:

*...Since we are working in an experiential setting, learning and doing are key. (B)*

The horses themselves play a pivotal role in this experiential learning process. Participant (F) described how horses serve as metaphors, allowing clients to project and explore their emotions, behaviours, and relationships:

*In this type of therapy, the horse is frequently used as a metaphor for several things. The client can use the horse to represent a spouse, a bully at work, or anything else they need to work through. (F)*



This metaphorical connection facilitates deeper self-understanding and promotes the transfer of insights to real-life situations.

Participants also highlighted the importance of client autonomy in EFP, allowing individuals the freedom to experiment and learn from their experiences.

As one participant (E) noted:

*Many clients would rather act than talk in the therapy... some reject being instructed what to do... In Equine sessions, they can now try out many approaches and through different activities with the horse to problem-solving, which I believe is somewhat liberating for them. (E)*

This sense of liberation was echoed by participant (C), who emphasised the importance of giving clients the *"freedom and chance to figure it out in different ways."*

The horses' immediate feedback on both verbal and non-verbal communication was also identified as a key aspect of experiential learning in EFP. Therapists noted that this feedback is not only immediate but also *"simple to consider"* (C), allowing clients to reflect on their interactions and apply their newfound understanding to other areas of their lives. Participant (A) concisely stated: *"The horses give them immediate feedback."*

The transferability of skills learned in EFP to real-life situations was a recurring theme among participants. As one therapist (B) put it:

*And it could be a relationship with a horse, at least as a starting point, and then maybe some of those skills would be transferable back into the human arena. (B)*

This quote highlights the potential for EFP to not only facilitate learning within the therapeutic context but also equip clients with valuable skills applicable to their broader interpersonal relationships.

Another participant (D) emphasised the efficiency of EFP due to the immediate and impactful nature of the experiential learning:

*It may be used to address a variety of difficulties and is a very efficient kind of therapy because so much comes out immediately. (D)*

The "Experiential Learning, Transferable to the Human Arena" theme captures the essence of participants perspectives about how EFP fosters deep, embodied learning that extends beyond the therapeutic setting. The unique dynamics of the horse-human relationship, coupled with the emphasis on experiential learning and client autonomy, create a powerful catalyst for personal growth and change. The immediate feedback provided by horses, the use of equine metaphors, and the potential for skill transfer all contribute to the transformative power of EFP.

### **2.3.2: THE HORSE AS FUNDAMENTAL TO THE EXPERIENCE OF EFP**

Building on the experiential nature of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), the horse emerges as a fundamental and active participant in the therapeutic process, far beyond a mere tool or setting. As Kohanov (2013) states, horses possess a unique ability to assess reality without human distortions, making them ideal partners in facilitating therapeutic change.

Participants consistently highlighted the horse's transformative role in altering the traditional client-therapist dynamic. One therapist (E) described how the horse's presence shifted her role to a more indirect, observational one:

*The horse removed me from being the only one in charge... the client and the horse can then lead the session somehow and I am like a mediator... which has released some pressure off me and made me observe more. (E)*

Challenging the traditional notion of the therapist as the sole authority, another participant (A) forcefully asserted the horse's active and indispensable role as a "co-facilitator" in the therapeutic process:

*Actually, it's the horse ..it is the co-facilitator. And if you start to steer sessions, what you're doing is you're getting in front of the horse and the work that the horse can do. (A)*

This perspective underscores a fundamental shift in the therapeutic dynamic within EFP, where the therapist relinquishes sole control and recognises the horse's innate wisdom and therapeutic contributions. By stepping back and allowing the horse to guide the process, the therapist creates space for the horse to

engage authentically with the client, potentially unlocking deeper levels of healing and self-discovery.

The horse's unique ability to foster trust and openness was also a salient theme. One therapist (F) noted how clients often confide in horses in ways they might not with a human therapist:

*...they can talk freely about anything or issue to the horses. And surprisingly sometimes they don't want to share it with me and they keep it a secret with the horse. (F)*

This sentiment underscores the non-judgemental and accepting nature of horses, which creates a safe space for clients to express their true selves.

Another participant (B) described horses as "perfect co-therapists," highlighting their authenticity and inability to deceive:

*...horses, in particular, are not judging, not criticising and not being able to lie. Horses can't lie what you see is what you get...they are the perfect co-therapist so to speak. (B)*

This unique quality allows clients to develop a genuine connection with the horse, fostering trust and facilitating therapeutic breakthroughs.

The horse's role extends beyond emotional support; it also serves as a mirror, reflecting clients' behaviours and emotional states. This immediate and unfiltered feedback, often more impactful than verbal interventions, enables

clients to gain valuable insights into their patterns and reactions. As one participant (A) stated, "*The horses give them immediate feedback.*"

The theme draws from the participants' opinions that the horse emerges as a fundamental and active participant in EFP, enriching the therapeutic experience through its unique qualities and capabilities. The horse's presence fosters a collaborative therapeutic relationship, facilitates deeper self-understanding, and provides invaluable feedback, making it an indispensable element in the transformative potentials of EFP.

### **2.3.3: OPEN STRUCTURE**

Therapists often see EFP as an unconventional therapy session because it takes place outdoors, providing a calming and grounding environment for clients (Henderson & Peham, 2018). Additionally, physical activities like grooming and leading horses can help clients build trust, confidence, and self-esteem (Kern-Godal et al., 2015).

Participants in the study emphasised how this "Open Structure" diverges from traditional therapy, fostering a different kind of therapeutic experience. One participant (A) described how EFP allows sessions to "unfold" organically:

*I need to let the client and the horse work together and go where it will.  
I'll let go and allow whatever unfolds to unfold. (A)*

Another participant (C) noted that the open space levels the playing field between therapist and client:

*So it makes a very level playing field for clients, which might be the first time they've ever experienced that... If we're outside in a bigger, more open space with the horses, that's a totally different situation. (C)*

This shift in dynamics can lead to unexpected breakthroughs. Participant (C) shared how simply observing a horse grazing prompted a client to express a desire for simplicity and freedom from life's pressures:

*...we were having a session, and I felt the client was really distracted, not fully present. But as they watched one of the horses just grazing, they said something like, 'it makes me wish I could just do that, just be... without all the have-to's and should-do's'. We hadn't talked about that sort of thing before, about their stress levels. And it felt like being outdoors, that kind of simple observation, helped them say something that maybe they hadn't been fully aware of yet... (C)*

The informality and flexibility of EFP sessions were also deeply valued. Participants (E) and (F) expressed their preference for the relaxed atmosphere:

*...and I look forward to all my equine sessions in a way that I don't always look forward to my sessions indoors because it's much more relaxed, it's much more informal... (E)*

*...instead of having that more fixed idea of what the sessions look like... I just allow things to be... (F)*

The "Open Structure" theme underscores how participants perceive EFP as a unique therapeutic environment fosters a sense of openness, collaboration, and self-discovery in clients.

### **SUMMARY OF THE SECOND THEME:**

The theme of "Unconventional Therapy Session" highlights the distinctive aspects of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) that set it apart from traditional talk therapy. Participants underscored three key subthemes within this theme.

First, the experiential nature of EFP facilitates profound learning and growth for clients. By actively engaging with horses, clients receive immediate feedback, gain embodied understanding, and can experiment with behaviours and emotions in a safe, supportive environment.

Second, the horse emerges as a fundamental and active participant, acting as a co-facilitator and offering a unique form of non-judgemental support and reflection. This collaborative dynamic with the horse can unlock deeper levels of self-awareness and emotional exploration.

Finally, the open structure of EFP sessions, often conducted outdoors, further contributes to its unconventional nature. This setting allows for a levelling of the traditional power dynamic between therapist and client, fosters a relaxed

and informal atmosphere, and encourages spontaneous exploration and self-discovery.

Together, these subthemes illuminate the multifaceted ways in which EFP deviates from traditional therapeutic norms, offering a unique and potentially transformative therapeutic experience.

## **2.4: SUPERORDINATE THEME 3: LIVING THE EXPERIENCE, LEARNING FROM EQUINES**

The theme "Living the Experience, Learning from Equines" emerged from participants' personal experiences working with horses, highlighting the impact of these interactions on their personal and emotional development. This theme is divided into five subthemes that illuminate the diverse ways in which therapists learn and grow through their engagement with horses in the context of EFP.

### **2.4.1: SELF AWARENESS**

A heightened sense of self-awareness emerged as a prominent theme amongst therapists engaged in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Through their interactions with horses, participants reported a deepening understanding of their own emotions, behaviours, and nonverbal communication.

One participant (D) described a transformative shift in their perspective, emphasising the importance of acceptance, trust, and humility in EFP:



*I've learnt to accept and trust, I've learnt to let go ... and that is ok that I know nothing ... (D)*

Another participant (E) experienced a profound personal transformation through EFP, resulting in a "very different view" of themselves and their relationships:

*...so I have a very different view now and a much better relationship with my horses as a result, and also I feel better about myself, so it's changed everything. (E)*

The development of self-awareness was often linked to a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between the therapist's internal state and their interactions with both horses and clients. Participant (B) articulated this connection, stating:

*It is a different level of self-awareness ... understanding and working on my emotions and behaviours ... not only [impact] me, but it impacts the horse's behaviours and emotions. (B)*

For participant (C), the emotional intensity of working with horses in the EFP setting served as a catalyst for personal growth and awareness:

*The fact that I am with two beings in the arena during the session elicits a range of emotions that have helped me for personal awareness and growth. (C)*

Participant (F) succinctly captured the essence of this theme, stating that EFP has "developed the skill of awareness and deepened my self-connection." Similarly, participant (A) emphasised the importance of increased awareness and observation in fostering personal growth and positive change:

*I learnt how to increase my awareness and observation, which is the first step towards more presence, personal development, and making positive change in my life. (A)*

The "Self-Awareness" subtheme highlights how EFP serves as a catalyst for personal and professional growth in therapists. Through their interactions with horses, participants reported they are encouraged to explore their own emotions, behaviours, and nonverbal communication. This heightened self-awareness not only enhances their therapeutic practice but also contributes to their personal development and well-being.

#### **2.4.2: LIVING THE HERE AND NOW**

Building on the heightened self-awareness cultivated through their work, therapists also emphasised the importance of "Living in the Here and Now" within EFP. This theme underscores the importance of mindfulness and presence in EFP, facilitated by the open structure and experiential nature of the therapy itself. The outdoor setting and direct interactions with horses naturally encourage a heightened awareness of the present moment. Kohanov's (2013) observation

showed that horses are "masters at assessing the evolving nuances of reality," as they live in the present and exhibit exceptional emotional agility (p. 30).

Participants in the study frequently referenced the profound impact of horses on their ability to be present and grounded. One participant (B) described the experience of being with horses as a grounding force:

*When I'm with the horses, I'm in the here and now I'm in the presence, really. And everything else just goes away into the background. That's great. That's exactly what I need. (B)*

Another participant (D) emphasised the experiential nature of this shift towards presence:

*The change can be felt and experienced in the here and now, while sharing the space. (D)*

Being present in the moment allows therapists to better understand their own emotions and energy, as well as those of their clients. Participant (C) noted that horses' sensitivity to energy encourages mindfulness and self-regulation in both therapist and client:

*Horses are very sensitive to the energy surrounding them, this helps me and my clients to be present and think of our energy, feelings, and autonomic states.. This provides the opportunity to learn self-regulation and ground. (C)*

The concept of "grounding" was also mentioned by participant (F), who described it as a vital skill learned through working with horses:

*I learned to pause, breathe, and absorb the surroundings.. it has helped me to connect with the horse wisdom so I can be more grounded and present. (F)*

This connection to the horse's wisdom, facilitated by a heightened sense of presence, was seen as a key aspect of EFP. Participant (F) further elaborated:

*...during the session, I find myself aware of myself and the surroundings to be able to understand what the horse is trying to tell me. I learned how to be in sync with the horse, and it will show me the way. (F)*

For some, like participant (A), this newfound grounding extended beyond the therapeutic setting into their everyday lives:

*I have learnt to be grounded in the here and now ...during the session and even outside the arena ...it is a life skill... I learnt how to increase my awareness and observation, which is the first step toward more presence, personal development, and making positive change in my life. (A)*

The "Living the Here and Now" theme highlights the profound impact of horses on participants' ability to cultivate mindfulness and presence, both within and outside the therapeutic context. According to participants' narratives, this heightened awareness not only enhances their therapeutic practice but also contributes to their personal growth and overall well-being. It builds upon the self-awareness developed through EFP, creating a cyclical process of growth and development for the therapist.

### 2.4.3: AUTHENTICITY

The theme of "Authenticity" further underscores the personal and professional growth fostered by EFP, building on the heightened self-awareness and grounded presence cultivated through working with horses. Participants highlighted how the non-judgemental and honest nature of horses encouraged them to embrace their true selves, both within and outside the therapeutic context. This authenticity in therapists can lead to stronger therapeutic relationships and improved outcomes (Lanning et al., 2014).

Participant A, highlighted the unconditional acceptance offered by horses:

*I can have dirty old clothes and just had a very bad day but horses will accept me no matter what with no judgement whatsoever. They will do the same with clients ...horses are so special ...so I learned to be me.. to be authentic. (A)*

This experience of acceptance and non-judgement, mirrored in the horse's interactions with clients, allowed participant A to embrace her authentic self.

For participant C, authenticity was linked to being fully present in the moment with the horse:

*I become in touch with my authentic selves, the world around me, and the moment I am in. (C)*

This suggests that the heightened awareness cultivated through "Living in the Here and Now" can also facilitate a deeper connection with one's true self.

Participant D emphasised the role of the horse in fostering authenticity within the therapeutic relationship, and how horse's presence can create a safe space for both therapist and client to express their true selves.

*When horses are present, the therapist and the client engage in a relationship that fosters the emergence of authenticity. (D)*

Participant E noted how working with horses helped them develop emotional regulation and authenticity:

*Being with horses helped me learn emotional regulations and become authentic and congruent. (E)*

Which demonstrates the interconnectedness of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and authenticity within the EFP process.

Participant F echoed the sentiment that EFP fosters authenticity in relationships with others:

*...I learned to be authentic with others. (F)*

This shows that the authenticity cultivated in the therapeutic relationship can extend beyond the EFP setting, impacting the therapist's personal and professional life.

The narratives of the participants underscore the transformative power of EFP in fostering a deeper sense of self-acceptance and congruence. The non-judgemental presence of horses, combined with the heightened self-awareness and mindfulness cultivated through EFP, encourages therapists to embrace their true

selves, leading to greater personal fulfilment and improved therapeutic relationships.

#### **2.4.4: I-THOU EXPERIENCE**

Participants highlighted the profound experience of encountering the horse as a "Thou" - a fellow being with whom a deep, reciprocal connection can be formed. This echoes Martin Buber's I-Thou concept, which contrasts with the I-It relationship where others are seen as objects. In EFP, this I-Thou experience emerges as a transformative element for both therapist and client.

Participant E eloquently captured the essence of this connection, describing it as:

*...the moment of connecting with another being ... the I-Thou moment. (E)*

Furthermore, participant F emphasised the role of shared presence and embodied interaction in cultivating this I-Thou relationship:

*...the intentional act of sharing space and the process of the dialogue through silence ... the experience we get from touching the horse and recognising it as a being ... and the embodied cooperation that each brings into the relationship translates the I-Thou relationship. (F)*

Participant A highlighted the transformative potential of this relationship, describing it as a:

*...conscious, thoughtful relationship with the horse ... one that is based on physical, emotional, and social intelligence and is advantageous to both the horse and the human. (A)*

The participants' narratives underscore the transformative potential of the I-Thou experience in EFP. By recognising the horse as a fellow being and engaging in an authentic, present, and embodied relationship, therapists deepen their connection with the animal and enhance their own self-awareness and personal growth, leading to a more profound and impactful therapeutic experience for clients.

#### **2.4.5: Embodiment**

The theme of "Embodiment" underscores the physical and sensory experience of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), highlighting how engaging with horses can foster a deeper sense of connection to one's own body and emotions (Bachi et al., 2012).

One participant (B) encapsulated this experience as a "sense of wholeness of being... an embodied experience," suggesting that EFP facilitates a deeper integration of mind, body, and emotions. Participant E noted how this embodied experience can enhance the therapeutic relationship, fostering trust and safety through a shared physical and emotional experience:

*...the embodied experience can increase emotional trust and a sense of safety which help build a strong rapport between the clients and me. (E)*



Participant C emphasised how working with horses heightened their attunement to clients' emotions:

*...our job as therapists requires us to "tune in" to our clients' emotions using our own bodies... When I work with the horses, I feel immediate and very clear about my surroundings ••I also observe that I am more easily able to cross through the resonance. The therapeutic space is held by me, the horse, their enormous heart and gut, and the surrounding natural environment. (C)*

Participant F described embodied practice as a "crucial component" of EFP and the "main healing key" for both themselves and their clients:

*...embodied practice is a crucial component of my equine-facilitated practice because it has been the main healing key for my own and many of my clients' paths back to wholeness, fully supported by the horses' feedback at every stage. (F)*

Participant A spoke of the "energetic resonance" between horses and humans, highlighting the potential for horses to mirror and amplify emotions:

*...they also seem to be able to connect with our own emotions and mirror them back to us, which makes it easier for us to feel our most intense emotions. The therapist needs to know about this energetic and emotional resonance... It almost seems as though the horse's body amplifies the feelings present in the scene. (A)*

The participants' narratives show how the embodied experience is perceived as a fundamental aspect of the therapeutic process, contributing to both personal and professional growth for therapists.

### **SUMMARY OF THE THIRD THEME:**

The theme of "Living the Experience, Learning from Equines" elucidates the profound personal and professional development fostered by therapists' engagement with horses in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Five distinct subthemes emerged, each illuminating a unique facet of this transformative process.

Firstly, through interacting with horses, therapists reported a heightened sense of self-awareness and emotional regulation. This heightened awareness extended to recognising the impact of their own emotional states on both horses and clients, thereby enhancing their therapeutic effectiveness.

Secondly, the theme of "Living in the Here and Now" underscores the importance of mindfulness and presence in EFP. Participants emphasised how horses' sensitivity to energy and non-verbal cues encouraged them to be fully present in the moment, both within and outside of therapy sessions, fostering a greater sense of groundedness and connection.

Thirdly, EFP emerged as a catalyst for authenticity in therapists. The non-judgemental and honest nature of horses facilitated a deeper connection to one's

true self, encouraging therapists to embrace their authenticity both personally and professionally.

Fourthly, the concept of the "I-Thou" relationship highlighted the importance of recognising the horse as a sentient being and co-facilitator in the therapeutic process. This recognition fostered a deep, reciprocal connection with the horse, enriching the therapeutic experience for both therapists and clients.

Finally, the theme of "Embodiment" underscored the significance of the physical and sensory experience of EFP. Participants reported a heightened awareness of their own bodily sensations, emotions, and nonverbal communication through interactions with horses. This embodied awareness translated into improved attunement to clients' non-verbal cues and a greater sense of presence and groundedness in their own bodies.

Collectively, these subthemes illuminate the transformative power of EFP in fostering personal and professional growth for therapists. The experiential nature of interacting with horses, coupled with the unique therapeutic environment it provides, allows for a holistic development of self-awareness, presence, authenticity, connection, and embodiment, ultimately enhancing therapists' capacity for empathy, connection, and therapeutic effectiveness.

## **2.5: SUPERORDINATE THEME 4: CHALLENGES**

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), while increasingly recognised for its therapeutic potential, presents unique challenges for practitioners (Lanning & Krennek, 2013). This theme, "Challenges," emerged from participants' candid reflections on the obstacles they encountered in their EFP practice. Their narratives revealed four distinct subthemes, each highlighting a specific challenge and offering insights into the complexities of working within this unconventional therapeutic modality.

### **2.5.1: HORSE WELL-BEING AND BOUNDARIES**

The theme "Horse Well-Being and Boundaries" emerged as a prominent challenge in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), highlighting the need for a balanced and ethical approach that prioritises the well-being of both clients and horses. Participants expressed concerns about the historical lack of attention to equine welfare within the field, emphasizing the need for an "equal partnership" (A) between horses and humans in EFP.

Participant A highlighted the importance of ensuring that horses not only tolerate but actively benefit from their participation in therapy:

*...there should be an equal partnership. So this is not just about the client getting something out of the session. The horses have to get something from it too that means not just tolerating it, you know, but it has to be okay for them. (A)*

This participant further shared their approach to safeguarding equine well-being:

*...but I have some very sensitive horses who are easily impacted. So I vary the amount of work my individual horses do. (A)*

Participant B echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the need for a "horse centred" approach in EFP:

*We need to bear that in mind. If we're client centred, we need to be horse centred. It needs to be equal. (B)*

The challenge of educating clients about equine welfare was also noted. Participant C stressed the importance of modelling respect for horses' needs and boundaries:

*...It is crucial to me that we prioritise equine welfare when caring for our therapeutic partners and that we set an example of this for our clients. (C)*

The complexities of understanding individual horses' personalities, preferences, and boundaries were highlighted by participant D:

*...and the need to spend time working with horses that [I am] planning to partner with in therapy. I need to gain insight into their routines, health issues, history, herd dynamics, temperaments ...and more. (D)*

Finally, participant F stressed the importance of respecting horses as sentient beings with their own boundaries:

*We must fully accept the notion that horses have boundaries if we are to genuinely honour the role of the horse in equine-facilitated practice. Although it is a relatively recent concept concerning horses, I feel that it is completely consistent with the idea that they are sentient entities in and of themselves. (F)*

The participants' narratives collectively reveal a growing awareness among EFP practitioners of the importance of prioritising equine welfare. They emphasised the need for education, respect for horses' boundaries, and a shift towards a more collaborative and equitable partnership between humans and horses in EFP.

### **2.5.2: ENVIRONMENT**

The theme of "Environment" underscores the practical challenges associated with Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) due to its reliance on outdoor settings. Participants identified weather and location as key factors influencing access to and participation in EFP.

Participant (C) highlighted the impact of weather conditions, stating,

*...being outdoors is a challenge for some people in the sense they don't like the thought of being cold...so the weather would definitely be a challenge.*

(C)

Adverse weather conditions could deter clients sensitive to temperature or those with certain health conditions from participating in EFP.

Participant (D) pointed out the geographical challenges, noting the difficulties faced by urban clients in accessing equine facilities often located in rural areas:

*One of the big challenges actually is travel. If you have horses and you live in a rural environment, it likely means you live some way away from a town. And it's likely that most of your clients would be coming from towns or cities. So transport, unless they are self-referring clients with plenty of money, can definitely be a barrier. (D)*

This raises concerns about potential socio-economic disparities in accessing EFP, as transportation costs and time constraints could disproportionately affect certain individuals.

These narratives collectively reveal the environmental challenges inherent in EFP, which can limit its accessibility and create barriers to participation for some individuals.

### **2.5.3: AFFORDABILITY FOR CLIENTS**

The theme of "Affordability for Clients" highlights a significant challenge in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP): the financial burden it can place on those seeking treatment. Due to the lack of insurance coverage and the inherently resource-intensive nature of EFP, many individuals who could benefit from this modality are unable to access it due to cost constraints.

Participant D lamented the financial barrier that EFP presents:

*So I noticed that I only see clients on the whole who can afford it. And that makes me sad sometimes that I can't really offer my services to people with less access to finances. (D)*

Participant A echoed this concern, and elaborated on the potential impact on access to therapy for marginalised populations:

*...a whole section of the population can't access equine therapy because it's an expensive intervention. For example, if I want to work with somebody who's maybe homeless or living in a refuge, or something like that, where there's trauma, but also real financial hardship, then I'm not able to. So that, for me, is one of the things that feels like a real drawback in this type of work. (A)*

This statement reveals a deep concern about the accessibility of EFP for those experiencing financial hardship, such as individuals who are homeless or living in refuges. It highlights the ethical dilemma faced by therapists who recognise the potential benefits of EFP for trauma survivors but are constrained by the financial realities of the modality. The phrase "*real drawback*" further emphasises the participant's perception of this limitation as a significant disadvantage of EFP, potentially hindering its reach and impact within the broader community.

The absence of insurance coverage for EFP was identified as a key factor contributing to its unaffordability. Participant B highlighted this disparity:



*It is not covered by insurance in at least where I work, which can be costly for clients who want to try the Equine approach but [is] covered for other approaches in other therapy centres. (B)*

Participant E also acknowledged this issue, noting that EFP's relatively recent emergence as a recognised therapy may contribute to its lack of insurance coverage:

*••Keep in mind that this service may not be covered by insurance because EFP has only recently gained recognition and trust as an effective therapy for various life and mental issues ••• (E)*

These narratives collectively underscore the financial barriers that hinder equitable access to EFP. The lack of insurance coverage and the often high out-of-pocket costs associated with this modality create a situation where those with limited financial means may be excluded from potentially beneficial therapeutic interventions.

#### **2.5.4: Lack of Supported Studies**

The theme of "Lack of Supported Studies" emerged as a challenge within the field of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), highlighting the need for more rigorous research to establish its efficacy and clarify its terminology. Participants expressed concerns about the limited availability of scientific studies

examining the effectiveness of EFP, as well as the inconsistent terminology and definitions used in existing literature.

Participant A noted the difficulty in distinguishing between studies that focused on the effects of equine therapy and activities and those that specifically examined Equine Psychotherapy sessions:

*It is quite difficult to distinguish between studies that looked at the effects of equine therapy and activities and those that looked at the actual Equine psychotherapy session. (A)*

This lack of clarity can make it challenging for therapists to navigate existing research and apply findings to their practice.

The issue of inconsistent terminology was also raised by multiple participants. Participant C remarked on the confusion caused by varying terminology across different studies:

*I always get struck by the inconsistent terminologies used in different studies. (C)*

Participant E echoed this concern and emphasised the need for greater standardisation in the field:

*...there is still a lot of work to be done in defining the terminology for the large field of equine therapies, as well as the scope of the competencies needed for each one. (E)*

These narratives highlight the need for further research and clarification within the field of EFP. The lack of robust evidence-based studies and inconsistent terminology can create challenges for therapists seeking to provide effective and evidence-based treatment, as well as for policymakers and insurance providers who need clear criteria for evaluating the efficacy of EFP interventions.

#### **SUMMARY OF THE FOURTH THEME:**

The theme "Challenges" encapsulates the multifaceted obstacles encountered by therapists in the practice of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Participants' narratives highlighted four distinct subthemes, each representing a significant hurdle in this emerging therapeutic modality.

Firstly, concerns regarding horse well-being and boundaries emerged as a salient issue. Therapists grappled with the ethical responsibility of ensuring that horses not only tolerate but actively benefit from their participation in therapy, emphasising the need for an equitable partnership between humans and animals.

Secondly, the environmental context of EFP presented practical challenges. Weather conditions and the often remote location of equine facilities were identified as barriers to access, particularly for clients with limited financial resources or mobility restrictions.

Thirdly, the affordability of EFP for clients emerged as a pressing concern. The lack of insurance coverage and high out-of-pocket costs limited

access to this potentially beneficial therapeutic modality for many individuals, raising questions of equity and inclusivity in mental health care.

Lastly, the lack of standardised terminology and robust evidence-based research in EFP created challenges for therapists seeking to provide effective and evidence-based treatment, as well as for policymakers and insurance providers who need clear criteria for evaluating the efficacy of EFP interventions.

These subthemes collectively illuminate the complex landscape of challenges faced by EFP practitioners. While the therapeutic potential of EFP is increasingly recognised, the challenges identified in this theme underscore the need for ongoing research, ethical considerations, and advocacy efforts to ensure equitable access and sustainable practice within this unique therapeutic modality.

#### **Summary of Chapter 4**

This study delved into the lived experiences of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) therapists, revealing the multifaceted ways in which this distinctive modality shapes their personal and professional lives. Employing an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, four interwoven themes emerged, painting a rich tapestry of the EFP experience. Therapists poignantly described EFP as an "arena of growth," a space that nurtures lifelong learning, allows for deep relaxation within the therapeutic process, encourages integrative practice, and reignites their passion for both horses and therapy. The

unconventional therapeutic space, blending the natural world with the presence of horses, emerged as a catalyst for profound personal and professional transformation.

The experiential and embodied nature of EFP sessions, with the horse as a central figure, was consistently highlighted by participants. They recounted how the horse, as co-therapist, facilitated experiential learning, offering clients a unique opportunity for real-time feedback and self-discovery. This non-verbal communication and authentic interaction within an open, outdoor environment fostered a profound sense of presence and encouraged clients to explore their emotions and behavioural patterns with greater clarity and understanding.

The horse-human dynamic proved to be a cornerstone of EFP, fostering a deep connection that transcended words. Therapists spoke with reverence about the "I-Thou" nature of these encounters, emphasizing the mutual respect, trust, and understanding that developed between horse and human. This unique bond, as described by participants, allowed for a profound sense of connection with self and others, promoting authenticity, emotional regulation, and a greater capacity for empathy.

However, the study also revealed the complexities and challenges inherent in EFP practice. Therapists expressed concerns about equine welfare, acknowledging the importance of respecting the horses' boundaries and agency within therapeutic interactions. Additionally, they identified environmental

limitations, financial accessibility for clients, and the need for further research to substantiate the effectiveness of EFP as areas for continued growth and development. These challenges, while real, also present opportunities for innovation and refinement within this emerging field.

. The following table (Table 6) summarizes the findings with samples of participants' quotations:

**TABLE 6.** Summary of the findings

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Example of Respondent Participant Responses</b>
<p><b>Theme 1: An Arena of Growth</b></p> <p><i>Subthemes</i></p> <p>-Passion Match, Source of Inspiration</p>	<p><i>“I have interacted with horses all my life and I have seen the result on myself, especially when I was grieving ...despite that research has already shown it is working...I know it is working ..it has worked for me..it has worked for my clients.”</i></p>

<p>-Lifelong learning</p>	<p><i>“we need to keep ourselves updated with what is new in the Equine therapy domain and how to deliver it as best as we can.”</i></p>
<p>- Relaxing into the process</p>	<p><i>“It is one of the approaches that the more you practice the more you become confident in running the sessions around horses... but takes lots and lots of practice.”</i></p>
<p>-Integrative practice</p>	<p><i>“I have been able to combine my 22 years of experience as a therapist with the unique abilities that horses have..through this integration, I have discovered innovative and effective methods to assist my clients.”</i></p>

<p><b>Theme 2: Unconventional therapy session</b></p> <p><i>Subthemes</i></p> <p>-Experiential learning, transferable to the human arena</p> <p>-The horse as fundamental to the experience of EFP</p> <p>-Open structure</p>	<p><i>“So if some of the experiential learning that a client gets is it's actually hitting their body, that's very good news because we can't heal just with cognitive processes or thoughts in the world.”</i></p> <p><i>The horse removed me from being the only one in charge .. the client and the horse can then lead the session somehow and I am like a mediator .. which has released some pressure off me and made me observe more.</i></p> <p><i>Instead of having that more fixed idea of what the sessions look like.... I just allow things to be.</i></p>
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<p><b>Theme 3: Living The Experience, Learning from Equines</b></p> <p><i>Subthemes</i></p> <p>-Self-Awareness</p> <p>-Living the Here and Now</p> <p>-Authenticity</p> <p>-I-Thou Experience</p> <p>-Embodiment</p>	<p><i>“this has developed my skill of awareness and deepened my self-connection.”</i></p> <p><i>“I learned to pause, breathe, and absorb the surroundings.. it has helped me to connect with the horse wisdom so I can be more grounded and present.”</i></p> <p><i>“I become in touch with my authentic self, the world around me, and the moment I am in.”</i></p> <p><i>“It is in the moment of connecting with another being ...the I-Thou moment.”</i></p> <p><i>“The embodied experience can increase emotional trust and a sense of safety which</i></p>
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<p><b>Theme 4: Challenges</b></p> <p><i>Subthemes</i></p> <p>-Horse well-being and boundaries</p> <p>-Environment</p> <p>-Affordability for clients</p>	<p><i>help build a strong rapport between the clients and me.”</i></p> <p><i>“one of the things that have become quite clear to us over the last few years is that the equine welfare side may not have been taken as seriously as it should have been historically.”</i></p> <p><i>“being outdoors is a challenge for some people in the sense they don't like the thought of being cold...so the weather would definitely be a challenge.”</i></p> <p><i>“a whole section of the population can't access equine therapy because it's an expensive intervention.”</i></p>
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<p>-Lack of Supported studies</p>	<p><i>“It is quite difficult to distinguish between studies that looked at the effects of equine therapy and activities and those that looked at the actual Equine psychotherapy session.”</i></p>
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## **CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE THEMES**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This qualitative study aimed to gain insight into the therapist's experiences and perspectives in Equine-facilitated psychotherapy. The analysis of the data involved the utilization of semi-structured interviews conducted with six mental health professionals who had previous or ongoing involvement in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Given the nature of the phenomenological approach, the primary focus was on exploring and uncovering participants' lived experiences rather than aiming to construct a comprehensive theory based on their accounts (Giorgi, 2008).

The present study offers a comprehensive investigation into the knowledge and expertise of practitioners, drawing on their personal encounters, viewpoints, and professional insights. Alongside exploring the advantages and difficulties associated with employing Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) as a therapeutic approach, the study also delves into the essence of EFP, uncovering both its advantages and challenges for therapists. This chapter aims to delineate the key themes that emerged from the inter-analysis and to compare these themes with the existing body of literature.

Due to the small sample size, the responses and analyzed data cannot be generalized; however, the information sheds light on the effect working with horses has on therapists, their perceptions of their role as equine therapists, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of working as an equine facilitated therapist, among other findings.

Four subordinate themes emerged through the analysis process: an arena of growth, unconventional therapy session, personal growth, and challenges. These themes, as well as subthemes, are discussed.

## **5.2 OVERVIEW OF THEME ONE: ARENA OF GROWTH**

The theme “An Arena of Growth” explores the transformative impact of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) on therapists’ professional development and personal growth. Through four distinct subthemes, participants’ experiences and insights illuminate the dynamic evolution of EFP practice, emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning, relaxation into the therapeutic process, integrative practice, and the alignment of personal passion with professional endeavors.

### **5.2.1 Passion Match, Source of Inspiration**

Participants expressed a deep love for horses in their responses, highlighting their perception of equine therapy (EFP) as a gratifying and meaningful career path. All participants shared anecdotes about their early

encounters with horses, emphasising how these experiences shaped their current involvement with these magnificent creatures. Vivid and detailed accounts from the interviews reveal a profound personal connection between participants and the horses, who are viewed as a healing power for them. This finding aligns with existing literature, which suggests that mental health professionals who choose EFP often do so due to their positive personal encounters with horses (Karol, 2007; Kohanov, 2001; Porter-Wenzlaff, 2007; Shambo, 2011). However, while this literature connects early connections with horses to favouring EFP as a modality, this study sheds light on the deeper reason behind therapists' passion for this approach. By delving into the emotional depth and personal significance of their connection with horses, we gain a richer understanding of what motivates them to become EFP practitioners and how it shapes their therapeutic approach. By focusing on the nuances of the human-horse connection revealed in the interviews, we move beyond a simplistic understanding of "positive personal encounters." The interviews uncovered a transformative partnership that fuels the therapists' passion for EFP and influences their therapeutic practice in profound ways. For example, participant B stated, "They [horses] helped me survive several traumatic and painful events in my life," and participant C said, "I have seen the result on myself, especially when I was grieving." Such positive experiences could be an important factor for choosing the EFP modality, not just prior history with horses.

However, while a passion for horses appears to be a driving force, it is crucial to examine the implications for aspiring therapists without prior knowledge or expertise in horses. The emphasis on individual passion and bond implies questions about the ease of access and inclusiveness of EFP as a therapy technique but also its dimensions in terms of passion. Could this passion create a blind spot for EFP therapists?

Research by Arluke & Luke (2011) suggests that strong emotional connections with animals can sometimes overshadow a therapist's objectivity. Additionally, if potential therapists are deterred due to a lack of prior experience or affinity for horses, it could limit the diversity of practitioners within the field and hinder access to EFP for clients who may benefit from it. Furthermore, the romanticized portrayal of the therapeutic bond between humans and horses may inadvertently create unrealistic expectations for aspiring therapists entering the field. It's important to acknowledge that developing a meaningful connection with horses requires time, patience, and genuine interest, which may not be feasible for all therapists. As such, there is a need for greater awareness and discussion within the EFP community regarding the role of personal passion versus professional competency in therapeutic practice.

### **5.2.2 Lifelong Learning**

While personal passion for horses can undoubtedly enhance therapists' engagement and commitment to Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), it should not overshadow the importance of clinical training, continuous professional development, and adherence to evidence-based principles. Aspiring therapists should receive comprehensive training and supervision in EFP approaches, irrespective of their prior experience with horses, to ensure competent and ethical practice. This study's findings revealed that therapists believe in the efficacy of the EFP approach but recognize the need for ongoing professional growth in this expanding field. One participant exemplified this commitment to lifelong learning by continuing to attend professional development courses and engage in research, despite having 20 years of experience. She emphasized the ongoing opportunities for learning and growth afforded by working with both horses and clients.

The emphasis on lifelong learning in EFP practice aligns with broader principles of professional development and clinical competence in psychotherapy. By prioritizing professional development, therapists can deepen their understanding of the therapeutic relationship between humans and horses, refine their clinical skills, and stay abreast of emerging research and best practices in the field.

Previous research has underscored the need for therapists using EFP to become familiar with the structure of EFP sessions and undergo specialized



training to enhance their comfort and effectiveness in facilitating therapeutic interactions (Kern-Godal et al., 2015; Schuck et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2007).

The dynamic nature of EFP sessions demands not only adaptability from therapists but also a deep commitment to ongoing learning and professional development which ultimately contribute to more successful therapeutic outcomes (Kern-Godal et al., 2015).

The current study emphasizes the intrinsic motivation behind therapists' commitment to lifelong learning. The participants suggest that therapists are driven not just by external pressures but by a genuine desire to improve their skills and stay current in the evolving field of EFP. This could be a valuable addition to the existing literature, which often focuses on the practical aspects of professional development. Additionally, the findings highlight the challenges associated with lifelong learning in EFP. Participant B mentions the need to demonstrate EFP's effectiveness, suggesting that therapists may feel pressure to stay up to date with research to validate their practice. Future research could explore their perspective further to understand the specific challenges therapists face in their pursuit of continuous learning.

By acknowledging the ongoing learning curve inherent in EFP practice, therapists can cultivate flexibility, fluency, and naturalness in their interactions with both clients and horses. The commitment to professional growth demonstrated by participants in this study underscores the importance of humility

and curiosity in therapeutic practice. Ultimately, by embracing lifelong learning and remaining open to new insights and experiences, therapists can enhance their effectiveness and integrity in utilizing EFP as a therapeutic modality.

### **5.2.3 Relaxing into the Process**

The journey of EFP therapists is marked by a progression of evolving confidence and ease, ultimately culminating in 'relaxing into the process'. While existing literature recognizes therapist adaptability and responsiveness (Ewing et al., 2007; Yorke et al., 2008), the concept of 'relaxing into the process' highlights a distinct interplay of experiential learning and trust-building unique to the human-horse dynamic.

One participant reflected on her journey, describing a shift towards a more facilitative role, characterized by trust in the therapeutic process and a focus on client autonomy. This adaptive approach emphasizes responsiveness to the client's individual needs and preferences, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-discovery. This aligns with client-centered therapy principles (Turner & Anderson, 2018). Additionally, others echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of gradual adaptation and experiential learning in building confidence and relaxation during EFP sessions (Wilson et al., 2017; Peterson, 2017). Through repeated exposure to client-horse interactions, therapists become more adept at reading nonverbal cues and navigating the therapeutic landscape with ease,

reflecting a shift away from rigid techniques towards greater intuition (Scheiner, 2011).

The findings highlight the cyclical nature of learning and development in EFP practice, emphasizing the interplay between formal training and experiential learning. While initial qualifications provide a foundation, therapists must cultivate a willingness to learn from experience and remain open to new insights. The emphasis on a relaxed and naturalistic approach within EFP sessions reflects a commitment to creating a safe and nonjudgmental space for therapeutic exploration. By adopting a flexible and responsive stance, therapists can foster trust and rapport, facilitating deeper therapeutic engagement and healing (Yorke et al., 2008).

The process of 'relaxing into the process' reflects a nuanced understanding of the therapeutic relationship between humans and horses, characterized by adaptability and attunement. This finding represents a novel contribution to the EFP literature, offering exciting directions for future research to explore the specific mechanisms underlying therapist growth and adaptation, the factors influencing therapist confidence and relaxation, and the impact of that on therapeutic outcomes. By addressing these questions, future research can enhance training programs and clinical guidelines, optimizing the quality and effectiveness of EFP interventions.

#### **5.2.4 Integrative Practice**

A significant finding within this study centers on the flexibility EFP offers therapists in integrating it with diverse therapeutic modalities. This aligns with previous suggestions that EFP holds the potential to complement existing treatment frameworks (Macauley, 2006; PATH Intl., 2001). However, the current research illuminates therapists' lived experiences with this integration, enriching the existing EFP literature and offering valuable insights for practice.

Participants described a process whereby EFP, even when initially approached with a limited therapeutic focus, organically facilitated the integration of additional modalities. This emergent quality, arising from the unique dynamics of human-horse-client interactions, suggests the horse offers a therapeutic space in which therapists experience greater fluidity and expansion of their practice. As one participant remarked, "So I work with CBT sometimes with the horses... I might work in a psychodynamic way... It just depends on the presenting issues, the client, on what the client wants really" (B).

The EAGALA model's emphasis on solution-focused and person-centered approaches resonates with participant experiences (Boyd, 2013). One participant noted the "immediate with quick results" aspect of integrating EFP with solution-focused techniques, finding satisfaction in empowering clients to "discover the solutions with the help of horses" (D). Beyond a specific model, therapists described the profound impact of EFP on their overall approach. For example, a

practitioner highlighted how infusing EFP with Polyvagal methods led to "a more deep understanding of a person's thoughts and feelings" (C), suggesting enhanced attunement to clients' somatic experiences. This holistic outcome aligns with EFP's emphasis on embodied learning.

Importantly, IPA's focus on individual experiences allows for a nuanced exploration of the integration process. Therapists expressed a sense of discovery and innovation as they combined EFP with their pre-existing training. For some, this combination facilitated a focus on "what type of intervention might be good for what client" (B), echoing a pluralistic approach. Others, like a practitioner specializing in EMDR, found that horses instinctively created a therapeutic environment that amplified the effectiveness of this trauma-focused modality.

This study's findings have several implications for therapists and the broader EFP field. The ability to integrate modalities fluidly points to increased therapist adaptability and responsiveness to clients' ever-evolving needs, potentially enhancing therapeutic outcomes. Additionally, the integration of EFP with diverse approaches fosters a more holistic client view, which may lead to greater therapeutic gains. However, it is suggested that EFP training programs could explore ways to support developing therapists in integrating different therapeutic orientations with the unique possibilities offered by the horse-human dynamic. Further qualitative investigations could delve into the specific

mechanisms through which EFP facilitates the effective integration of other modalities, as well as exploring the impact on client outcomes.

As a researcher and EFP practitioner who frequently incorporates Polyvagal, Internal Family System, and existential frameworks, I find these results particularly encouraging. They suggest that EFP's unique environment allows for a synergistic interplay with diverse theoretical models. Future investigations focused on these specific combinations hold the potential to further refine best practices and increase our understanding of the multifaceted benefits of EFP for both clients and therapists.

### **5.3 OVERVIEW OF THEME TOW: UNCONVENTIONAL THERAPY SESSION**

A core finding of this IPA study highlights the significant ways in which therapists perceive EFP as distinctly different from traditional office-based therapy settings. This unconventional approach appears to benefit both clients and therapists. Therapists describe the value of EFP's experiential focus, the fundamental role of the horse in the therapeutic process, and its open, flexible structure. These elements set EFP apart, facilitating unique learning experiences and offering the potential for lasting change in clients' lives.

#### **5.3.1 Experiential Learning, Transferable to The Human Arena**

The findings illuminate the transformative potential of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) through its ability to cultivate experiential learning. This translates to transferable skills that clients can apply beyond the therapy session. For instance, the embodied nature of EFP can lead to increased self-awareness. Interactions with horses can foster a deeper understanding of one's emotions and reactions. This self-awareness can be a powerful tool for navigating interpersonal dynamics and managing emotions in various contexts (Chambers, 2015).

The theme of "Experiential Learning, Transferable to the Human Arena" emerged as a powerful testament to the distinctive ways in which EFP fosters client growth and self-understanding. EFP's emphasis on direct experience, rather than solely verbal processing, allows for a holistic integration of learning that engages both mind and body. This resonated deeply with participants, who witnessed clients achieving a profound somatic understanding that complemented their cognitive insights. As Participant D stated, clients not only "get it" intellectually but also experience a shift within their bodies, allowing for a deeper integration of insights into one's lived experience. Participants consistently highlighted the experiential nature of EFP as a defining feature, emphasizing its distinction from traditional talk therapy and its alignment with the principles of embodied learning (Kolb, 1984).

What differentiates EFP as an experiential therapy from other experiential therapeutic modalities such as art therapy or drama therapy, according to

participants, is the horse, which acts as more than just an animal in the therapeutic space. Participants described horses as powerful, living metaphors for clients' issues, echoing the work of Toukmanian (1994) on the use of metaphors in therapy. This metaphorical connection aligns with Kohanov's (2013) observation that horses often mirror human emotions and behaviours, providing a unique opportunity for clients to gain insights into their own patterns and challenges. Participant F observed the EFP as "In this type of therapy, the horse is frequently used as a metaphor for several things." This statement underscores the symbolic richness of the equine-human interaction and how horses can serve as mirrors, reflecting clients' emotions, behaviours, and relational patterns.

The concept of "freedom" within the EFP setting was another salient theme. Participant E's emphasis on clients having the "freedom and chance to figure it out in different ways" spoke to the empowering nature of EFP, which aligns with client-centred approaches that value autonomy and self-direction (Rogers, 1951). However, this emphasis on freedom also sparked the researcher's curiosity about the potential need for structure and guidance, particularly for clients who might struggle with ambiguity or lack of direction. This area could be further explored.

The transferability of skills learned within the "arena" to the "human arena" was a recurring theme, yet one that was primarily discussed anecdotally. Participants frequently observed clients applying insights and skills gained during



EFP to their daily lives (Chambers, 2015), but the specific mechanisms that facilitate this transfer remain under-explored. It could also be beneficial for future therapists to understand how they can optimize this learning process and support clients in transferring these newfound skills to their everyday lives.

### **5.3.2 The Horse as Fundamental to The Experience Of EFP**

Therapists' narratives consistently highlight the horse as a central, transformative element differentiating Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) from traditional therapy formats. Participants described a shift in their responsibilities, emphasizing how the horse's active participation alters the client-therapist dynamic. This aligns with Kohanov's (2013) assertion that horses' ability to remain present and acutely aware of their surroundings makes them uniquely receptive partners in the therapeutic process.

Therapists observed that by sharing the therapeutic space with the horse, they adopted a more indirect and receptive approach to sessions. Participant E noted that this shift allowed her to observe clients more fully, removing the pressure of being the sole director of the session. This "mediator" role fosters a greater sense of collaboration where the client and horse often lead the direction of the therapeutic experience. Similarly, Participant A emphasized the importance of recognizing the horse as the "co-facilitator," reframing their role in the process

and allowing space for the unique interactions between horse and client to unfold organically.

This distinctive collaboration extends to the communication dynamic as well. Participants F and B noted that clients often feel comfortable disclosing personal struggles to the horse that they might not initially share with the therapist. The horse's non-judgmental and receptive nature, combined with their inability to distort feedback, creates a safe space for clients to express themselves without fear of criticism. This unique connection reinforces the view of horses as "perfect co-therapists" (Participant B). For example, the horse's sensitivity and responsive nature can create a safe space for individuals with trauma to explore their experiences, potentially regulating their nervous system and fostering a sense of empowerment (Klontz et al., 2007).

These findings resonate with the work of Lee and Makela (2015) who underscore that while horses don't deliberately engage in therapeutic actions, their very presence and natural characteristics become catalysts for transformation. This therapeutic aspect of equines has led to their recognition as co-therapists within the framework of EFP (Hallberg, 2008). This is further supported by therapists' observations of the horses as prey animals, whose natural survival instincts create an authentic feedback loop that promotes greater understanding of clients' interpersonal communication styles. This dynamic creates an opportunity

for humans to gain insight into their own communication beyond what they consciously believe they are conveying (PATH, 2014).

While this subtheme highlights therapists' perspectives on the horse's central role in EFP, it doesn't directly explore the specific, nuanced metaphors that clients develop through their interactions with horses. Understanding these metaphors from the clients' own perspectives provides a valuable area for further research. Additionally, while therapists in this study emphasized the horse's fundamental role, comparing EFP with other animal-assisted therapies or nature-based therapies could help isolate the specific therapeutic factors attributable to horses. This would shed light on the unique benefits of equine interaction versus the broader benefits of engaging with animals or nature.

### **5.3.3 Open Structure**

The open, less-structured format of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) sets it apart from traditional talk-based therapy sessions conducted within an office. Therapists in this IPA study perceive this open structure as central to the transformative nature of EFP. The natural environment of EFP sessions facilitates a sense of grounding and openness. Participant A described this shift as sessions moving from "folded" to "unfolded," emphasizing a release of rigid control and an embrace of a more fluid therapeutic process.

EFP's open structure encourages the direct observation of behaviors and reactions in real-time (Hublou, 2015), offering both client and therapist valuable, non-verbal information unfiltered by the confines of an office setting. Participant C highlighted this unique aspect, emphasizing how EFP sessions shift the traditional power balance between client and therapist and create a "level playing field." This dynamic environment, often involving physical activity with the horses, promotes trust, confidence, and self-esteem (Kern-Godal et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the outdoor setting of EFP invites informality and flexibility. Therapists like Participants E and F expressed greater ease and anticipation in these sessions compared to indoor formats, allowing for a focus on the present moment and the natural unfolding of insights. By embracing this "unfolded" nature of EFP sessions, therapists open themselves to unexpected therapeutic moments and observations that might be missed within the confines of a traditional office setting. For instance, Participant C described a scenario where a client initially seemed distracted and disengaged during a session. However, while observing a horse freely grazing in the field, the client expressed a sense of peace and desire for unstructured time. This seemingly spontaneous observation, facilitated by the open environment, became a turning point for exploring the client's stress and need for more self-care in their daily life.

Participant C further highlighted the unique aspect of EFP, emphasizing how sessions shift the traditional power balance and create a "level playing field."

This dynamic environment fosters experiential learning, where insights can emerge through interactions with the horses that might not surface in solely talk-based therapy. This aligns with concepts within client-centered therapy, which emphasizes the importance of lived experience and self-discovery within the therapeutic process (Rogers, 1951). Additionally, researchers have explored the potential for nature-based therapies to facilitate mindfulness and self-awareness, which may contribute to the unique therapeutic breakthroughs observed in EFP (Peham et al., 2016).

These findings align with the existing literature that recognizes how open, flexible therapeutic settings can foster adaptability and client agency (Rogers, 1951). The unique inclusion of horses in a natural setting further differentiates EFP and, as Fine (2000) and Christian (2005) note, can lead to the surfacing of previously hidden emotions, facilitating deeper therapeutic work.

While emphasizing the benefits, it's crucial to acknowledge potential challenges. An open, less structured environment may require additional skill and experience from therapists to guide the process effectively. Additionally, it's important to consider client preferences, as some individuals might find the outdoor setting and its inherent unpredictability initially anxiety-provoking. These challenges were later discussed during the interview and further discussed in the fourth theme. Further research could investigate whether clients experience

similar benefits to therapists in this open structure, and if there are specific client characteristics that make them well-suited to thrive in EFP's unique environment.

## **5.4 OVERVIEW OF THEME THREE: LIVING THE EXPERIENCE, LEARNING FROM EQUINES**

All participants reported a variety of shifts in their personal experiences as therapists working within the EFP modality. A deeper analysis through the theoretical lens of my IPA study revealed five subthemes that categorize these shifts: self-awareness, living in the here and now, authenticity, I-Thou experience, and embodiment. This framework offers a more nuanced understanding of how participants explored the meaningfulness of their personal growth trajectories within the context of EFP practice.

### **5.4.1 Self Awareness**

Self-awareness, the conscious understanding of one's emotions, behaviors, and patterns, is essential for effective therapeutic practice (York et al., 2008). This study explored the experiences of therapists practicing Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), revealing heightened self-awareness as a central outcome of their work within this modality.

For participants, the process of developing self-awareness was closely intertwined with embodied learning. Therapists described paying mindful attention to their physical sensations, breath, and the surrounding environment

within the EFP session. As Participant A shared, "During the session, I learn to pay attention to my body movement ...track my breath.. be aware of the surroundings....and the process." This emphasis on embodied self-awareness resonates with findings by Lanning et al. (2014), who highlight the potential of EFP to enhance emotional regulation and awareness of bodily sensations.

Furthermore, the unique interactions with horses fostered deep inner reflection. Participants learned to recognize the impact of their own emotions and behaviors on the horses. Participant B observed, "It is a different level of self-awareness...understanding and working on my emotions and behaviors...not only impact me, but it impacts the horse's behaviors and emotions." The horse's sensitivity to non-verbal cues served as a powerful mirror for the therapists, promoting transformative insights. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the equine's ability to evoke and reflect human emotions, facilitating self-discovery within therapeutic contexts (Shumbashaba, 2013).

Beyond internal awareness, participants experienced a relational shift, characterized by greater openness, acceptance, and humility. Through interactions with the horses, therapists confronted their own biases and communication patterns. As Participant D reflected, "I've learned to accept and trust, I've learned to let go...and that is ok that I know nothing." This newfound awareness fostered personal growth that extended to relationships with both horses and clients. Participant E expressed, "...so I have a very different view now and a much better

relationship with my horses as a result, and also I feel better about myself, so it's changed everything." This finding supports existing literature within equine-facilitated contexts that underlines the importance of therapist self-awareness and growth in building effective therapeutic relationships (Karol, 2007; Kunz, 2008; York et al., 2008).

While the positive impacts of animal-assisted interventions on clients self-awareness have been documented, there's a relative lack of research exploring this specific benefits for therapists themselves. This IPA study illuminates the experiences of therapists practicing EFP, underscoring the modality's potential to promote self-awareness in its multiple dimensions, including embodied awareness, inner reflection, and a transformed relational perspective.

However, while participants hinted at the positive influence of their heightened self-awareness on their work with clients, a focused investigation of this connection remains a promising direction for future research. Exploring how therapists' self-awareness within EFP translates into specific practice changes would further deepen the understanding of EFP's broader therapeutic value.

#### **5.4.2 Living the Here And Now**

Mindfulness, the practice of focusing on the present moment with openness and acceptance, is a cornerstone of many therapeutic approaches. Yalom (1980) states, "Mindfulness is the capacity to be fully present, to be aware of



where we are, what we are doing, and what is happening around us" (p. 123).

Within Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), therapists in this study consistently described a heightened sense of presence as a significant outcome of their practice. This awareness extended beyond traditional mindfulness techniques, encompassing a unique embodied connection fostered by interactions with horses.

Therapists described how the horses' natural attunement to the present moment became a powerful stimulus for their own mindfulness. As Participant B expressed, "When I'm with the horses, I'm in the here and now, I'm in the presence, really. And everything else just goes away into the background. That's great. That's exactly what I need." This focus on being fully present aligns with Kohanov's (2013) observations of equine behavior, noting horses' ability to embody an authentic and unburdened engagement with each moment.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the role of horses in facilitating an embodied awareness of their own internal states. Participant C explained, "Horses are very sensitive to the energy surrounding them, this helps me and my clients to be present and think of our energy, feelings, and autonomic states. This provides the opportunity to learn self-regulation and ground." This focus on embodied mindfulness in response to horses' sensitivity resonates with the work of Lanning et al. (2014).

The concept of "grounding" emerged as a unique theme within this subtheme, characterized by a shift from internal ruminations to present-focused awareness of surroundings. Participant F shared, "I learned to pause, breathe, and absorb the surroundings...it has helped me to connect with the horse so I can be more grounded and present." This emphasis on sensory connection with the environment sets EFP-based mindfulness apart from traditional meditation practices that often prioritize internal focus.

EFP appears to facilitate a distinct form of mindfulness, one that is deeply embodied and influenced by the external presence of the horse. While mindfulness techniques often focus on connection with nature or internal awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), the horse offers a dynamic and responsive element. This mirrors Frame's (2006) observation that horses provide immediate feedback, highlighting the cause-and-effect dynamics of one's actions in the present moment.

These findings shed light on the transformative potential of EFP, fostering present-moment awareness and embodied mindfulness for therapists. Future research could directly compare EFP-based mindfulness practices with traditional mindfulness techniques or mindfulness within other nature-based settings. Furthermore, investigating how this enhanced presence translates into therapists' interactions with clients would offer valuable insights into the broader benefits of EFP.

### 5.4.3 Authenticity

Authenticity, defined as the alignment of one's internal experiences with outward expressions, As Heidegger (1962) put it, "Authenticity is the mode of being in which one is true to one's own self" (p. 127). Within Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), therapists in this study emphasized the development of authenticity as a transformative outcome of their practice. This aligns with the core principle of congruence within Rogers' person-centered approach to therapy (Rogers, 1951). Therapists who are genuine and congruent in their interactions with clients create a safe space for exploration and growth.

The horses' non-judgmental acceptance appeared to be a powerful catalyst for therapists' own self-acceptance. As Participant A shared, "I can have dirty old clothes and just had a very bad day but horses will accept me no matter what with no judgment whatsoever...so I learned to be me...to be authentic." This unconditional acceptance creates a safe space for therapists to explore their true selves, fostering deeper authenticity in their interactions with both horses and clients. This aligns with the work of Yorke et al. (2008) and Bizub et al. (2003), who highlight the non-judgmental responsiveness of horses as a key factor within EFP interventions.

Importantly, the act of being fully present with the horses seems to nurture therapists' connection to their authentic selves. Participant C explained, "I become in touch with my authentic selves, the world around me, and the moment I am in."

This highlights how the EFP environment encourages a shift away from self-consciousness and toward genuine engagement in the present moment, offering a unique mindfulness-based pathway towards authenticity.

Furthermore, EFP appears to facilitate the development of congruence, a key component of authenticity. Participant E noted, "Being with horses helped me learn emotional regulation and become authentic and congruent." This suggests that the horses' sensitivity likely provides therapists with embodied feedback about their internal states - whether they are expressing emotions genuinely or if there's a disconnect between inner feelings and outward displays. This learning experience aligns with observations from Cody et al. (2011), who emphasize the horse's ability to differentiate between a person's "authentic" and "false" self.

This study illuminates how the unique interplay of presence, non-judgmental acceptance, and embodied interactions within EFP fosters authenticity in therapists. Future research could further explore this finding through in-depth interviews. These interviews could focus on specific instances where therapists noticed discrepancies between their feelings and behaviors during EFP sessions. Analyzing how they resolved this incongruence, with the help of the horses, would provide valuable insights. Additionally, observational studies of EFP sessions could focus on therapists' facial expressions, body language, and verbal tone during different types of interactions with horses. This data could be

correlated with post-session interviews to investigate the connection between their internal states and authentic expression.

#### **5.4.4 I-Thou Experience**

Martin Buber's I-Thou philosophy offers a profound framework for understanding human relationships and their potential for authenticity and connection (Buber, 1958). An I-Thou relationship transcends objectification, recognizing the other as a whole being with their own agency and subjectivity. Within Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), the unique interaction with horses provides a fertile ground for therapists to cultivate I-Thou experiences. The focus on lived experiences that characterizes IPA methodology helped to facilitate the exploration of these deep connections with horses, allowing therapists to articulate the nuances of I-Thou interactions within the EFP context.

Participants in this study articulated a shift from a potential instrumental view of the horse towards a profound sense of connection and respect. This transition aligns with Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou relationships, suggesting that EFP may facilitate a rhythmic alternation between these modes of interaction, as needed for the therapeutic process (Kirby, 2016). Participant F described this process as "...the intentional act of sharing space and the process of the dialogue through silence..the experience we get from touching the horse and recognizing it as a being..and the embodied cooperation that each brings into the

relationship translates the I-Thou relationship.” This emphasis on embodied presence, reciprocity, and respect for the horse's agency highlights the unique way EFP facilitates an I-Thou experience. These experiences resonate with Buber's (1958) emphasis on presence, mutuality, and wholeness in I-Thou moments.

Drawing on Buber's (1958) philosophy, this genuine presence seems to invoke a deep sense of living within the encounter itself (Schneider & Krug, 2009). The participants' language further supports a shift towards an embodied and authentic way of being fostered by direct connection with horses. This notion aligns with Lac's (2016) exploration of I-Thou dynamics in EFP for Anorexia Nervosa and Kirby's (2008) concept of "I-Thou Horsemanship" that underscores genuine connection in therapeutic contexts.

Importantly, this approach echoes Gestalt therapy's emphasis on the I-Thou therapeutic relationship (Hycner & Jacobs, 2010). By extending this concept to interactions with horses in EFP, therapists gain clarity regarding the "relational container" and the ethical necessity of deep respect for the horse's participation.

While participants' experiences suggest EFP's potential in fostering I-Thou relationships, existing literature in this area could be further enriched by rigorous experimental studies that clearly distinguish the outcomes and processes of I-Thou interactions with horses from other forms of connection, such as empathetic connections, mindful connections, or task-oriented connections, that might occur

within EFP or related modalities like animal-assisted therapy (AAT) or nature-based therapies.

#### **5.4.5 Embodiment**

Embodiment, the experience of being fully present within one's body, is a fundamental aspect of human experience and therapeutic practice (Deurzen, 2008). Therapists who are attuned to their physical sensations, emotions, and internal states are better equipped to connect with their clients on a deeper level, fostering a safe and transformative therapeutic space. This study's revealed that therapists participating in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) experienced a profound sense of embodiment. Embodiment, as highlighted by Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the 'lived body' (2002), refers to our experience of being fully present and aware within ourselves as physical beings. Participants described a 'wholeness of being' (Participant B) that emerged from their embodied interactions with horses. This heightened sense of embodiment appeared to contribute to deeper connections with clients, fostering emotional trust and rapport building (Participant E).

The participants' experiences resonate with Merleau-Ponty's (2002) phenomenological perspective, which emphasises the embodied nature of consciousness and challenges the Cartesian mind-body divide. His concept of the 'lived body' highlights how our perception of the world and our interactions

within it are fundamentally shaped by our embodied experience. In EFP, therapists gain a deeper understanding of this through their interactions with horses and the physical nature of horsemanship activities.

Embedded within the framework of phenomenology, Churchill (2012) proposed that adopting a perspective of the other, whether human or animal, through embodied engagement facilitates a profound understanding of their experience. This second-person viewpoint entails transcending one's own subjective perspective and attentively observing the intentional communicative gestures and behaviours of the other. By doing so, the encounter is enriched, allowing for comprehensive phenomenological inquiry. Anchoring awareness in the here-and-now is a process of re-inhabitation that allows us to experience our bodies entirely and thus ourselves. In this context, the participants explained how the horses' embodied experience and environment can shift their embodied sense of themselves. This aligns with the therapists' descriptions of experiencing a 'wholeness of being' through their embodied interactions with the horses. The horse's embodied presence seems to invite a deeper attunement and a kind of 'crossing through resonance' (Participant C) that enriches the therapists' embodied awareness.

However, it's important to acknowledge that embodiment can be conceptualised in various ways. Mindfulness-based approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) emphasise a focus on present-moment



bodily sensations, often through meditation. While EFP also emphasises present-moment awareness, the active nature of EFP might offer a complementary way of cultivating embodiment. It allows therapists to understand their body in motion and relation to the horse and environment. Additionally, somatic therapy perspectives (Hanna, 1995; Levine, 1997) propose that embodiment is a key to unlocking stored trauma in the body. EFP's potential to engage the body through tactile sensations and movement might facilitate a similar embodied healing process. Further research into how EFP aligns with these various embodiment approaches would deepen our understanding.

Furthermore, several participants highlighted the concept of resonance, suggesting that the horse's embodied presence creates opportunities for shared embodied states and influences their own embodied awareness. Participant C described this as 'crossing through the resonance' within a therapeutic space shared with the horse and client. This resonates with Scheiner's (2011) theory of resonance and research from the HeartMath Institute (Gerke, 2010). Additionally, theories of intersubjectivity and affect attunement (Schorer, 2009; Stern, 2004) further suggest that shared emotional experiences have an embodied quality. EFP could provide a unique context to explore this through the therapist-horse-client triad. Therapists who are more attuned to their own embodied experiences may be better able to recognise and attune to non-verbal embodied cues from both clients and horses (Porges, 2011).

Finally, the emphasis on embodiment complements and may even be intertwined with the I-Thou experiences described earlier. Recognising the horse as a sentient being with its own embodied presence seems to deepen the therapists' embodied awareness during their EFP sessions. Kohanov (2001) and Kruger & Serpell (2006) emphasise the importance of the embodied relationship between horse and human. Fostering embodied awareness in EFP might be crucial for facilitating such deep I-Thou moments between the therapist, client, and horse. Further research could explore whether cultivating embodiment is a prerequisite for, or a consequence of, I-Thou moments in EFP, leading to a cyclical process that enriches both the therapist's and the client's experiences.

### **5.5 OVERVIEW OF THEME FOUR: CHALLENGES**

Challenges in practising Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) have been documented within the field (Jarrell, 2009; World Health Organization, 2004; PATH, 2014). This study's findings reinforce these previously identified challenges. Participants' experiences and perspectives about the difficulties they face within EFP were categorised into four main areas: horse well-being and boundaries, environmental challenges, the affordability of EFP sessions, and the lack of supportive studies.

This study suggests that, as experienced practitioners in EFP, participants experience a unique duality: they are both qualified the field and seekers of

further knowledge and support. This duality highlights a key challenge inherent in new and unconventionally imagined therapeutic practices.

### **5.5.1 Horse Well-Being and Boundaries**

This study's participants, through the deep introspection facilitated by IPA, voiced deep concern regarding the well-being of horses involved in EFP. Their emphasis on an 'equal partnership' (Participant A) between horse and human challenges the historical tendency to view horses primarily as therapeutic tools. Participants stressed the ethical importance of respecting horses as sentient beings with their own needs and boundaries, stating, "it is crucial to me that we prioritise equine welfare... and that we set an example of this for our clients" (Participant C). Building on this, Bekoff & Pierce (2017) and Lundgren (2017) introduce the importance of granting horses greater agency. Providing agency, which requires rethinking established boundaries, is key to genuine well-being. In EFP, this necessitates recognising horses' emotional states and sensitivities (Participant A), establishing healthy workloads, and respecting when a horse might communicate a need for rest or disinterest in a session. This focus on agency challenges traditional client-centred models of therapy, where the animal's well-being might be unintentionally overlooked.

The participants' concerns about potential emotional burdens on the horses are supported by studies such as Merkies et al. (2018), Malinowski et al. (2018),

and Kaiser et al. (2019). These studies demonstrate the potential for stress and even burnout in horses engaged in therapeutic work. The participants' experiences, combined with this research, underscore the need for careful monitoring and limits in EFP to protect horses' emotional well-being.

Participant A's quote highlights a historical tendency to overlook equine well-being in EFP, aligning with Lundgren's (2017) assertion that human biases can influence our approach to animal welfare. This is further supported by the participants' call for greater emphasis on equine welfare within EFP training programmes. Organisations like Eagala, Herd, and PATH including horse well-being in their training reflects a positive shift towards acknowledging the complexity of this issue.

However, implementing true agency for horses within EFP presents a series of critical questions. How can therapists balance respecting a horse's potential 'refusal' with a client's therapeutic needs? Is there tension between this focus on equine agency and the practical workload of a therapy horse? Moreover, while participants voiced this concern for ethical boundaries within EFP, is this challenge unique to EFP, or does it extend to other forms of equine-assisted interventions? These questions warrant further exploration.

### **5.5.2 Environment**

Participants in this study highlighted that the natural environment, often seen as a benefit of EFP, can also present unique challenges. This aligns with previous research (EAGALA, 2014; Rothe et al., 2005; Trotter, 2012) on weather, safety, and accessibility in outdoor therapeutic settings. Weather-related factors like extreme temperatures pose practical limitations. As Participant C notes, "...being outdoors is a challenge for some people in the sense they don't like the thought of being cold...so the weather would definitely be a challenge." This suggests a need for therapists to assess clients' vulnerabilities and needs (Kunz, 2008; McNamara, 2017) and adapt sessions accordingly. Are alternative indoor options available when conditions are unsuitable?

Additionally, accessibility challenges emerged as a key theme, with Participant D emphasising barriers related to transportation and the socioeconomic implications for clients in rural areas. This highlights potential disparities in accessing EFP (Masini, 2010). The outdoor setting, while therapeutic, might present unique safety considerations depending on terrain and weather (Lentini & Knox, 2009). This raises questions about safety protocols and risk management in EFP.

The researcher's location in a climate with hot summers highlights the importance of investigating how EFP practitioners in diverse climates worldwide manage environmental factors, underscoring the need for future research on

effective adaptations and strategies in various weather extremes as well as rural locations.

### **5.5.3 Affordability for Clients**

The participants' voices illuminate the multifaceted impact of EFP's affordability barrier. Participant A expresses a sense of frustration with the socioeconomic divide created by costs, while participant B highlights a practical limitation driven by the lack of insurance coverage. This lack of coverage appears to be a significant source of anxiety for both clients and therapists. Participant D's sadness underscores the emotional weight felt by practitioners who genuinely want to help but might be bound by financial constraints.

Participant E highlights a critical issue: the limited insurance coverage might be a consequence of EFP's relatively new status as a recognised therapy. This aligns with research suggesting that insurance companies often lag in adopting coverage for emerging modalities (Anestis et al., 2014). This highlights the need for continued advocacy and research demonstrating EFP's efficacy to sway insurance providers. Without a shift in policy, the socioeconomic disparity highlighted by participants will persist, undermining the accessibility of this potentially life-changing therapy.

### **5.5.4 Lack of Supported Studies**

The findings of this study align with a significant challenge prevalent within the field of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP): the limited research base and its consequences for both practitioners and the broader perception of this therapeutic modality. As highlighted by Johnson et al. (2015), while there is emerging evidence supporting the potential benefits of EFP, many current studies suffer from methodological limitations such as small sample sizes and lack of control groups. This lack of robust research creates several issues that participants in this study directly experienced.

Participants expressed a sense of frustration in their attempts to navigate the existing EFP literature. Participant A emphasized the challenge, stating, "It is quite difficult to distinguish between studies that looked at the effects of equine therapy and activities and those that looked at the actual equine psychotherapy session." This confusion reflects a broader lack of clarity and standardization in defining the various interventions within the EFP field. This lack of clear definitions and a limited research base creates several interconnected challenges for therapists. For example, it can hinder their ability to find reliable research directly supporting their specific practice approach. Moreover, it undermines their ability to effectively advocate for EFP within the mental health community. Participants described difficulties communicating the value of EFP to others, often having to rely heavily on anecdotal evidence due to a lack of robust scientific studies. This aligns with findings from Paquette (2010), highlighting the

potential impact of limited research on practitioner confidence and acceptance of EFP within the broader mental health field.

Furthermore, the lack of clear definitions and inconsistent terminology within EFP literature adds to practitioner difficulties. Participant C expressed feeling "struck by the inconsistent terminologies used in different studies." This lack of standardization, Participant E emphasized, creates a need for defining the terminology for the large field of equine therapies. These concerns point to the challenges practitioners face in clearly articulating their work, potentially hindering communication with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders. This reflects a key issue highlighted in literature by McNamara (2017) and Hallberg (2018): the mismatch between the qualitative, experiential focus of EFP and the quantitative, outcomes-driven model often favored by insurance companies.

The consequences of EFP's current research landscape extend beyond practitioner challenges. The lack of robust scientific evidence can limit access to EFP services, particularly when it comes to insurance coverage and recognition among institutions. Without sufficient research demonstrating its efficacy, EFP may struggle to gain wider acceptance as an evidence-based treatment modality.

Therefore, a concerted effort is required to increase the quantity and quality of EFP research, including well-designed studies with larger sample sizes, control groups, and replicable methodologies (EAGALA, 2014). Additionally, establishing clear definitions and consistent terminology across the field is



crucial. Hallberg (2018) advocates for a collaborative approach among EFP practitioners, researchers, and organizations to develop standardized language. Finally, investigating how EFP's qualitative focus and the lived experiences of clients can be effectively translated into the evidence-based framework often demanded by institutions and funding bodies is vital. This could involve developing assessment tools that capture the unique outcomes valued in EFP (McNamara, 2017).

### **SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 5**

This chapter focused on the central themes that emerged from the interpretative analysis of EFP therapists' lived experiences, establishing connections with the existing literature on EFP and therapists' experiences. A deeper examination of the four core themes – "An Arena for Growth," "Unconventional Therapy Session," "Personal Growth," and "Challenges" – revealed a nuanced understanding of the transformative potential of EFP, both for practitioners.

The analysis highlighted the significance of the horse-human bond, the role of the horse as a co-therapist, and the experiential nature of EFP in fostering personal growth, self-awareness, and authentic connection. Participants' descriptions of heightened presence, embodied awareness, and the integration of EFP with other modalities underscored the unique and impactful nature of this

therapeutic approach. The discussions also explored the challenges faced by EFP practitioners, including concerns about equine welfare, environmental limitations, financial accessibility, and the need for further research to substantiate EFP's efficacy.

Throughout the chapter, the interpretations of the findings were grounded in existing literature, weaving together the voices of participants with established theoretical frameworks and previous research. This integration of perspectives provided a richer understanding of EFP's potential benefits and limitations, emphasizing the practical, real-world implications of current knowledge gaps and the need for further exploration. The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, with its emphasis on lived experiences, assisted in capturing the nuances and complexities of therapists' narratives.

The following chapter will delve into the broader implications of these findings for EFP practice and the field of therapy, offering recommendations for future research and outlining potential avenues for growth and development. Additionally, the study's limitations, and the researcher's reflections on the research process, including the interplay between personal experiences and interpretive analysis, will be explored in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS, REFLECTION ON RESEARCH PROCESS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Given that equine-based interventions are still in their early stages of development, limited research has been conducted on therapists' motivations for utilizing this modality (Nurenberg et al., 2020). This IPA study delves into therapists' experiences to illuminate the transformative potential of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) for both therapeutic practice and broader approaches to personal development. Key findings highlight several interrelated themes with significant implications, specifically the power of embodiment and connection, integration with diverse therapeutic approaches, and a unique ability to address existential concerns.

#### **6.1.1: Implications for Practice and Knowledge Expansion**

These findings offer several key insights with both immediate and long-term implications for EFP and the broader field of therapy:

- *Emphasizing Embodiment, Connection, and Horse Well-Being:* This study reinforces the importance of strong horse-human bonds, somatic awareness, and ethical practices focused on equine well-being. It contributes to existing

knowledge by highlighting the unique role of EFP practitioners as both leaders and advocates in ethical animal-assisted therapies. EFP practices might evolve to incorporate more robust monitoring of horse well-being, establish clearer workload expectations, and emphasize respecting horses' boundaries and agency within sessions.

- *Evolving Therapist Roles:* This study highlights the nuanced understanding of the EFP therapist's role as a mediator, emphasizing the importance of balancing guidance with fostering client autonomy and responsiveness to spontaneous connections within the horse-human dynamic. This finding could inform broader therapeutic practice by demonstrating the power of this specific therapeutic stance.
- *Integration as a Path Forward:* This study reinforces EFP's potential for integration with diverse modalities. By developing training modules on EFP integration, the study's findings could contribute to a more holistic understanding of therapeutic approaches, providing therapists across modalities with tools unique to EFP's embodied aspect.
- *Confronting Challenges for Growth:* This study directly addresses challenges inherent in EFP practice, including environmental limitations, accessibility barriers, and a need for increased research and standardization. Openly acknowledging these challenges positions the study to contribute to the

practical knowledge needed for EFP's growth and recognition as a legitimate therapeutic modality.

### **6.1.2: Noteworthy Distinction: Addressing Existential Concerns**

This IPA study reveals a significant and unique strength of EFP: its ability to meaningfully address existential concerns. The emphasis on embodiment, present-moment awareness, authenticity, and I-Thou connections creates a powerful framework for exploring themes of isolation, meaning-making, and connection. This finding underscores a key area where EFP diverges from traditional models, offering a valuable contribution to our understanding of how to address core components of the human experience.

This noteworthy finding has several implications for EFP and the broader field of therapy. Firstly, EFP's success in addressing existential concerns highlights the potential for other therapeutic modalities to benefit from integrating embodiment, present-moment focus, and the profound connections possible in interspecies relationships. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of therapists cultivating an enhanced understanding of existential concerns. By demonstrating EFP's effectiveness in working with these fundamental human experiences, this study provides a compelling rationale for broader exploration of embodied approaches. This could lead to increased recognition of EFP within the therapeutic community, facilitating access and creating valuable opportunities for collaboration

between EFP practitioners and therapists working within other modalities focused on existential concerns.

### **6.1.3: Contributions to Knowledge**

This study highlights EFP's potential to move beyond symptom reduction and directly address core elements of the human experience. It emphasizes the importance of horse well-being and ongoing professional development and provides a compelling argument for why EFP's unique experiential framework offers potential benefits for addressing existential concerns. By addressing these implications, this study contributes to EFP's knowledge base, potentially paving the way for its wider recognition and solidifying its transformative power within both personal development and therapeutic contexts.

### **6.1.4: Further Significance**

The comprehensive importance of this study on therapists' encounters lies in its capacity to offer deeper insight into the significant aspects of EFP that hold meaning to practitioners throughout the process and beyond. This encompasses an exploration of the therapists' perspectives and perceptions, the factors that influenced their experiences, and the transformative nature of their lived reality. This wealth of data gathered on the perceptions and experiences of EFP therapists contributes significantly to the enhanced understanding of individuals and their unique encounters within this context.

By delving into equine therapists' experiences, this study sheds light on potential impacts on both therapists and clients, fostering positive professional growth and personal transformation.

Overall, this study positions EFP as a transformative therapeutic approach, underscores the power of embodiment for personal growth and healing, offers a distinctive model for understanding the therapist's role, and provides a valuable resource for researchers, practitioners, and those seeking insights into the power of human-animal connection.

## **6.2 REFLECTING ON RESEARCH PROCESS**

As an equine-facilitated psychotherapist deeply connected to horses, my passion for this therapeutic modality ignited a curiosity about the broader impact of EFP on fellow practitioners, and having personally experienced the transformative power of EFP in both my healing journey and professional practice, I embarked on this research with a vested interest, acknowledging the potential for bias inherent in my positionality. This understanding has not only enriched my therapeutic practice but also shaped my research perspective, potentially influencing my interpretations and analysis of the data. While this personal experience has undoubtedly informed my approach to this research, I have strived to remain mindful of potential biases and maintain a rigorous methodology grounded in the lived experiences of the participants. This awareness underscored the importance

of reflexivity throughout the research process, as detailed in the study's reflexivity section.

To mitigate the influence of my personal experiences, I actively engaged in reflexive practices. Maintaining a journal allowed me to document my thoughts, feelings, and assumptions, ensuring transparency and fostering critical self-awareness. Additionally, being interviewed by a colleague provided an opportunity for external reflection on how my experiences might shape my interpretations of the data.

Employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) further enriched the research process. This methodological approach, with its emphasis on understanding lived experiences, enabled me to delve into the multifaceted nature of therapists' narratives while acknowledging the complexities and nuances inherent in their accounts. My own positive experiences with EFP undoubtedly sparked my initial interest, but the phenomenological lens offered a structured approach to interrogate and challenge my assumptions. This involved a deliberate effort to suspend my personal beliefs about EFP's effectiveness and focus on understanding the experiences of the participants as they described them.

The interviews themselves were often emotional. Participants generously shared deeply personal accounts of their journeys with EFP, revealing vulnerabilities and challenges alongside successes and moments of profound growth. One particularly emotional moment occurred when a participant spoke



about the potential impact of EFP on horse well-being. This resonated deeply with my own experience of losing 3 of my horses during the research period. I grappled with the guilt and responsibility inherent in asking these animals to carry the emotional weight of my clients during therapeutic sessions. However, I tried to remain grounded and managed to regulate myself after the interview. I also recognised that this shared concern among therapists was an important ethical consideration, leading me to further emphasise the need for research and guidelines on equine welfare in EFP.

Another moment of reflection occurred when participants discussed environmental challenges, such as extreme weather conditions, as barriers to EFP practice. While I empathised with their struggles, my own experience as a therapist who owns an EFP facility provided me with a different perspective. I realised that my questions about the financial impact of these challenges might unintentionally reflect my positionality as a facility owner. This awareness led me to re-evaluate my interview approach, ensuring a more inclusive perspective that encompassed the experiences of therapists working as employees, not just facility owners.

The emergence of the theme "Living the Experience, Learning from Equines" in the data analysis process sparked deep personal reflection, mirroring my own transformative journey with EFP. Witnessing therapists' accounts of increased self-awareness, authenticity, and connection resonated with my own experiences. As an EFP practitioner, I have personally witnessed the profound

impact horses can have in fostering self-acceptance, presence, and genuine communication, both within myself and in my clients.

This has shown me that horses possess an innate ability to quiet the mind, facilitating expanded awareness and a deeper connection with oneself and others. Through non-verbal communication and shared presence, horses offer a unique pathway to peace, harmony, compassion, and understanding. This heightened awareness allows for a profound connection rooted in authenticity and self-acceptance, mirroring the very essence of genuine communication.

Participants' responses echoed similar perspectives. This reinforced my commitment to presenting their narratives with authenticity and respect, acknowledging the deep personal significance that EFP holds for those who engage with it. This personal connection I believe has also enriched my empathy and understanding, ultimately enhancing the research process and its findings.

In sum, this research journey has been both personally and professionally enriching. By actively engaging in reflexivity and embracing the nuances of IPA, I managed to honour the experiences of EFP therapists while acknowledging my own positionality. This nuanced understanding of EFP, as revealed through the voices of practitioners themselves, not only enriches our knowledge of this emerging field but also ignites a spark of curiosity and possibility, inviting us to envision a future where human-animal partnerships play an increasingly vital role in mental health care.

### 6.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were various limitations in this research investigation. Firstly, the study adopted a qualitative approach, which typically entails a limited sample size. The implications of such small samples are considerable, as the generalizability of the findings to a broader population may be compromised (Guest et al., 2006). Consequently, the external validity of the research could be restricted, and the applicability of the results to other contexts may be questionable (Creswell, 2014). The sample of this study encompassed six individuals who held certifications in equine-related interventions from diverse accredited organizations.

Another potential limitation was the lack of diversity within the participant group, comprised solely of white women. The absence of male mental health professionals participating in the project influenced the outcomes and omitted a crucial perspective that could have enriched the study. In future studies of this nature, it would be advantageous to include participants of both genders, enabling a broader range of experiences to be considered.

Additionally, the geographic region of the study was limited to the United States and the United Kingdom, although PATH and Eagala, for example, have certified therapists and centres worldwide. This aspect limited the experience of

different therapists using EFP for mental health because they could come from a diverse, multicultural perspective.

Another limitation regarding the sample is that years of experience in using EFP varied from 15+ years to two years; this has led to a different point of view regarding the effects or challenges of using EFP and the impact on therapists' personal and professional growth throughout the years of practice. However, it can be considered a strength since responses during the interview were quite similar, despite how experienced the therapists are.

Another potential limitation of this study was the potential for bias. The researcher involved in the study had a personal connection to horses, held accreditation as an EFP therapist through Eagala, and possessed a strong passion for this type of intervention. However, despite the researcher's ability to identify with certain aspects expressed by the participants, she acknowledged this potential bias and employed reflexivity techniques to minimize its influence. The researcher made a conscious effort to suspend any preconceived notions about the EFP therapists' experience and approached the study with a fresh perspective. Drawing from the phenomenological approach, the researcher aimed to practice *epoché*, setting aside subjective knowledge of the subject matter and examining the experience with objectivity (Giorgi, 2008; Langdridge, 2007).

Another limitation of this study is that participants were recruited from different organizations. Each organization has its own approach and model for

EFP, which influences how therapists practice. Examples of different models include but are not limited to, EAGALA's model, which focuses on experiential, ground-based activities and integrating solution-focused and person-centred therapeutic modalities (EAGALA, 2015).

In contrast, the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH, 2011) presents a different perspective on EAP/EFP. According to their definition, EAP/EFP involves an interactive process where a licensed mental health professional collaborates with an equine professional who possesses the appropriate credentials. Together, they work with suitable equines to address psychotherapy goals set by the mental health professional and the client. It is important to note that interviewing participants who have practised various models could potentially lead to an inflated perception of how their approach can address diverse mental issues. Consequently, the perspectives and experiences of therapists may vary depending on the specific model implemented at their accredited location.

Another limitation is that participants were certified by one or two of these organizations (EAGALA, Herd, Leap, Path, and Equilateral). In contrast, there are other models through which individuals can access equine-facilitated psychotherapy or similar Equine interventions with different models.

A pattern emerged in which all participants illustrated that the reason for taking the EFP or related equine therapy course was their love of and interaction

with horses. However, one might hope therapists are interested in learning about EFP, even if they have no experience with horses, and how it can be offered to a future therapist who desires to take the course but has no experience working with horses.

Lastly, it is important to consider the influence of therapists' prior experiences on their perceptions of therapeutic success and its effects on their personal and professional lives. The strong affinity that therapists in this study have for horses may have potentially biased their views regarding positive outcomes. Therefore, future research should aim to clarify and discuss the therapists' previous experiences with horses, as well as explore specific outcomes in greater detail.

## **6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) emerges as a powerful and innovative therapeutic modality. This study, utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore therapists' experiences with EFP, unveils the richness of this modality. By reflecting on therapists' lived experiences using EFP, the study offers valuable insights for future research. Building upon the discussion of the findings, the following recommendations aim to further

develop EFP, enhance practices, and solidify its place as a transformative therapeutic option:

- **Expanding Representation:** To enrich understanding of diverse EFP experiences and promote inclusivity, future research could prioritize amplifying the voices of underrepresented practitioners. This includes males, individuals from diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and therapists operating in various geographic contexts.
- **Exploration of EFP Models, Integration, and Impact:** Valuable insights for EFP practice and the broader field of therapy could be gained by investigating therapists' perspectives within different EFP models. This could involve comparing practices and outcomes across models, alongside exploring how EFP practitioners integrate other therapeutic modalities and examining the potential impact on both clients and therapists.
- **Addressing Existential Concerns:** Informed by the finding that EFP supports existential growth, future research could explore the application of an existential psychology framework to examine its effectiveness in addressing existential concerns. This investigation could pave the way for the development of a formalized existential equine therapy model.
- **Supporting EFP's Recognition and Accessibility:** To strengthen the evidence base for EFP and advocate for its recognition as a mainstream

therapeutic option, conducting robust studies with larger sample sizes is crucial. This could contribute to potential insurance coverage and solidify EFP's accessibility.

- **Understanding Therapist Development:** Comparing the perspectives of novice and experienced EFP practitioners could yield valuable insights. This exploration could reveal the unique benefits and challenges therapists face throughout their careers, informing practitioner support, professional development resources, and training standards.
- **Prioritizing Equine Welfare:** Dedicating research to examining the impact of EFP interventions on horses is essential. This ensures a strong ethical foundation where horse well-being remains central to practice. Developing clear guidelines that prioritize horse well-being, respect for their boundaries, and protection from overwork would be beneficial.
- **Mechanisms of Therapist Growth:** Investigating the specific elements of EFP that facilitate therapists' personal and professional growth could enhance training and support for EFP practitioners. Identifying these core transformative factors would be valuable for the field.
- **Supporting EFP Practitioners:** Conducting research into the business aspects of establishing and maintaining sustainable EFP careers could provide valuable knowledge and support. This could encompass exploring



business practices, funding acquisition strategies, and other resources to enhance the accessibility and longevity of EFP practices.

- **Unexplored Themes:** Conducting in-depth studies on emergent themes with limited current research, such as "finding relaxation in the therapeutic process" and "establishing boundaries with horses," could deepen the understanding of the multifaceted EFP experience and its implications for practice.
- **Diversifying Research Methodologies:** To gain a broader understanding of therapists' experiences with EFP, consider employing a range of research methodologies. This could include quantitative studies to measure outcomes, mixed-methods designs for triangulation, or alternative qualitative approaches that offer different lenses for interpretation.

By pursuing these research directions, the field of EFP can continue to evolve, refine its practice, and solidify its potential to transform the lives of both clients and therapists.

## 6.5 DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

The outcomes of this research investigation will be shared with the participants, emphasizing the key concepts and themes that emerged.

Additionally, the data and results will be submitted for publication in relevant scholarly journals and showcased at professional conferences. The dissemination

of the study findings will serve as a means to promote greater recognition and understanding of equine-based interventions in the realm of mental health and well-being. It is anticipated that these findings will contribute to advocating for the broader adoption and utilization of equine-related approaches as alternatives to conventional psychological and counselling methodologies.

## 6.6 CONCLUSION

This study delved into the lived experiences of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) therapists, revealing how this distinctive modality profoundly shapes their personal and professional lives. Employing an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, four core themes emerged, weaving a rich tapestry of the EFP experience. Therapists poignantly described EFP as an "arena of growth," a space that nurtures lifelong learning, allows for deep relaxation within the therapeutic process, encourages integrative practice, and reignites their passion for both horses and therapy.

The unique characteristics of this "unconventional therapy session," marked by experiential learning in an open, outdoor setting with the horse as co-therapist, resonated deeply with participants. They highlighted how this embodied approach, grounded in present-moment awareness, fostered personal growth, leading to increased self-awareness, authenticity, and a profound sense of connection with themselves and others. These experiences further empowered

therapists to explore and address existential questions alongside their clients, fostering a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their lives and work.

However, therapists also candidly shared the challenges inherent in EFP practice. Concerns around equine welfare, environmental constraints, financial barriers for clients, and the need for more robust research to support its efficacy were recurring themes.

This comprehensive exploration of EFP therapists' lived experiences provides a foundation for future research and practice. It reveals EFP as a modality with unique potential for fostering growth and healing, both for clients and therapists. By highlighting the challenges and opportunities present in EFP, this study paves the way for further exploration and refinement of this burgeoning field, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the therapeutic potential of the human-animal bond. By demonstrating the effectiveness of an embodied, experiential approach in addressing existential concerns and fostering therapist well-being, this study suggests that incorporating similar principles could enrich other modalities. It also underscores the need for continued exploration of the human-animal bond in therapeutic contexts, advocating for a more holistic and integrative approach to mental health care. Hence, this study aims to make a valuable contribution to the existing literature, fostering evidence-based practices that support clinicians and the diverse populations they serve.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix A

#### Ethics Committee Approval



NEW SCHOOL OF PSYCHOTHERAPY  
AND COUNSELLING

NSPC Limited  
Existential Academy  
61-63 Fortune Green Road  
London NW6 1DR

Fatine Salah  
P.O.Box 128009  
Jeddah  
Saudi Arabia

30<sup>th</sup> November 2020

Dear Fatine

Re: Ethics Approval

As you will be aware, your ethics approval has been granted by Chair's action.

We reviewed your ethics amendments on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2020 and this decision was formally ratified by the panel. This letter acts as evidence of ethical approval should you need it.

Please note that it is a condition of this ethics approval that recruitment, interviewing, or other contact with research participants only takes place when you are enrolled in a research supervision module.

Yours sincerely

Sasha Smith

Registrar

## Appendix B

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Research Title: Understanding of Therapists' Experiences and Perceptions of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, An Interpretative Phenomenological Study**

NSPC Ltd  
258 Belsize Road  
London NW6 4BT

Middlesex University  
The Burroughs  
London NW4 4BT

**Researcher:** Fatine Salah      email: [faten@therapist.net](mailto:faten@therapist.net)

**Supervisor:** Dr. Julie Scheiner      email: [juliescheiner@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:juliescheiner@yahoo.co.uk)

**Date:**

Dear participant,

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide please take your time to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of certified equine therapists in providing equine facilitated psychotherapy to their clients.

Do I have to take part?

Being in this study is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form" an electronic signature is accepted by including a "digital" signature on the consent document (such as using DocuSign)". You are free to withdraw from the research up to a week after the interview without having to explain your reasons for doing so and request that your data be destroyed.

What will happen to me if I take part?

I will contact you to check if you meet the criteria and arrange an online virtual Zoom interview. Your role in this research project is to provide in-depth answers to the research questions. The study involves semi-structured interviews. The primary question of this research study is: (*What are the experiences of certified equine therapists in providing equine-facilitated psychotherapy to their clients?*) The interviewing process will not exceed 90 minutes. A zoom Audio-only recording of the interview will be taken and I will personally transcribe and anonymise the data myself. I will then use a qualitative research method to extract the main themes from what you tell me about your experiences. After the interview, you will have the opportunity to debrief during which I will re-explain the intentions of the study and what will happen to your data.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

The possible disadvantage is giving up some of your precious time to participate in a 60-90 minutes interview.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

There may be no direct benefit to you personally in taking part but the information we get from the study will help to increase our understanding of how the use of EFP may enhance the knowledge base and discussion in the EFP field.

Online interviewing

I will be interviewing you via videoconferencing application called Zoom, you will need to download the free application and I will provide you with the meeting zoom link and password. On the agreed day and time, you will need to use a private room during the interview to eliminate the possibility of potential interruptions or distractions taking place simultaneously.

You (participant) and I (researcher) will be the only individuals privately involved in the process. The whole process of online interviewing will not leave permanent records of communication and there is no written communication (i.e. use of synchronous online chat) that will take place through Zoom during the video-conference call.

If you are not familiar with using Zoom software, a time will be arranged when we can meet online using the interview technology as part of the preparation. You will not be allowed to turn the camera off and use audio-only as it is crucial for the interview process.

#### Consent

You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records, and if you agree to take part, you will be asked to print, sign, scan and email it back, or add your digital signature and email it back. I will make sure that you have fully understood the aims of the study before signing the consent form. You will also have the opportunity for a debrief afterwards where you can ask any questions to complete your understanding.

#### What will happen to my data now?

Your name will not be recorded anywhere except in the consent form, and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your data will be given a fictitious code number or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. All the recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer. I will be personally transcribing all the data which will then be anonymised. The file will then be deleted from the computer. Excerpts from your data may be published verbatim in my final thesis but neither your name nor any identifying details will be used. You have the right to access any personal data collected about you by requesting the address at the top of this form. Your consent forms and anonymised transcript will be kept for 10 years and will be treated as confidential.

#### Who is organising and funding the research?

Although my research is being completed through the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and is overseen by this training institution, I am organising and self-funding my research.

#### Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC Ethics sub-Committee has reviewed this proposal.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

## **Appendix C**

Middlesex University School of Science and Technology

Psychology Department

Written Informed Consent

**Title of study: Understanding of Therapists' Experiences and  
Perceptions of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, An  
Interpretative Phenomenological Study**

**Academic year: 2020-2021**

Researcher's name: *Fatine Salah* Tel: 00966 549209292 email:

[faten@therapist.net](mailto:faten@therapist.net)

Supervisor's name and email: *Dr Julie Scheiner* [juliescheiner@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:juliescheiner@yahoo.co.uk)

- I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher and have been fully informed about the risk and benefits of my participation in it. I confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.
- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.
- I have read the participant information sheet and the details about the online interviewing.
- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from

participating in the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

- I understand that I can ask for my data to be withdrawn from the project up to a week after the interview and request that my data be destroyed.
- I understand that the consent form and anonymised transcript will be kept securely and separately for 10 years in the researcher's own home, and will be treated as confidential.
- I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and I provide my consent that this may occur. I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously published into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.
- I agree to the audio-recording of the interviewing process

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Print name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Print name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign Name

date: \_\_\_\_\_

**To the participant:** Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Science and Technology Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits:

\_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **General information:**

1. Name:
2. Location:
3. Email:
4. When did you start your training in EFT?
5. When did you finish your training in EFT?
6. How long have you been practicing EFT?
7. What organization are you associated with?
8. What theoretical orientation(s) best informs your treatment/clinical approach for equine therapy sessions? Example: Behavioral, cognitive, cognitive Behavioral, Existential, Experiential, Gestalt, Humanistic, Interpersonal, Psychodynamic, Rogerian..etc.

#### **Interview questions:**

9. Let's begin by discussing why you decided to use equine facilitated psychotherapy for mental health and wellness. Tell me about your decision to use this type of therapy to help others.

Probe: Why horses? (if not directly answered)

10. From your experience, why do you think EFT is beneficial? Specifically, why is it preferable or advantageous over therapeutic methods that do not incorporate the use of horses?

11. In your experience, what do you think best explains how clients make changes during equine therapy?

Probe: How can clients apply what they have learned in working with horses to other situations or relationships.

12. How do you as a therapist support participants' effort to apply their new skills and understandings?

13. Tell me what have you learned about yourself by working with horses to help others.

13. Tell me about how working with horses has helped with your own mental health and wellness.

Probe: How has this experience also influenced your own self-care routine as a therapist?

15. In your experience what are the biggest challenges to implementing equine therapy services?

16. I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you believe would be valuable for me to know?

Closing: Thank you very much for participating in the interview. Do you have any questions before we bring the interview to a close?

## **Appendix E**

### **Guidelines for IPA (Smith, 1996)**

1. Read the transcript a number of times, using one side of the margin to note down anything that strikes you as interesting or significant about what the respondent is saying. Some of these comments may be attempts at summarising, some may be associations / connections that come to mind, others may be your preliminary interpretations.
2. Use the other margin to document emerging theme titles, that is, using key words to capture the essential quality of what you are finding in the text.
3. On a separate sheet, list the emerging themes and look for connections between them. Thus you may find that some of them cluster together, and that some may be regarded as master or superordinate concepts. Do some of the themes act as a magnet, seeming to draw others towards them and helping to explain these others? You may also find that during this process you come up with a new master theme that helps to pull together a number of initial categories you had identified. As new clusterings of themes emerge, check back to the transcript to make sure the connections also work for the primary source material – what the person actually said. This form of analysis involves a close interaction between you and the text, attempting to understand what the person is saying but, as part of the process, drawing on your own interpretative resources. You are now attempting to create some order from the array of concepts and ideas you have extracted from the participant's responses.
4. Produce a master list of themes, ordered coherently. Thus the process outlined above may have identified five major themes that seem to capture most strongly the respondent's concerns on this particular topic. Where appropriate, the master list will also identify the sub themes that go with each master theme.

5. Add an identifier of instances. Under each master theme you should indicate where in the transcript instances of it can be found. This can be done by giving key words from the particular extract plus the page number of the transcript. It may also help to code the instances in the transcript with an identifier. Level and type of coding depend on the size of the project and on your own way of working.

If you have a number of individuals' transcripts to analyse, analysis can proceed in the following way. Begin the process anew with interview two, going through the stages outlined above and producing a master list for this second interview.

The master lists for each interview could then be read together and a consolidated list of themes for the group produced. If new themes emerge in subsequent interviews, they can enlighten, modify or become subordinate to a previously elicited one.