

Just munching like the herd: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the impact of intersubjectivity in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy

Fiona Wilby*

'At a time when horses are no longer required to work in our fields and carry us to war, they can do something arguably more important – work on us'

(Kohanov, 2001, p.xxiii)

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) first originated in the USA, developed from a form of riding therapy, Hippotherapy, which involves riding for psychological and physical healing (Wilkie et al., 2016). Unlike Hippotherapy, EFP practitioners are qualified in mental health or psychotherapy, and work with the horses and clients on the ground to process client's emotional and mental health issues (LEAP, 2018). There are two main membership bodies for EFP in the UK which are the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EAGALA, 2018) who use the term EAP (Equine Assisted Psychotherapy) and LEAP Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning (LEAP) who use the term Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), which is the adopted terminology used in this study.

The research question was developed from an interest in exploring the theoretical concepts of relational depth and intersubjectivity, in relation to the practice of working in a triad, with therapist, equine and client. To what degree does working intersubjectively impact on the therapeutic

relationship in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy?

In order to answer this question, three objectives were developed. These were:

- What are participants' ethos and experiences and why did they choose this model of working?
- How do EFP therapists work with the client and the horses in a relational context?
- Can you work intersubjectively with more than two subjects within EFP, where one or more of the subjects are horses?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the theoretical framework in order to employ an in-depth analysis and an established framework to guide the researcher. Purposive sampling (Bager-Charleson, 2014) was used due to the limited number of participants available within Yorkshire and the UK as a whole. The recommended number of interviews for IPA is up to six participants (McLeod, 2015) so a target of four participants was set for this study. The participants were identified from the LEAP and EAGALA websites

and the BACP online register, and criteria such as organisational memberships and qualifications were taken into consideration when selecting participants.

In-depth interviews were conducted, recorded, then transcribed. Initial comments were made in the right-hand margin of the first transcript, using Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance on three key ways of initial commenting: Descriptive (regular text), Language-based (underlined) and Interpretive (italics). Once saturation had been reached, the left-hand column was used to document emergent themes (codes) arising from the initial analysis. These emergent themes were then clustered into subordinate themes, using convergence, divergence, linking and mapping, with a flexible title allocated to each cluster.

The final task was to group, prioritize and reduce the subordinate themes into master themes, which were experience, relationships and language and communication. These master themes were then developed within the context of current literature to provide the following three concepts. These themes were analysed in the context of available literature and are discussed below.

Subjective experience

The first theme identified in findings was Experience. This explored the backgrounds of participants and their motivations for becoming EFP therapists, as well as a developmental concept around subjectivity of horses and humans.

Why Horses?

Brandt (2004) discusses the horse's ability to recognize our subjectivity and create a subjective presence. This opportunity for mutual recognition suggests the possibility that a horse can be seen as a subject, rather than an 'object' in therapy (Benjamin, 1990) and therefore be valued as a co-facilitator in therapy for developing intersubjective relationships in EFP.

'for clients, the beauty of them is they [the horses] wear no masks so they respond to what's on offer genuinely and somatically without judgement.' (Nicola)

The suggestion by Nicola that horses do not wear masks, and see our 'true' selves, rather than the false self we portray to hide our inner feelings and emotions (Slade, 2015), links to Winnicott's (1965) concept of the true and false self in development (Fonagy and Allison, 2012).

Due to their sensitive nature, horses become distressed when we are not being congruent with our feelings (Dampsey, 2013) and will often mirror (Grant and Crawly, 2002) our 'true' inner emotions through their body language. To provide an example, Jane talked about working with a client diagnosed with a personality disorder:

'the two horses were not able to engage with her because of the anger that she had inside that she wasn't recognising... The horses were just mirroring the anger back.'

Reflecting this back to the client may help the client to recognise aspects of their true self, and hidden feelings and emotions that need to be addressed. Jane explains:

'things can be brought to the surface quicker, so if something's been suppressed for many years the horses will bring it out a lot quicker.'

This ability to connect quickly in a sensitive and authentic way may provide a basis for understanding how horses are able to connect to aspects of our 'false self' (Winnicott, 1965) in a more efficient timescale than traditional therapy.

The development of relationships

The therapeutic relationship has been identified as the core concept for most therapeutic models of working (Green, 2010; Clarkson, 2003) and is the basis for intersubjective development between the self and the other (Benjamin, 1990). Five relationships were identified in the findings. These were 'Horse and therapist', 'Horses and clients', 'Co-facilitators', 'Client, horse and therapist', and 'Client and Therapist – Importance of therapist'. The last two were the key relational findings as they began to highlight the possibility of dynamic intersubjective in EFP.

Lucy described a:

'moveable amazing experience because you're in there then, and you step back and allow them to have their moment...the client is dipping into the two of us.'

And Mary said:

'there has been a real connection where we have all been in that brief moment really connected and there's either emotion that comes up or a real stillness.'

This stillness is also mentioned in the work of Brandt (2004) when discussing connection with horses. This dynamic relationship has also been addressed in other research, such as 'triangle' (Carlsson, 2017) or 'triad' (Johansen et al., 2014). These special moments can also be contextualized by the theory of 'moments of meeting' (Stern and BCPSG, 1998).

Client and therapist – importance of therapist

The importance of this theme links to the two perhaps conflicting views that were identified in the literature review and evidenced by findings from this analysis. Two relational attachments were identified within the literature review: 1) It is easier to develop a relationship with a horse, and the horse becomes the secure attachment (Carlsson et al., 2014) for clients and 2) the therapist becomes a secure attachment for the client (Bachi, 2013).

From the analysis of this study, the findings agree with Bachi's (2013) concept that the therapist becomes a secure attachment for the client, with the horse possibly providing a secure base for the therapist and a dynamic or relational exploration for the client.

This may suggest that the client's secure attachment with the therapist is the differentiating factor between 'therapy with a small t' (Sophie) which describes the therapeutic nature of being around horses for pleasure, compared to engaging in an active intersubjective therapy relationship within EFP.

Developing mutual understanding

The final theme developed was communication and language. These findings also suggest how EFP

therapists can become more aware of relational phenomenon and embodied responses, to aid in the development of intersubjective relationships in EFP.

Horses are non-verbal, they can't speak to us and communicate what they think or feel verbally, yet humans have been working alongside horses since the beginning of time (Kohanov, 2001). We have already demonstrated that it is possible to work intersubjectively where one or more of the subjects are horses, through the identification of the horse as a subject and the development of relationships between humans and horses. Now, it is important to address the second aspect of Buirski and Haglund's (2010) definition of intersubjectivity; the development of shared and mutual understanding for communication in EFP.

Symbolisation, representation and metaphors

Identifying and using symbolisation, representation and metaphors allows clients and therapists to develop shared understanding when working with horses, and can be understood in the context of transference and projection theory (Macaskie, 2008; Grant and Crawly, 2002). An example was shared by Sophie:

'when they have all been stood round the trough eating, you know it's so easy to imagine this is a family at the table, and you know how suggestive is that for a lot of people... I've been really struck by how rich observing the herd seems to be.'

To support the development of intersubjective relationships, therapists can work with clients to identify and uncover meaning from such examples. One way to develop this understanding is through the use of metaphors (Klontz et al., 2007). Metaphors help 'bridge the internal and external worlds of the client' (Karol, 2007, p.88). For understanding, Ottens (2008) describes metaphors as maps, guiding us from subconscious to conscious understanding. An example of metaphor work is provided by Lucy:

'we were talking about the fact that she puts boulders in the way of her life and she didn't really know how to move them metaphorically... He was pawing at the ground and

nudging her, because he probably wanted some nuts, so she said to me I know he's doing that because he wants some nuts. I said ok, but what else does it mean? ... she was like, he is pushing those boulders out of the way.'

This use of metaphor helped Lucy to understand the client's internalisation of the experience.

Working with body language and empathy

Empathy can be seen as 'a process, through which you, the counsellor, attempt to see things through the eyes of the client, to inhabit their skin for that time' (Green, 2010, p.10). This suggests that empathy is not only trying to 'see' another's perspective, but suggests an embodied connection with the client's inner way of being. A mutual resonance (Green, 2010) between horses and clients was identified by Mary:

'they [clients] will tell you about pain in their leg or emotion that's come up really strongly or a sensation...they've picked up that there's a horse with a pedal bone issue and they've picked up a real pain in their shin or real sense of sadness with that horse...different people pick up the same things with the same horses...they are coming at that blind, they don't know anything about these horses.'

The second aspect of this theme is body language. Within theory on dance therapy, which focuses on embodied, non-verbal work (Gallagher and Payne, 2015) body language is described as 'one's posture, spatial position, gestures, facial expressions, vocal intonation' (Gallagher and Payne, 2015, p.73). Becoming aware of the body language of the client can help therapists understand processes that may be occurring within the client that are not verbally communicated:

'we had a client recently and when she first came physically there was a real sort of [scrunches up body] and within three sessions the physical way she moved by the end was huge... her body had remembered it!' (Nicola).

Lucy also commented on the identification and verbalisation of body language to aid in client's self-awareness: 'for example they will stay very near to the head of the horse, that kind of very obvious thing and you can bring that in straight away'.

Being aware of the body language of the horse is another vital communication aid when working with horses, not just for safety (Brandt, 2004). If really seen, they can also show us what they want and feel:

'another horse has jumped high fences... like no you've chosen the wrong horse, she's jumped out of her field, come to the round pen, stood at the door, they've both stood at the door, I've opened the door, they've swapped.' (Mary)

Non-verbal moments of meeting and mutual understanding

Stern (2004) describes his concept of 'present moments', as 'unbelievably rich' and that they 'occupy the subjective now' (p.14). These present moments can be used to understand the moment-to-moment happenings experienced by clients, when working non-verbally with the horses. Stern & BCPSG (1998) discuss 'moments of meeting', that lead to 'implicit knowledge'. The 'now moments' described by Stern (2004) are 'handled by the patient and therapist so as to achieve a 'specific moment of meeting' the implicit knowledge of each partner gets altered by creating a new and different intersubjective context between them... this process requires no interpretation and need not be made verbally explicit' (p.302). Stern (2004) and Stern & BCPSG (1998) link these moments to the preverbal, nonlinear processes for development between mother and infant. Lucy mentioned that 'it is obviously pre-verbal ...that would be maybe like a child before they have language, the horse is tapping into that preverbal state, implicit understanding'. Jane discussed how this way of nonverbal working can help clients who struggle with talking about their issues: 'you are able to be nonverbal so therefore you can help more people and you can help people who can't articulate their trauma'.

The importance of this theme is that it demonstrates that intersubjective development in EFP is possible. The therapy does not depend on talking, as change can happen thorough non-verbal connection, yet verbalisation and metaphor are useful to help the client begin to understand their process.

Conclusion

The findings identified that in order to work intersubjectively in EFP, horses should be capable of developing individual subjectivities. These findings and other current research available suggests this is possible (Brandt, 2004) but further research to explore this would be helpful, perhaps from an equine behavioural perspective. The therapist was suggested as the 'catalyst' for therapeutic change through a secure attachment with the client in EFP. In addition, the horse or horses offer a relational and secure base for the client, allowing for a quicker development of relational depth in comparison to working within a more traditional model of therapy. Verbalising can assist in meaning making between client, therapist and horse, but understanding is also possible by working with symbolisation, representation, metaphors, identification of body language and non-verbal communication. **📍**



Biography

I have always had a passion for helping others and animals, and my journey in training led me to complete my MA in Psychotherapy and Counselling at the University of Leeds last year. My MA research developed from my decision to become an Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) practitioner. I currently support clients at St Michaels Hospice as well as run my private practice of room based work and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy in Leeds.

* fiona@stablebase.co.uk

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4 Gestures in losing Sound Wisdom

John Roy*

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When in the last three days
 The loss of all I hoped for entered my stomach
 Even my skin erupted rust
 Even my heart constricted as the blow fell foul.
 What path to follow now, this need to know
 Is met with silence from he who led me here
 As to the future that would show itself
 Back in my own hands it must be, potential partnership
 Of two made older by time
 Made younger by crossings of landscapes
 Is henceforth ended, this life at least.
 Voar ent'ring Hairst's deep mystery lowps back
 Sommer an Wunter gie nay way tae win anuther.
 It cam guy early this year
 Whisperin fates, augurs o' speerit bairns we lost.
 Man's selfish sleepwalk dooms our earth
 Death follows death, tigers and whales
 Tree after tree is lopped in the forest of time
 Pool after pool is thickened by residues of plastic
 Islands roll under the sea again, their corals white as skulls.
 Can we conceive of renewal with all this loss?
 The young meet an empathy new to the human
 Participation with our images
 with the world we tread,
 it grows in us
 Time is still turning the Yew back to life from within
 And the phoenix could still be arising,
 or so we wish.

*Email: john.roy171@hotmail.co.uk