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Hannah Louise Burgon

'QUEEN OF THE WORLD': EXPERIENCES OF 'AT-RISK' YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATING IN EQUINE-ASSISTED LEARNING/THERAPY

There is a significant body of research into the benefits of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) but less into the fields known as equine-assisted learning and therapy (EAL/EAT) where horses are incorporated in therapeutic and learning interventions. This paper explores the experiences of seven 'at-risk' young people who participated in a therapeutic horsemanship (TH) programme. The study followed a practice-near approach seeking to capture the young people's experiences within a participative ethnography. Themes related to the risk and resilience literature such as self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of mastery, empathy and the opening of positive opportunities are explored in this paper.

Keywords therapeutic horsemanship; equine-assisted learning; equine-assisted therapy; equine-facilitated psychotherapy; 'at-risk' young people; risk and resilience literature

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of 'at-risk' young people who participated in a therapeutic horsemanship programme (TH) and is drawn from aspects of my larger doctoral study. TH is aligned to the emerging therapeutic interventions known as equine-assisted therapy (EAT), equine-assisted learning (EAL) and equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EAP). These aim to provide alternative therapeutic and learning opportunities through experiences with horses alongside specialist practitioners. The horse is claimed to provide benefits such as being non-judgemental and motivational (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Yorke *et al.*, 2008), useful as a metaphor (Karol, 2007; Klontz *et al.*, 2007) for building self esteem, confidence and mastery (Virdine *et al.*, 2002; Bizub *et al.*, 2003; Trotter *et al.*, 2008), adapting behaviour (Kaiser *et al.*, 2006; Schultz *et al.*, 2007) and effective for building trust and attachment with both the horse and therapist (Brooks, 2006; Yorke *et al.*, 2008; Chardonens, 2009). It is claimed that animals in general can act as 'communication mediators' within the therapeutic

environment and help to provide a calming effect, especially during initial sessions (Levinson, 1969; Corson & Corson, 1980; C. Wilson & Turner, 1998; Fine, 2000; Friesen, 2010). Other allied alternative therapeutic and learning approaches for young people that have been adopted in social-work contexts, such as youth offending and with young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, are outward-bound adventure-type courses located in the natural environment. These seek to provide activities such as rock climbing, water sports, rope courses and so on and, similarly to EAL/EAT and TH, are aimed at engaging young people in activities that may help build their self-esteem, self-confidence and social skills (Ewert, 1987; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Ungar *et al.*, 2005).

The young people who attended the TH centre in the present study were referred from various agencies such as a foster-care company, a residential facility, youth offending team, pupil referral unit and through private referrals. They were understood to be 'at risk' due to various psychosocial factors, which, according to the risk and resilience literature, puts them at greater likelihood of negative life outcomes (Rutter, 1985; Masten *et al.*, 1990; Jackson & McParlin, 2006). There are a multitude of reasons attributed to contributing to risk factors ranging from socio-economic factors such as poverty, class and cultural expectations, to neurobiological and environmental risk (Masten *et al.*, 1990). In addition there is general agreement that childhood exposure to stressful and traumatic events, such as physical, sexual or psychological abuse, neglect, dysfunctional parenting and parental drug and/or alcohol abuse, for example, can result in subsequent 'negative life outcomes' (Bannister, 1998; Egeland *et al.*, 2002; Gunnar *et al.*, 2006). Many of the young people who attended The Yard had been referred to the agencies involved in their care and management due to having experienced a number of these risk factors, and often displayed complex emotional and behavioural coping strategies as a result. Through enabling young people to have meaningful, educational and therapeutic experiences with horses, preventative therapeutic interventions such as EAL/EAT and TH seek to provide participants with some of the protective factors suggested as useful in promoting resilience and avoiding possible negative life outcomes.

This paper is based on some of the observations drawn from my PhD thesis. The focus of the PhD was interested in exploring the interactions between horses and young people and looked at a number of themes related to theories linked to attachment and psychotherapeutic literature, risk and resilience, mindfulness and nature/outdoor therapies. This particular article focuses on some of the themes that emerged from the research related to the risk and resilience literature — themes such as self-confidence and self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of mastery from successfully overcoming challenges, social skills and an empathy for others and the 'opening of positive opportunities' (Rutter, 1985; Masten *et al.*, 1990; Poresky, 1990; Werner, 1993; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Rutter, 1999; Lexman & Reeves, 2009).

Human–animal relationships

Animals have long been recognised for their therapeutic benefits, and this interest has developed in recent years into the formalised field of therapy known as animal-assisted therapy (AAT). Dogs are taken into hospitals and nursing homes (Barker & Dawson, 1998; Bernstein *et al.*, 2000); there are therapy programmes where people swim with

dolphins, although these are not without criticism (Chandler, 2005); and stroking a dog and dog ownership have been shown to lower blood pressure and raise coronary survival rates (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, *et al.*, 1980; Friedman, Katcher, Thomas, *et al.*, 1983). Other reported psychosocial benefits of AAT range from acting as a 'social lubricant' (Levinson, 1969); providing relationships and support (Beck & Katcher, 1996; C. Wilson & Turner, 1998; Walsh, 2009; Wells, 2009); acting as 'confidant' and 'holding environment' (Melson, 2001; Brooks, 2006); transitional object (Triebenbacher, 1998), acceptance (Siegel, 1993); encouraging responsibility, empathy and moral development (Poresky, 1990; Daly & Morton, 2006; Myers, 2007); and growth of self-esteem and control of behaviour (Kogan *et al.*, 1999; Fine, 2000). Some authors go so far as to suggest that these healing benefits are due to an innate connection between humans, animals and the natural environment (E. Wilson, 1984; Katcher & Wilkins, 2000; Nebbe, 2000).

Horse–human relationship

Alongside their long relationship with humans and pivotal role in the shaping of the modern world, horses have also been recorded throughout history as healing agents, with the word chiropody derived from the Greek centaur Chiron — a god of healing (Barclay, 1980).

More recently horses have started to be incorporated into therapy programmes, with several organisations such as the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFHMA) and the Equine-Assisted Growth And Learning Association (EAGALA) striving to set standards and bring research and models to practice. Whilst many of the benefits the horse can bring to the therapeutic encounter have similarities to AAT, the horse is argued to have additional qualities, in part because of its large size and power, but also its inherent vulnerability and unique characteristics (Virdine *et al.*, 2002; Karol, 2007). Because it is a prey animal, the horse has developed highly effective communication systems based primarily on body language, and is finely tuned in 'picking up' on human emotions and intention. Horses have strong social bonds, and herd behaviour is based on a co-operative form of living, with each horse having a 'place' but with a leader, rather than a boss, who is usually an older, wise mare (Rees, personal communication, 2009). Participants may identify with the horse's inherent fear and need for security and safety, so providing a metaphor for how they may feel themselves (Karol, 2007). Additionally, in order to work effectively with horses, it is necessary to model behaviours to which the horse will respond positively — qualities such as calm, confident and fair leadership (Rashid, 2004; Rees, 1984) — and this can provide opportunities for learning new forms of behaviour and feelings of self-efficacy.

A plethora of different styles, philosophies and practices exist within the burgeoning field of EAL and EAT. These range from practices basing themselves on cognitive behavioural methods, psychoanalytic, psychotherapeutic person-centred and experiential gestalt approaches (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005; Lentini & Knox, 2009). The style of TH practiced at the centre in the study aligned itself to person-centred, humanistic, gestalt and experiential philosophies, with the resident therapist having trained in Buddhist-orientated core-process psychotherapy (Rogers, 1951; Kurtz, 1990; Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Gammage, 2008; Sills, 2009). Many of these approaches have similar theoretical and philosophical orientations to aspects of the

'natural horsemanship' (Rashid, 2004) approach adopted at The Yard, and it was hoped that this amalgamation would provide an environment where young people could gain some of the strengths and resources that would help equip them with 'protective factors' unique to their individual circumstances.

Method

The research setting

The site for the research study was a TH programme I established whilst working as a social worker for a foster-care company. It aimed to offer an additional therapeutic intervention for young people in foster care who had been assessed as requiring additional support. Alongside a child-centred ethos, I position myself within the sociology of childhood literature that understands that children have rights and agency (Greene & Hill, 2005) and is critical of the labelling with which many found themselves (Jones, 2003).

The Yard was located in the countryside and consisted of a yard area and open barn, together with a small office, feed and tack area. A bench was positioned outside the office in the yard, and horses were generally free to mingle around whilst participants sat observing them. TH sessions were between one and three hours long, and the young people attended weekly, fortnightly or intermittently depending on their individual circumstances, timetables and, more often than not, funding. Activities in a session ranged from initially just spending time with the horses, observing and discussing horse behaviour and psychology, to learning how to look after and work with them. Inherent in all the activities was an emphasis on respecting and building up relationships with the horses. 'Invisible riding' sessions and hacking in the lanes were also offered. 'Invisible riding' involves riding the horse without saddle or reins (with a leader and side-walker) in an enclosed arena and learning how to connect with the horse using the power of intention and body language alone. Other, ground-based exercises included 'join-up', where the horse is loose in the round pen, with the young person learning how their body language can influence the horse and how to build up a relationship with him/her; the ultimate aim of this exercise being for the horse to follow the young person unattached to a lead rope. In line with EFHMA-suggested safety standards, a minimum of two staff were employed on TH sessions. Additional sessional TH practitioners included a play therapist, a teacher and a counsellor, together with experienced horse specialists.

The young people

Seven young people who attended The Yard over a two-year period participated in the study. There were five girls and two boys. The participant attending for the longest period, Minimax, came intermittently over almost the whole two-year period, as did Lucy. In contrast, Kelly came only half a dozen times before she discovered, during a TH session, that her residential placement was to be brought to an abrupt end, and she was moved away to a foster placement in another part of the country. Generally, the young people came for a number of months, either weekly or fortnightly. Their ages

ranged from 11 to 16 years, apart from Lucy who had her 21st birthday during the time of the study. The participants could be understood to be in the 'at-risk' category due to their various psychosocial circumstances and disadvantages, as discussed previously. A number had an educational statement of need, and others had ADHD and autistic spectrum diagnosis.

The horses

Nine horses were resident at The Yard during the course of the research study, although some left and others joined during this time. They ranged from an elderly mare, Duchess, to two young, semi-wild horses. In the middle was the cob-cross mare, Ruby, and Jason, an Iberian-cross gelding. Their temperaments ranged from very placid and steady to more unpredictable and feisty, which provided rich ground for discussion of their various characters with the participants.

Ethics

In line with a participative approach, all the young people were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms (and those of the horses), and all did so apart from Kelly and Freya who both stopped attending the TH centre before having decided their pseudonym names. Ethical consent was obtained from the university ethics committee, and a child-protection policy was in place alongside the other policies and procedures of the TH centre. I also sought the young people's opinions and collaboration on research design, such as questionnaires. This was successful with a number of the participants, such as Lucy who was very articulate and keen to engage with all aspects of the research, but was felt to be intrusive and inappropriate with others, such as Minimax and Wayne who seemed to find being asked questions tiresome, and this was respected. Dilemmas such as this posed challenges for me during the entire research process; the blurring of lines between practice and research sometimes seemed muddy. How much the research imposed upon practice and vice versa were questions constantly asked of myself. However, there were advantages to being a practitioner-researcher too, such as having already built up relationships with a number of the young people prior to starting the research project so having already 'built rapport' and gained the status of 'insider' (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Silverman, 2005).

Data-collection methods

Due to the small sample size together with epistemological bias of the author and child-centred philosophy of The Yard, a qualitative, participative and reflexive ethnography within a psychosocial approach was adopted utilising a practice-near methodology with myself as practitioner-researcher (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Cartwright, 2001; Clarke, 2002; Walkadine, 2008; Hingley-Jones, 2009). A contemporary qualitative research perspective generally acknowledges the researchers' presence and influence in research, recognizing that 'people respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions' (Denscombe, 2003, p. 169). However, a reflexive approach additionally takes a wholly holistic understanding of the process, understanding further that it 'permeates every aspect of the research process'

and challenging us to become more aware of our own positions and interests (Hertz, 1977, p. viii).

Within the wide cross-disciplinary qualitative research positions in which I located myself, I employed an ethnographic, case-study design employing participant observation with detailed fieldnotes and a combination of semi-structured, ethnographic conversational and, latterly, more unstructured, open 'field' interviews (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Cartwright, 2001; Henn *et al.*, 2006). By employing these methods, I hoped to 'give voice' to the participants and become absorbed in the process in order to fulfil the aim that Moustakas (1990) refers to when he states that 'the humanistic researcher seeks to capture the co-researcher's experience' (p. 103).

Analysis procedure

Interviews were transcribed and, alongside the fieldnotes, were analysed using an open coding process to look for emerging themes and patterns (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This time-consuming process eventually resulted in numerous categories, which were organised into two main thematic blocks of social well-being and psychological processes. In line with a participative approach, the results were shared with a number of the participants in order to verify my interpretation of their experiences. Unfortunately, this was only possible with three of the young people due to the nature of the TH programme, which, due to political and financial reasons, lost its funding during the final year of the study, and, more often than not, because the young people moved foster placements with little prior notice.

Ethnographic insights

Within the 'protective factors' suggested as being important to resilience, the main themes to emerge were related to aspects of confidence-building and self-esteem, a sense of mastery or self-efficacy, empathy and the opening up of positive opportunities (Rutter, 1985; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Gilligan, 1999). These were grouped into four main categories termed with the participants' own words: 'queen of the world', 'I can't believe I am doing this', 'I can give him love' and 'I didn't know you could do that'.

Being with the horses seemed to provide different things to the young people, but a commonality was of the horses appearing to be the 'glue' that motivated them to want to return and build up relationships with the horses, which then seemed to lead to other benefits.

'Queen of the world': confidence and self-esteem

Many of the participants would appear unconfident and withdrawn when they first attended The Yard. Wayne initially refused to get into his carer's car and ran off on the first day. It later emerged that he was, in fact, scared of attending, telling us that he was previously 'petrified of horses'. Similarly, Minimax hid behind his foster carer when we first introduced him to the horses, but then, when she left, became overly confident, approaching the horses rather too quickly and with abrupt movements, which they

don't like. This resulted in one of the bigger horses, Jason, pinning his ears back and shaking his head at him, Minimax responding nervously, saying 'ooh, who's a grumpy boy then'. After that, Minimax and Jason avoided each other, Minimax choosing to work with the quieter mare, Ruby. However, one day after he had been attending The Yard for a few months and had grown in confidence and competence, Minimax asked to ride Jason. He started off by grooming him then led him up to the round pen (a round enclosed training arena) where he led him around a small obstacle course in order to get to know him better before attempting to ride. Weaving around a course of bollards, across poles set at angles and a shiny, potentially scary, tarpaulin to walk over, Minimax had to exercise concentration, judgement and leadership skills in order to gain Jason's trust and co-operation. Achieving this, and subsequently riding on Jason's back with no saddle, he practiced 'invisible riding'. Minimax finished the session clearly pleased with his success, exclaiming to his foster carer when she arrived to collect him, 'I've had two days of feeling really strong now!' By overcoming his fears, then experiencing success and achievement through participating in challenging activities with the horses, Minimax was perhaps able to experience some feelings of self-confidence and, in turn, higher self-esteem, which Rutter (1985) refers to as important for resilience.

A 'target' for Minimax attending TH was for him to be able to progress from one-to-one sessions to being able to participate in small group sessions. Both Minimax's foster carer, Angie, and his social worker told us he especially struggled with establishing and maintaining relationships with his peers. Angie told us that Minimax would get extremely upset with any reference to his mother or brothers, one of whom was being adopted at the time he attended TH, resulting in him getting into fights and being excluded from school on a regular basis. After he had been attending The Yard for a number of months, Minimax managed to communicate successfully to another young person on their first session how to look after the horses and take care of them, and appeared to be confident and proud in the knowledge and ability he had acquired.

The resilience literature refers to 'acts of helpfulness' or 'required helpfulness'. This is where helping others can lead to positive benefits for an individual. It is suggested that acts of helpfulness can lead to the individual learning that they can effect positive change and have something valuable to offer (Katz, 1997; Howard *et al.*, 1999; Schwartz & Sendor, 1999). Others claim that by having an area of responsibility that involves caring for something or someone (including an animal), growth in self-esteem and self-efficacy can be gained (Werner, 1993; Myers, 2007). Some of these 'required-helpfulness' benefits may be gained from the caring and responsibility involved in looking after horses, and these in turn transferred to other areas of social benefits to the individual, as could perhaps be seen with Minimax.

Another participant, Lucy, told me how being high up on the horse was an important element for her, as she felt empowered by being higher up than other people. She said:

She (the horse Duchess) kind of made me feel like, you know, I'm the queen of the world kind of thing because I was higher up.

(Lucy, participant)

Lucy went on to tell me how through learning how to work with horses she had been able to transfer these skills to other areas of her life. She explained that an

understanding of horse behaviour and how she needed to behave around horses resulted in her feeling more confident about her abilities. The following extract is from an interview with Lucy:

- Lucy: Um, when I'm angry, they make me feel a lot calmer because you have to be calm around them.
- Me: Hmm, yes.
- Lucy: Otherwise, they pick up on you.
- Me: Absolutely.
- Lucy: And then you won't get such an enjoyable ride. So if you go in with a cross mind and stamp around, then they're not exactly going to be very helpful to you, are they?
- Me: No.
- Lucy: If you, if you play the opposite of what you actually feel, with me I start feeling the opposite way.
- Me: Ah, I see, so if you start acting it, then you start feeling it.
- Lucy: Yes. It really helps with confidence and things.
- Me: Right. So if you sort of act confident...
- Lucy: I get confident.

'I can't believe I am doing this!': sense of mastery and self-efficacy

The risk and resilience literature talks about how developing successful coping strategies and successfully overcoming challenges can strengthen the ability to cope in the face of future difficulties (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Place *et al.*, 2002). The participants who were in the care system who were referred to The Yard largely had little control or involvement in decision making about their lives and futures, which together with their traumatic experiences had resulted in many of them having been referred as possessing very little self-esteem and certainly, it would seem, low self-efficacy. It would appear that Lucy had gained a sense of self-efficacy from learning how to control her behaviour and actions around the horses, which she could then apply to other areas of her life that she found challenging.

Some authors argue that engaging in activities that carry an element of risk is necessary in order to grow and develop self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Rosenthal, 1975; Voight, 1988; Ball *et al.*, 2008). Overcoming a fear or lack of confidence in order to participate in an activity with Hector in the round pen resulted in Freya appearing to experience a sense of mastery. This was demonstrated by a huge change in her whole body language, attitude and way of communicating as recorded in the following extract from fieldnotes:

As she has only attended TH a few times, we try and engage Freya in conversation about what sort of things she would like to do with the horses, but her response seems unsure and hesitant, and she shrugs her shoulders saying 'Don't know really'. While we are standing by the shed talking, Hector walks purposely over to us and heads straight to Freya, standing close to her and placing his muzzle in Freya's hands. I comment that Deborah and I had been at the yard all morning,

sitting at the bench having a meeting and Hector hadn't come over once. Freya seems pleased with this and we see a small smile. We suggest that as Hector seems to want to be with her that she may like taking him up to the round pen to do some leading and perhaps a short ride. Again, Freya is non-committal and shrugs her shoulders, saying 'Well maybe later . . . I'm not sure'. Once we have finished grooming the horses, we ask Freya if she would like to lead Hector up the track to the round pen, but she replies, 'I don't think I will lead him up; I will let her [Deborah] do it'.

Up at the arena, Freya is initially hesitant to try anything and refuses to go into the round pen. However, she is happy to watch whilst I give a short 'join-up' demonstration (where the horse follows of their own free will with no lead rope). In order to achieve this, it is necessary for the trainer to demonstrate to the horse some understanding of body language and that they are trustworthy and safe. Finally, after watching intently, Freya agrees to join me in the round pen, although refusing to lead Hector without me walking beside her initially. Eventually she plucks up the courage to lead him alone, and I hand her the lead rope. Hector is just as forgiving and generous with Freya in the round pen as he was in the yard, following her closely first with a loose rein and then without the lead rein, around the cones and over the poles, joined to Freya like glue. At the tarpaulin, Hector is playful, pawing at the blue plastic sheet with his hooves, which makes her laugh. Then rain starts to come down again and everyone is getting cold, so I suggest Freya practice seeing if Hector will follow her in trot to warm them both up. Freya's expression becomes momentarily unconfident again, and she hesitates, saying 'I'm not sure . . .', so I quickly suggest that Deborah and I accompany her. Freya visibly relaxes and I suggest that if she starts to run Hugo might follow her, which he does beautifully. A grin spreads over her face and she exclaims 'I can't believe I am doing this!' Freya is happy to lead Hector back down the track this time and seems more confident with him now. When he goes to try and put his head down to eat grass, she manages to read his body language and prevent him from eating, which is a big achievement with a large, strong horse such as Hector. Later, back at the yard when the residential staff member arrives to collect her, Freya animatedly tells him about the experience and of how Hector 'followed me like my shadow'.

(Fieldnotes, April 2008)

From this example with Freya, it was clear that her whole attitude and body language changed remarkably from the beginning of the session when she arrived, withdrawn, unconfident and uncommunicative, to after she had succeeded in a slightly challenging and engaging task with the horse Hector. It appeared that the connection with Hector initially facilitated a change in Freya's mood, and this led to her wanting to start to participate in the session. Once she had felt the sense of achievement from overcoming her initial fear and experienced the connection of Hector following her of his own accord, this seemed to give Freya a boost of confidence, which then enabled her to start to believe in her own self-efficacy, witnessed when she was able to control Hector's behaviour on the way back down to the yard. This new sense of achievement extended into Freya being more animated and initiating conversation about her experiences to

the staff member who came to collect her. Participating in 'positive experiences' and mastery over challenging experiences is consistently referred to as important in terms of providing protective factors for at-risk young people (Rutter, 1985; Masten *et al.*, 1990; Rutter, 1999; Ungar *et al.*, 2005; Morgan, 2010).

'I feel that I can give him love': development of empathy through horses

All of the young people developed relationships with the horses on some level. For some of them there were immediate connections, whilst with others they were slower to develop. For many of the young people, it appeared to be a way in which they could express affection and nurturing. Other participants spoke of the horses as confidants, of how the horses understood them and of how they could trust them, with Emma explaining that 'you can tell them your secrets'. The theme of being able to express affection and nurturing had an unexpected gender element, as it was especially noticeable with some of the teenage boys, with their carers often expressing surprise at their openness in displaying affection for the horses. Both Minimax and Wayne would frequently spend time hugging and stroking the mare Ruby and talking to her quietly and in soft tones. They would often disengage from what we were doing in a session and almost go into a trance, lost in their own world with the horse. By developing these connections and attachments to the horses, it appeared that this enabled the young people to empathise with them on some level. In addition, some of the participants also empathised with new horses that were experiencing some stress and anxiety for various reasons. It is argued that the 'normal development of empathy has been proposed to be imperative to the healthy emotional and social functioning of youths' (Thompson & Gullone, 2008, p. 124). Other authors claim that there is a clear link between child neglect and a lack of empathy (DePaul & Guibert, 2008), with it being suggested that interactions with animals may be useful in developing empathy (Poresky, 1990; Vidovic *et al.*, 1999).

An example of how some of the young people expressed their empathy for the horses is provided by Cinderella. During one session with Cinderella, a young three-year-old filly had just arrived at The Yard and was displaying some anxiety about being in a new environment. When I asked Cinderella how she felt Sherry was feeling and the best way to respond to her anxiety, she replied, 'Well, she's probably scared and missing her mum' and that it was important to be 'calm and kind to her'.

The relationship that Cinderella developed with the pony Louis also appeared to contain some elements of empathy. From her very first session, Cinderella was immediately attracted to Louis and was very concerned about his health, wanting to spend much of her time in sessions grooming and caring for him. Louis was the oldest pony in the herd and sometimes suffered from a painful health condition called laminitis. For Cinderella, the relationship that she built up with Louis seemed to be based on her wanting to give him love and attention. In a questionnaire about their experiences of TH that some of the participants completed for the research, Cinderella wrote this about Louis:

I love Louis the best because he's an old boy who needs loads of TLC. He loves being groomed and cuddled, feeding and general attention and stuff, and I feel I can give him love. Today when we measured the hard feeds out into the buckets for the horses, I gave him a bit extra coz he's special!

(Cinderella, questionnaire)

More than a year later, after Cinderella had moved foster placements and no longer attended The Yard, she found my work mobile telephone number and I received a text from her asking how Louis was doing:

Hey [author], it's [Cinderella] here, the one who's favourite horse is [Louis]. How's he doing? Hope he's OK.

(Cinderella, text message)

This would suggest that Cinderella had built up some form of bond with Louis, which enabled her to feel some empathy towards him, demonstrated by wanting to know how he was and wondering about his well-being.

The theme of feeling that the horses needed them and of being able to provide nurture to them in some way was mirrored by another participant, Lucy, who switched her affections from the more secure mare, Ruby, to a new pony to join The Yard. Timmy was a rather anxious pony who got very agitated in new situations and was especially terrified of donkeys! One day out hacking in the lanes on Timmy and Ruby, we came across a field containing two donkeys, which caused Timmy to display great fear, trying to run away and prancing and snorting himself into a sweat. However, Lucy was able to remain calm and composed, and helped Timmy overcome his fear and pass the donkeys, telling him, "It's OK Timmy, they won't hurt you". Later, when I asked her about her feelings towards the two horses following this incident, Lucy replied:

I think I've got more of a connection with Timmy now really, it's like I know him better now and he sort of needs you more. It's like Ruby doesn't really need you, she's more sort of solid and sure of herself, like she doesn't really need anyone.

(Lucy, participant)

By Lucy perceiving Timmy as needing her, this seemed to enable her to empathise with his fear of donkeys. In turn, she was then able to help him overcome his anxiety through kind treatment, as opposed to being frustrated and angry at his behaviour. The participant Minimax also showed his empathy for the mare Ruby when she became upset and anxious about being separated from her 'pair bond' in the herd, Louis. Ruby and Louis had lived together prior to coming to live at The Yard and were extremely attached, with it taking a lot of time and patient handling to get them over their fear of separation. Witnessing her distressed behaviour during one early session, Minimax expressed his understanding of her anxiety, telling her, 'Don't worry he's only over there, you'll be back with him soon'. We wondered if one of the reasons Minimax was especially drawn to Ruby and able to empathise with her was due to his own circumstances of being separated from his younger brother who was being adopted. This area, of the young people strongly identifying with certain horses and appearing to explore issues important to them through the horses, was another major theme to emerge from the research and is explored in the larger PhD, but unfortunately, it is out of the scope of this paper to explore this area in any more depth.

It may be that, for young people who have been unable to develop empathy due to dysfunctional attachment patterns and empathy not having been demonstrated to

them by their adult caregivers (DePaul & Guibert, 2008), by building a relationship with an animal, the beginnings of the development of empathy may be facilitated. Whilst research looking at the development of empathy in these groups is limited, other authors suggest that animals can help children in general develop empathy, 'interactivity' and 'moral development' (Melson, 2001; Myers, 2007).

'I didn't know you could do that': opening of positive opportunities

An important aim of EAL/T and TH is for participants to become involved in a new activity, which may lead to the opening of positive opportunities in the future. 'Opening up opportunities' and 'positive experiences' are argued to be important in terms of providing protective factors (Rutter, 1985, 1999). Additionally, participating in a leisure, sporting or such like activity may provide a 'normalizing' experience (Bizub *et al.*, 2003) and offer the opportunity for 'marginalised young people, such as those in care, to join, or re-join the mainstream' (Gilligan, 1999, p. 187). Linda, the adoptive mother of the participant Emma, explained that one of her reasons for encouraging Emma's love of horses was in the hope that it would help enable her to gain better skills in social situations and acceptance by her peer group.

By gaining confidence in their abilities with the horses at The Yard, some participants were enabled to take this new-found confidence to other areas of their lives. Wayne told us how overcoming his fears with the horses at The Yard had enabled him to participate in a group outing, which he had not had the confidence to do previously:

Wayne proudly tells us that he went riding at another stable with the PRU and had a canter. He is clearly really pleased and proud about having achieved this. I ask him if he had gone out riding with the school before but he says he always chose other things, or refused to do anything, as he didn't have the confidence to go riding previously.

(Fieldnotes, May 2008)

Another aspect of the 'opening up of positive opportunities' is that of having horizons opened by having learned and mastered new skills. Kelly showed interest in Donna (horse practitioner) telling her about the 'working pupil' scheme she had completed upon leaving school in order to gain more experience and qualifications in horse care and teaching. This was something Kelly had not been aware of being available previously, saying, 'I didn't know you could do that'.

By gaining confidence and learning a new skill, horizons may be opened where previously they were limited. A further example of this was provided by Wayne when, more than a year after he had finished coming to TH sessions, we were informed by his social worker that he had applied for and got into a local agricultural college to undertake an entry-level qualification in equine studies. If it were taken that educational achievement is a good thing, this would certainly seem to be a remarkable achievement for a young person in care such as Wayne, who had previously possessed limited academic ability and even less educational motivation, against statistics showing that only 5% of care leavers enter higher education (Jackson & McParlin, 2006).

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that the relationships and experiences the participants had with the horses contributed to them gaining psychosocial benefits such as those identified in the risk and resilience literature as offering 'protective factors'. A number of authors identify these as including an ability to reflect, social competence, empathy, sense of purpose and future, and mastery, autonomy and self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem (Rutter, 1985; Masten *et al.*, 1990; Born *et al.*, 1997; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Rutter, 1999; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Thompson & Gullone, 2008).

It is suggested in this paper that many of the young people appeared to grow in confidence and ability around the horses during the length of their attendance in TH — confidence being suggested as a key factor in the resilience literature. Confidence and self-esteem are important in terms of resilience for their own obvious benefits to mental health and also related to the other theme of sense of mastery and self-efficacy. By the participants learning that they could monitor and change their own behaviour through modelling confident leadership to the horses in order to gain their trust and co-operation, the young people were able to experience a feeling of mastery and of being able to influence something. Understanding that it is possible to effectively cope with, and overcome, challenges through your own personal effort is known as self-efficacy and considered vital in terms of being enabled to have a sense of a positive future (Bandura, 1982). This is something that is often missing for young people in care who have limited control over their lives, as demonstrated by the fact that many of the young people in this study moved placements with little notice.

The development of empathy towards the horses was another theme considered to be important. Lexman and Reeves (2009) describe empathy as '... an ability to put yourself in another person's shoes — and to act in a way that is sensitive to other people's perspectives' (p. 17). Empathy is one of the characteristics vitally important in determining success in later life, due to its importance in relation to forming successful working and personal relationships (Goleman, 1996; Lexman & Reeves, 2009). Some of the AAT literature talks of how children are perhaps able to display and feel attachments and, in turn, empathy for animals where they may not have been able to towards humans due to difficulties in relationships in childhood (Melson, 2001; Poresky, 1990).

Finally, by participating in TH, young people may gain some of the benefits argued to be obtained by the opening of 'positive opportunities' (Rutter, 1985; Werner, 1993). These benefits can include the opening up of new social relationships, to offer 'normalizing' and 'mainstream' experiences, and gaining skills and self-confidence that can lead to the opening up of new possibilities and horizons, which may be especially limited for young people in foster care (Gilligan, 1999).

In addition to the themes identified and discussed in this paper, other themes including those related to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1984) and the therapeutic alliance (Yorke *et al.*, 2008; Chardonnens, 2009) were amongst those most prominent and are explored in the larger PhD. However, unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into these in any more depth.

Clinical relevance and limitations

Horses do not suit everyone. Some young people may have health conditions that render TH unsuitable. Some may just not like horses. Even when it may be deemed a viable option, there is clearly a large obstacle to the provision and availability of TH due to its not inconsiderable cost. The upkeep of horses, premises and public liability insurance, together with the staffing costs of two practitioners, make it an expensive option (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001). However, if all the many different aspects of TH are taken into account, such as the suggested benefits gained from being in the natural environment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Louv, 2008), from contact with animals (Beck & Katcher, 1996; C. Wilson & Turner, 1998), the physical and mental health benefits of exercise (Halliwell, 2005) and challenging and risk-taking elements (Rosenthal, 1975; Voight, 1988), then it may seem a more economical intervention. Despite the limited literature, there is a long tradition of involving young people in outdoor activities within social work with the aim of bringing about positive change, and TH is an intervention that draws on many similar principles (Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Voight, 1998; Ungar *et al.*, 2005).

The present study was a small case study of a single TH centre with only seven participants. So generalisations can obviously not be claimed from its findings, and certainly that was not an intention; rather, this was an attempt to convey some of the experiences and 'voices' of the participants within 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1993). Ultimately, my positioning as practitioner-researcher and my own personal biases, understandings and background affected the research process. It was hoped that the young people would be more fully participative in the study. However, this was unfortunately not the case due to their particular circumstances, and so the extent in which their views influenced the data analysis was limited. Despite these limitations, the participants' words would seem to indicate clearly that they experienced benefits from interacting with horses and participating in TH, which were helpful to them in some way as individuals. Further research is needed in order to widen the knowledge base of all the perceived psychosocial benefits of TH and the other allied interventions of EAL/T and EAP.

General Note

Names of all participants and horses have been changed to protect anonymity.

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