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Therapeutic Value of Equine–Human Bonding in Recovery from Trauma

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ABSTRACT Although most human–animal bond research has focused on relationships between humans and pets, animals have been used for therapeutic purposes in a variety of settings. Therapeutic riding programs have demonstrated a positive impact on quality of life for people with disabilities. Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is a promising approach to address self-esteem, depression, and other emotional or psychological problems. Restoration of the trauma victim's capacity for recovery hinges on provision of safety and development of trust, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Thus, recovery from trauma represents an ideal context for exploring the therapeutic impact of equine–human relationships. The six participants in this study recognized that their pre-existing relationships with horses were therapeutic during recovering from trauma, defined as sufficient to have caused significant change in the participant's life. Semi-structured interviews and video-tapes of horse–rider interaction were used to describe the nature of the equine–human bond and its contribution to recovery from trauma. The equine–human bonds described by participants have parallels both with important elements of therapeutic alliances between professionals and clients and with the positive impact of relationship factors on client outcome.

Keywords: equine–human bond, equine psychotherapy, horse, therapeutic alliance, trauma recovery



Psychotherapy research confirms that a good helping relationship, characterized commonly by mutual liking, respect, rapport, trust, warmth, acceptance, and collaboration, is the most powerful predictive factor for successful client outcome (Horvath and Symonds 1991; Orlinsky, Ronnestad and Willutzki 2004). Human–animal bond research suggests that close relationships with companion animals may also have therapeutic value for humans (Friedman et al. 1980; Katcher 1980; Katcher et al. 1983; Lagoni, Butler and Hetts 1994; Jorgenson

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1997). This study is an in-depth exploration of the therapeutic nature of equine–human relationships in recovery from trauma, investigating potential parallels between the nature and healing impact of human–animal and therapist–client bonds.

The therapeutic impact of the therapist–client relationship in psychotherapy has been conceptualized as provision of a corrective emotional experience (Alexander and French, cited in Weinberger 1993) overcoming demoralization via the installation of hope (Frank and Frank 1991), and, more generally, as social and emotional support that bolsters self-esteem and coping ability. Therapeutic alliances in human relationships are collaborative, incorporating elements of attachment (Bowlby 1965), engagement (Weinberger 1993; Wampold 2001), and task (Hougaard 1994). Hougaard (1994) contends that attachment is a necessary ingredient in an effective therapeutic alliance. Strong therapeutic alliances have proven more effective as variables in client outcomes than treatment techniques. Mutuality and strong emotional connections contribute to the effectiveness of both the therapeutic alliance and how it interacts with various techniques of intervention (Hougaard 1994). These concepts have been extended into human–animal bond research (Strand 2004; Frewin and Gardiner 2005).

When the impact of the therapist–client relationship is understood in these ways, it is not difficult to understand how human–animal relationships may have similar therapeutic effects. Research has shown that relationships with companion animals (e.g., dogs, cats) may have positive effects on depression (Odendaal 2000), blood pressure (Katcher et al. 1983), coronary survival rates (Friedmann et al. 1980), and quality of health among the elderly (Seigel 1990). Attachment to companion animals appears to share some aspects of traditional attachment theory in human-to-human relationships (Crawford, Worsham and Swinehart 2006). Emotion in animals, specifically horses, is difficult to interpret; however, some research suggests that experience and familiarity with horses by humans can improve accuracy in interpreting behaviors indicative of emotion (Saslow 2002; Russell 2003).

The therapeutic impact of the therapist–client relationship in social work is overarched by the "person-in-environment" ecological perspective (Bartlett 1958; Stein 1960; Germain and Gitterman 1980; Siporin 1980, 1983; Germain 1981). This "includes the examination of the environment as a critical factor both in causing as well as solving individual problems (Reich 1995)" (Haynes 1998, p. 508). Accordingly, two significant ecological theories in human–animal bond research identify the importance of the environment (Wilson 1984; Allen 1985; Kellert and Wilson 1993) and support the premise that "…the brain was hardwired with a predisposition to pay attention to animals…" and "…animals are demonstrably a source of social support." (Beck and Katcher 2003, p. 80). How humans interact with their companion animals is represented theoretically along a continuum, from chattel to anthropomorphism (Milani 1995).

Although most human–animal bond research has focused on relationships between humans and pets (small companion animals), increasingly, animals have been used for therapeutic purposes in a variety of settings (e.g., nursing homes, hospitals, treatment centers) (Mallon 1992; Jorgenson 1997). The use of horses for therapeutic purposes (hippotherapy) has received increasing attention (Strauss 1991; Engel 1997; Bizub, Joy and Davidson 2003; Haylock and Cantril 2006; Kaiser et al. 2006). Horses are recognized as patient, cooperative, and receptive to people, and therapeutic riding programs have demonstrated a positive impact on quality of life for people with disabilities (Garrity and Stallones 1998). Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is a promising approach to address self-esteem, depression, and a host of other emotional or psychological problems (Taylor 2001). Although the amount of contact time between riders/owners and their horses might often be less than that between humans and small

companion animals, unique elements of equine–human relationships may foster deep, intimate connections (Brackenridge and Shoemaker 1996; Wipper 2000; Taylor 2001; Yorke 2003; Brant 2004). Riding provides an activity and a place for riders to socialize with like-minded individuals. Few other companion animals can be ridden, offering the opportunity for such close and broad body-to-body contact. As a result of the close physical contact involved in riding and grooming horses, a type of "physical sign language" develops (Edgette 1996), establishing a deep rapport, intimacy, and mutual understanding. Although well-designed controlled research on the effectiveness of equine-facilitated psychotherapy is lacking, anecdotal evidence (Tyler 1994; Pearson 1997) and the results of research relating to small companion animals suggest its promise.

Trauma may result in a spectrum of physical, emotional, and psychological consequences (Meichenbaum 1994; Figley 1995; Van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth 1996). Recovery from trauma, as well as from other socio-emotional problems, requires a close personal connection that is caring, consistent, trusting, and safe (Herman 1997; Regehr, Hill and Glancy 2000). Regehr, Hill and Glancy (2000) conclude that restoration of the trauma victim's capacity for recovery hinges on provision of safety and development of trust, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. In this study, trauma was defined using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2000), which defines it as " direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threats to one's physical integrity… (Criterian A1, p. 463). Thus, recovery from trauma represents an ideal context for exploring the therapeutic impact of equine–human relationships. This study focused on a small sample of riders who recognized that a pre-existing relationship with a horse had been helpful in recovery from trauma (e.g., car or work accident, horse-related accident, health trauma).

Methods

Research Approach

In order to explore the therapeutic nature and impact of equine–human relationships in recovery from trauma, it was necessary to explore the deep meaning that participants ascribe to their relationships with their horses. This is best accomplished by a qualitative phenomenological research approach sensitive to an emotionalist perspective. "In exploratory studies, the quality of the study in not determined by the size or randomness of the sample, as the research goal is not to generalize but rather to go into depth with a small number of people. Thus qualitative research seeks to compose a group of people who have something in common, and to include individuals who are 'information-rich' (Krueger and Casey 2000)" (Kruzich and Friesen 2002 in Alexander and Solomon 2006). Phenomenology (the theory that behavior is determined by the way a person perceives reality) allows the researcher to view the issue in a broad context and to explore with the intention of understanding the lived experiences of the participants (Gubrium and Holstein 1994).

In the present study, observation in a natural setting was important to understanding the nature of equine–human bonded relationships. The goal was to observe and understand the participant's experience without disrupting it (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Participants often use "thick," rich, and descriptive language related to their interpretation of the experience. Inherent in that "language" are clues to the feelings their experiences produce. The researcher considered empowerment of the participants, through the mutuality of dialogue and development of trust, as key to the successful completion of this study. Informants needed to be

allowed to speak for themselves, using their language (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Emotionalism explores the depths of feelings and emotions expressed by the participants, allowing the researcher and the reader to feel the experience (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). By employing an emotionalist lens, the researcher explored the narrative of the individual's interviews, related to their trauma experiences, to discover the depth and range of feelings that occurred for them.

Sample Selection

Sampling was purposive, addressing the need to focus on participants who offered the best opportunity to understand the experience of equine–human relationships and their healing capacity with regard to trauma. Participants were selected on the basis of their identifying that a pre-existing relationship with a horse had been therapeutic in terms of their recovery from a trauma. Individuals who began riding after their trauma experience were not included. Participants were sought through snowball sampling, including the researchers' personal and professional contacts, and through media coverage of the pending project. In addition, equine veterinary practices, therapeutic riding schools, and some riding coaches throughout southern Ontario, Canada, were informed of the study and asked to refer possible candidates for participation.

Participants were screened through telephone discussion. Participants (at least 18 years of age) were selected on the basis of their identifying a relationship with a particular horse that had been therapeutic in their recovery from trauma—defined as sufficient to have caused significant change in the participant's life. Following the initial telephone screening, respondents received an introductory letter, informed consent statement, and a short questionnaire. The questionnaire gathered basic demographic information and information about the respondent's riding experience, the trauma experienced, and initial thoughts about how the relationship with a horse had been helpful in recovery from the trauma.

Human Participants

There were six participants, four women and two men, who ranged in age from 18 to 51 years. Trauma had occurred 10 months to 11 years before the research interviews. One male and one female participant had been injured in horse-related accidents, with the female rider becoming a paraplegic and the male rider being brain-injured. Two other female participants were injured in car accidents, with both becoming quadriplegics and one being brain-injured. One male participant was HIV-positive. The sixth participant was a female who had experienced multiple physical and psychological traumas as well as abuse. All participants had been riding since childhood, and all had been in recovery from their traumas for at least eight months before they returned to riding. Thus, all participants had experienced a debilitating physical and or psychological trauma that had acute and chronic consequences and that had interrupted or had a profound effect on his or her riding.

All participants had resumed riding at least two to three months before participating in the study. Some rode more consistently than others. All but one rode frequently (three to seven days per week), depending on the weather, demands of horse show competitions, and physical health. Most participants rode for 30 minutes to several hours, depending on how many horses they rode in a day.

Initially, five participants depended on family or partners to provide transportation to the stable or assistance mounting and grooming the horse. At the time of the study, only two of the participants required ongoing family assistance with grooming and transportation. Five

participants were able to keep their horses at home because they lived in rural settings that provided proximity to a barn, indoor and/or outdoor riding arenas, paddock space for horses to graze in throughout the day, and in some cases, trails through wooded areas. These participants were involved in daily grooming, cleaning of bedding in stalls, feeding and watering once or twice a day, and blanketing of horses, if required, in winter.

Three participants rode more than one horse regularly before and after their accidents. These riders had been involved in coaching and training young horses and riders before the trauma experience, and had been responsible for riding many horses in a day or week. All participants identified one horse as significant to them. Five participants owned the significant horse, and for the sixth participant, the significant horse lived on the property but belonged to a friend. Four riders returned to riding the high performance animals they had ridden and/or competed with prior to their trauma experience, despite warnings and cautions from coaches, physicians, and family members. Three participants returned to competing with their horses after the trauma.

Horse Participants

Six horses were involved in this study. Four of the horses, ridden by participants, were considered to be complex and difficult animals by riders and/or their coaches, finely tuned athletes in their own right. These horses were capable of competing at a very high level in sport (international competition, three-day horse trials, dressage, trick riding, roping and reining), prior to the riders' trauma experiences. This made them fast and at times unpredictable, requiring dexterity and quick responses from their riders prior to the trauma. The remaining two horses were well-trained and accommodating with their riders.

Interviews and Videotaping

Two semi-structured, audio-taped interviews, each approximately two hours' long, were conducted with each participant in the barn where the horse was kept. Interviews with participants and videotaping occurred between the spring of 2001 and 2002. Observation in a natural setting was deemed important to understanding the nature of equine–human relationships. The first interview began with exploration of the trauma that had been experienced and the participant's relationship with the horse. In the second part of that interview, the researcher videotaped the participant interacting with the horse (grooming and riding) for 30 to 60 minutes, to observe the interaction between the horse and rider on the ground and in the saddle.

During the second interview, the impact of the human–horse relationship on the participant's recovery from trauma was discussed in depth, and selected parts (riding the horse, grooming the horse) of the videotape were reviewed together, at the home of the rider. Review of the videotape provided the researcher and participant with an opportunity to discuss the horse–rider interaction and to explore a deeper understanding of the relationship. For two participants who had been brain-injured, their mothers were also interviewed to elaborate on, and ensure the credibility of, the data.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the open coding processes identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and all transcripts were coded using paper and pen initially. The videotapes were reviewed by the primary researcher (JY), with input from participants, the other authors, and notes from these reviews were included in the data analysis, with respect

to development of codes and validity. Open codes, based on quotations from the transcript and the researcher's understanding of the participant's meaning, were assigned to sentences and paragraphs in the transcribed text. After coded interviews were reviewed and compared by peers and research committee members, qualitative software NUD*IST (Non-numerical and Unstructured Data * Indexing Searching and Theorizing; Qualitative Solutions and Research International Pty Ltd., Doncaster, Victoria, Australia) was used to comprehensively code each sentence and paragraph. The unusually fine coding, which was done to capture every emotional nuance, generated multiple layers of categories that ended up containing over 1600 individual codes. As the primary researcher (JY) identified repetitive patterns throughout the coding process, categories were reorganized and grouped. All codes were finally subsumed under the main themes shown in Figures 1 and 2 (see Results section). Finally, the results of the analyses were shared with participants via mail or follow-up interview, and their feedback on the analyses was incorporated into the results. The researcher wanted to be reflexive (examine their interpretation) and be assured by participants that the interpretation was authentic and reliable. Videotapes were also used to triangulate observed behaviors (in riders and horses) with coded interviews. "Transferability is considered to be the parallel to the positivistic concept of generalizability, except that the reader, not the researcher, decides if the results can be applied to a second situation (Krueger and Casey 2000)" (Kruzich and Friesen 2002, cited in Alexander and Solomon 2006).

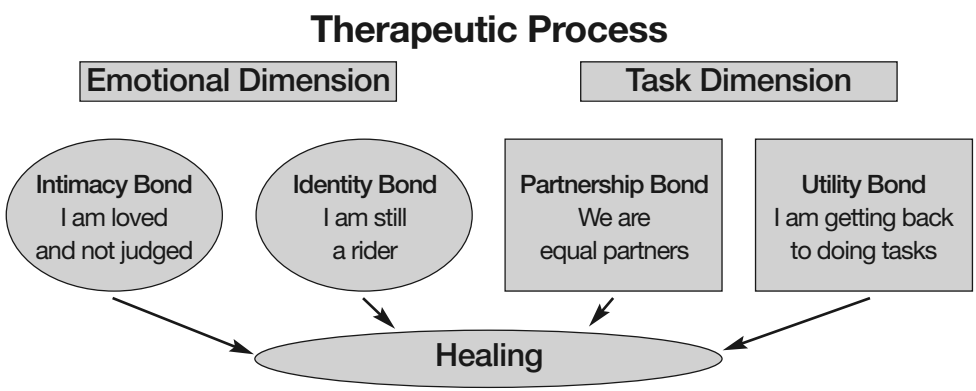


Figure 1. Description of four equine–human bond themes and the relationship to healing.

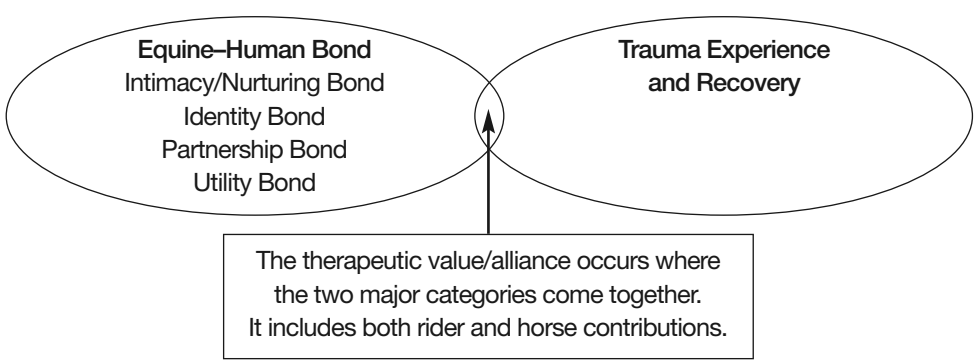


Figure 2. The nature of the therapeutic alliance.

Results

Overview of Thematic Categories

Two broad categories arose from the analysis. The first category was "the nature of the equine–human bond " and the second was "the therapeutic value of the equine–human bond." Each broad category had a number of sub-categories (see Figure 2).

The relationships that developed between the riders and horses in this study were deep, complex, and multifaceted. Four main components of the equine–human bond emerged from the data analysis: the intimacy/nurturing bond, the identity bond, the partnership bond, and the utility bond. Two bond components (intimacy/nurturing and identity) were emotional and personal in nature. The other two (partnership and utility) were more practical or task-oriented. Aspects of all four bond themes emerged in each participant–horse relationship, with some aspects of a bond more prevalent for some participants than others.

The category "therapeutic value of the equine–human bond" focused on aspects of the horse–human relationship that the riders identified as contributing to their healing and recovery. Three sub-categories emerged that defined the therapeutic nature of the equine–human bond: "feelings," "proximity/touch," and "behaviors relevant to healing and recovery."

Nature of the Equine–Human Bond

The intimacy/nurturing bond appeared to be the most intense of all of the four bond themes (see Figure 1). It was emotional and personal, with emphasis on the feelings about the horse that transcended riding. Riders for whom this element of the bond was strongest appeared to be the most anthropomorphic and would say things like "we both want to be close." They spoke to their equine partners as they would to loved ones, and each often put into words what he or she thought the horse was trying to communicate. These relationships appeared reciprocal, interactive, and responsive. The horses in these relationships appeared to be very "touchy and oral," and frequently chose to nuzzle, lick, touch, and physically interact with their riders. These riders also talked about the significance of human–horse relationships compared with human-human relationships, making points such as "they don't try and analyze you" or "it has a lot to do with his innocence, he's completely pure, who he is. There is no second guessing what he is thinking."

One rider described such intimacy and nurturing: "I can remember standing with my arms around [her horse], and crying on her shoulder, literally tears running down onto her fur, and it was like her saying 'It's okay, you can tell me your story… I won't tell anyone else there were tears in your eyes.' You just kinda get it [emotion] out and they seem so accepting of it."

The identity bond concerned the rider's self-perception. The focus was emotional and personal, with emphasis on feelings about self in relation to the horse. Riding appeared to be the center of the participants' lives, defining who they were. The life work of each participant had been riding, care of horses, and/or competing. The trauma experience appeared to rob them of aspects of self. They used riding in recovery, especially with the horses they were closest to, to regain pieces of themselves, of whom they had been before their trauma experiences. One participant talked of riding her horse as a way to "get back on my feet again," and another said that without riding her horse "I'd have no means of finding myself again." This aspect of the bond emerged as more prevalent in the two male participants than the four female participants, and appeared to be more prevalent earlier in four of the six riders' recovery than later in their recovery.

The partnership bond was more task-focused, with emphasis on the egalitarianism of the relationship, including the mutual respect and effort the partners exhibited. It emphasized the

teamwork and communication required by riding (the use of language as well as non-verbal communication). It described the symmetry of human and horse, moving as one and working together, that evolves from proximity and length of relationship, and the clarity that comes with their knowledge of what to expect from each other, both physically and mentally. One rider remarked: "When you can feel a horse raise its eyebrows in attention, you know there is a connection there."

Three riders focused their efforts on redeveloping this partnership or teamwork ability in the face of the challenges remaining from their trauma experience. Their language focused on description of behaviors/responses related to the partnership and what they meant. The emphasis in this aspect of the relationship appeared to be on togetherness and oneness. The bond appeared focused more on behavior, less on emotion. This theme appeared to be part of the working phase of recovery, incorporating perseverance and determination and ignoring the risks of riding and fear of injury that might accompany the effort to recapture a particular level of ability. For these riders, the partnership with the horse went beyond riding. Participants noted: "It's not just good enough to ride," or "With a horse you are never alone."

The utility aspect of the equine–human bond encompassed a cluster of issues related to the functionality of the horse and the relationship. Three female participants described horses as useful and riding as enjoyable, providing goals that gave the rider something to work toward. These riders associated the act of riding and the interaction with the horse as a challenge, like their recovery. Recovery became something that was surmountable and motivating, something to declare victory over. There was an overlap with the partnership aspect of the bond in that the horses were not seen just as means to an end, but rather as comrades-in-arms, allies, and partners in the fight for recovery. These participants described riding their horses as a way of "getting away from the ugly stuff," "thinking about something different," and "getting a new frame of mind." This component of the bond was described as part of early recovery experiences for these three riders.

Therapeutic Value of the Equine–Human Bond

"Feelings" were a significant sub-category that emerged. Feelings of intimacy in the horse–human relationship provided support and nurturance to participants in their journeys toward healing and recovery. Some participants spoke fondly of other horses (e.g., therapeutic riding mounts, second horses they owned), but each was clear to distinguish between those horses and the one to which he or she felt most connected. Participants talked about the length of the relationship ("We've known each other for over 20 years"), the shared history of facing difficult circumstances (competition, early training, rescue from risky circumstances for the animal or rider), and the horse's specific characteristics ("He was the cutest horse I'd ever seen") when describing the intimacy in their relationship with the animal. Mutual understanding and trust were important parts of this intimacy. One rider explained: "He [the horse] seems to know that I'm disabled, he seems to know how I am disabled, and he seems to know what I mean without me saying a word to him, both on and off the horse. And it's not something I have with any other horse because I don't know them well enough. He can be strong…I mean a strong rider gets on him, he starts fighting with them, and he will take off on them…you fight with him, you lose. My mother knew I didn't have the strength to do anything if he decided to take off. So she was very concerned and she should have been. I was never afraid to get on him. I know how he reacts, I know him, he knows me. I can't explain it."

Riders also talked about the significance and helpfulness of their relationships with smaller animals, but they were careful to qualify the distinction between these relationships and those

with their equine partners. One participant emphasized: "You can't sit on your dog and go for a four-hour trail ride in the mountains."

Participants' feelings about the rural environment in general and the barn in particular seemed to be closely tied to the feelings of intimacy they experienced with their horses. The barn was often described as a "nest" or safe place that provided the context for healing. One participant explained: "… comfort zone …that is what I get at the barn with my horses." Participants often described the smells, sounds, and places in the barn that were significant to them. One participant talked about how as a teenager she would go to her horse's stall for comfort and cry until she fell asleep. Another participant described the sound of horses in the barn eating contentedly as a therapeutic experience: "Just to listen to them munch on hay, I feel like I'm in heaven." With regard to the rural environment, one participant explained: "Going to the barn and mucking out, and turning out, and feeding, being out in the country, being at one with nature, there's a whole warmth to it, and it's a very healing, positive warmth."

Closely related to "feelings" was the importance to healing of closeness, touch, and physical contact between the rider and horse. One participant, talking of physical proximity to his horse, said: "… to me it's a safe zone, I just want to be there." Many of the riders talked about the importance of touch while in the saddle, identifying it as significant to the amount of intimacy they developed with their equine partners: "I think the only comparison to riding a horse is probably when people make love . . . because it's the same connection. You're so close and it's intimate but there's not a lot of talking. It's like when you're so close with somebody you can move with them. Like probably, I would think, like when people get to swim with dolphins and whales . . . it's a non-verbal, very close body connection."

The importance and healing quality of touch was also inherent in the husbandry that surrounded the care and grooming of the horse. Referring to these activities, one participant said: "There's the physical contact, which is therapeutic."

"Task-related" behaviors and "relationship-related" behaviors both seemed to be important to healing and recovery. Participants described task-related behaviors, such as grooming, using equipment and training techniques to teach the horse to behave in a particular way, as familiar, comforting, and contributing to feelings of competence. Although there was no clear distinction between task-related and relationship-related behaviors, the latter were related more to feelings of intimacy than feelings of competence. One rider explained: "I think the emotional part that helped me was in the barn, playing with [my horse]. You know, grooming him, playing with him, talking to him . . . because with a horse, you're not alone, he's always responding to what I do, whether it's the grooming aspect I'm doing to him, or talking to him, he's always talking back."

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the relationships participants had with their horses contributed significantly to their healing from trauma. Furthermore, findings suggest parallels between good equine–human relationships and good therapist–client relationships, both in terms of the nature of the bonds that are formed and their healing qualities.

The four bond themes described in the results have many parallels to the descriptions of good therapeutic alliances in the psychotherapy literature. Hougaard's (1994) analysis of the concept of the therapeutic alliance divides it into two main areas: the personal relationship, which is socio-emotional, and the collaborative relationship, which is task-oriented. The four bond themes that emerged in this study clearly fit into these two categories. The first two

human–equine bond themes (intimacy/nurturing and identity bonds) are clearly personal and emotional, whereas the partnership and utility bonds are collaborative and task-oriented.

The intimacy/nurturing component of the equine–human bond echoes traditionally valued characteristics of therapist–client relationships, such as mutual liking, warmth, trust and respect. However, the depth of the emotional connection that many riders had with their horses seems to go beyond the intimacy achieved in most therapist–client relationships. Riders emphasized the accepting and nonjudgmental nature of horses compared with humans. Most strikingly, they talked of the deep bonds forged by exchanges of physical affection—something not ethically possible in therapist–client relationships. Although the identity bond is somewhat different in that it is focused on feelings about self in relation to the horse and to riding, especially with regard to recovering aspects of one's pre-trauma identity, it is clearly personal and emotional in nature.

The partnership and utility components of the equine–human bond clearly suggest collaboration. In riding, collaboration requires trust and development of verbal and non-verbal communication between horse and rider. Collaboration in psychotherapy requires agreement on goals and tasks (Hougaard 1994). Although such agreement is less explicit in equine–human relationships, it is still required if the demands of skill development and competing are to be met. The trained horse is the skilled partner that not only receives direction from the rider, but also teaches the rider the best way to elicit specific responses in their interaction. The partnership and utility aspects of the human–equine bond reflect the essence of what is required in a therapeutic endeavor—agreement on tasks and goals and collaboration.

Participants' descriptions of how their relationships with horses contributed to their healing from trauma also parallel in many respects the descriptions in the psychotherapy literature of how therapeutic alliances contribute to client change. Psychotherapy research has lent support to Frank's (1961, 1991) common factors theory, which holds that a good helping relationship is the most important factor contributing to therapeutic change and that its primary function is to instill hope and overcome demoralization (Lambert and Ogles 2004). Although study participants did not use these terms explicitly, their descriptions of how the trust, understanding, intimacy, and support they experienced in their relationships with their horses nurtured their recovery fits very well with this conceptualization. Closely related to the ideas of instilling hope and improving morale is the psychotherapeutic concept of the correctional emotional experience (Alexander and French, cited in Weinberger 1993). Weinberger, who has built on Frank's (1961, 1982, 1991) work to develop his own theory of common factors, suggests that a key mechanism in a corrective emotional experience in therapy is that the client "faces the issue troublesome to him or her and learns that it is not as devastating as imagined or feared" (Weinberger 1993, p. 51). This certainly rings true for the five participants in this study who suffered physical trauma that compromised not only their riding ability, but their feelings of competence and worth. With the support of their horses, they were able to regain ability and self-esteem. Christensen and Jacobsen (1994, p. 12) have pointed out that "personal change that does not rely on experts may create a sense of personal autonomy or personal empowerment that is not obtained in professional therapy."

In addition to an emotionally close relationship with a helper (or horse), another aspect of the healing process referred to by the participants in this study also has a parallel in Frank's (1982) common factors theory. Frank's theory focuses not only on factors that are common across different types of psychotherapy, but also on how these factors exist in all approaches to healing, including religious revivalism and traditional healing in non-industrialized societies. In all approaches to healing, Frank and Frank (1991, p. 41) point out the importance of a special

setting that provides "safety" and allows people to "freely express feelings, [and] dare to reveal aspects of themselves that they have concealed from others." Participants' descriptions of the healing qualities of the rural setting and the barn reflect this very clearly.

Finally, the importance of touch and physical closeness that participants talked about in their relationships with horses has also received theoretical and empirical support as a healing agent in various types of helping. The Franks (1991, p. 130) note that with a few exceptions (e.g., encounter groups and body therapies), most Western psychotherapies have avoided touch. They say: "This oversight may reflect a culturally biased perception of all bodily contact as either erotic or aggressive. Such bias robs therapists of powerful means of relieving tension and enhancing rapport that are widely used in other cultures." The significance of touch in healing has emerged in the work of Jernberg and Booth (1999) with the development of Theraplay©. This attachment-based approach to healing incorporates nurturing touch with structure, engagement, and challenge to meet the needs of both parents and children, enhancing healing through attachment. Touch is a sensitive topic in psychotherapy and in particular with clients suffering trauma related to touch (sexual abuse, incest, domestic violence). The point made by this study is that riding and grooming an equine partner offers the opportunity for the healing effects of "safe" touch within a close relationship.

Conclusions

Although this study suggests the promise of equine–human relationships for psychotherapeutic purposes, caution must be exercised in interpreting these results. Clearly, larger studies are necessary to establish the effectiveness of equine–human relationships in trauma recovery. Nevertheless, these results have a number of positive implications. First, they support the general idea that human–animal relationships can be therapeutic, and reveal parallels between the therapeutic impact of the therapist–client relationship and that of human–animal relationships. Second, they imply that equine–human relationships might have unique therapeutic aspects beyond those found in relationships either with small companion animals or with therapists. The horse is accessible when the rider is ready to work on their recovery, providing unconditional responsiveness. Third, deriving from the first two points, people who are not long-term horseback riders might also benefit from the help equine–human relationships bring to dealing with a range of common problems, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Development of a relationship with a horse offers the opportunity for acceptance, nurturance, intimacy, safe touch and physical affection, collaboration, development of a sense of mastery and empowerment, and a natural setting that is safe and soothing. Unlike many professional approaches to therapy, riding focuses on ability, not disability.

Strength-based approaches to helping utilizes clients' strengths and resilience (Saleebey 1997), emphasizing the need for social workers to empower their clients and the person-in-environment perspective. Equine–human bonds offer people this opportunity. The challenges presented in developing a relationship with a large powerful animal and learning to ride have parallels with common life challenges, including recovery from trauma, low self-esteem, and depression. Riders develop mutual trust, acceptance, liking, and intimacy with their horses, and concurrently develop skills, mastery, and self-esteem through collaboration, facing fears, and taking risks while riding. It is not difficult to understand how such advancements could be applied to other parts of one's life.

Riding is not for everyone. Horses are imposing and at times difficult animals to handle. Some clients might find the physical requirements too demanding or might have health

problems (e.g., asthma, allergies) that prevent them from interacting with animals. Horses may not be easily accessible in some urban settings. Nevertheless, social workers and other helping professionals should consider the use of horses as a therapeutic adjunct, supportive follow-up to therapy, or alternative to therapy for their clients.

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