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CLIENT EXPERIENCES OF EQUINE-ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY:
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

BY

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A Minor Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

in the

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

at the

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

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JULY 2013
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following persons who played a significant role in the completion of this dissertation:

To my partner Shaun, a special thank you for your continued love, motivation and understanding. Your words of encouragement and many acts of support have kept me going through the difficult times. I could not have achieved this without you.

To my parents, thank you for your support and motivation throughout my many years of study. Thank you for supporting me financially and emotionally and for always believing in me; your presence in my life has been invaluable.

To my supervisor Elsabe Jordaan, thank you for mentorship throughout my professional development. I have learnt a great deal from you, above and beyond this dissertation. Thank you for your support and guidance through the writing process and openness to the field of EAP.

To each of the participants, thank you for sharing your personal experience and allowing me the privilege to enter your world. Your experiences enriched this dissertation and provided a wealth of information for future EAP development. Psychotherapy is a personal process and I am honoured to have shared in these experiences with you.

To the members of EAPISA, thank you for assisting me in sourcing participants and providing me with a wealth of knowledge and opportunities in the field of EAP. I look forward to our continued work together.
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ABSTRACT

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential approach that involves the horse or equine in the psychotherapeutic process. EAP is a recently emerging approach in the field of psychology; consequently, research focusing on EAP is relatively limited. As an experiential approach, EAP focuses on the experience of the client in the therapeutic session. However, very little research has been conducted which focuses solely on the client experiences of EAP. This qualitative, phenomenological study aims to explore the experience of EAP from the perspective of the client. Descriptions of such experiences were sourced from interviews conducted with three participants who had experienced EAP. Utilising an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology, transcripts were analysed and themes were identified. Although similarities were found across the participants’ descriptions, the uniqueness of each individual's experience was acknowledged. Six central themes emerged from the experiences of the participants. These were the experience of intense emotion, the horse as central to the overall experience of EAP, the role of the horse, personal growth, the experience of uncertainty and a need for something more. The themes of uncertainty and a need for something more have not previously been reported in EAP literature. Through giving expression to the client experiences of EAP, significant themes were identified. These themes can be viewed as a point of departure from which future EAP studies may develop for further exploration of this emerging approach.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy is an experiential approach that involves the horse or equine in the therapeutic process (McConnell, 2010). EAP is currently practised internationally as an effective treatment strategy for a range of mental health concerns (Frewin & Gardner, 2005). EAP is a developing psychotherapeutic modality in South Africa, with its use spreading dramatically in the last few years (EAPISA, 2012).

EAP is a method of psychotherapeutic intervention and thus falls within the field of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is a broad term that includes diverse models of understanding human behaviour and a range of therapeutic orientations and interventions (Corey, 2013). In general, psychotherapy is conducted for the purpose of assisting people in changing identified aspects of their emotional, mental, behavioural or personal characteristics in a manner that is agreed upon between both client and therapist (Norcross, 1990 as cited in Prochaska & Norcross, 2009).

Psychotherapy is conducted within a relationship between two people, the client and the therapist (Corey, 2013; Norcross, 1990 as cited in Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). For this reason, research focusing on the practice and experience of psychotherapy should consider the perspective of both client and therapist (Duncan & Miller, 2000). Historically, however, research on psychotherapy has focused primarily on the perspective of the therapist rather than both the client and the therapist (Macran, Ross, Hardy, & Shapiro, 1999).

The focus of psychotherapy research on the therapist perspective has left the area of client experience relatively underemphasised (Macran et al., 1999). Elliott and James (1989) recognise that the examination of client experiences is central to the advancement of
Theoretical understanding in psychotherapy. As such, it becomes vital for them to be highlighted (Peterson, 2010). Client experiences should not be omitted from the research on the psychotherapy process, as these experiences are reported to be the best predictor of success in treatment (Norcross, 2010). This presents a gap in psychotherapy research literature and an area that requires further exploration.

EAP is a unique approach to psychotherapy as it specifically utilises the equine and the equine role as herd animals to facilitate therapeutic processes in the here and now. Kersten (1997) defines EAP specifically by stating:

Horses are used as a tool for emotional growth and learning… it is an experiential approach… where the client learns about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses and then processing the feelings, behaviours and patterns (p. 138).

According to Masini (2010), “EAP is not so much a theoretical orientation as it is an approach that can be used in conjunction with a variety of psychotherapeutic orientations and with diverse client populations” (p. 30).

EAP does not involve actual horse riding and prefers that clients work with the horse on the ground. EAP is exclusively used for psychotherapeutic aims and may only be conducted by a registered mental health practitioner (Cepeda, 2011). Thus it is differentiated from other forms of therapeutic intervention such as Hippotherapy, Therapeutic Riding or Vaulting (Frewin & Gardner, 2005).

Peterson (2010) maintained that clients are the most important aspect of EAP. However, research focusing specifically on the client experience of EAP is substantially limited (Peterson, 2010). Only a handful of studies have been conducted on this topic internationally, and none in South Africa specifically. This limitation in the field of EAP creates a need for further investigation and exploration.
The aim of this study is to explore the experience of EAP from the perspective of the client. Qualitative research enables an understanding of the “lived experience”, as it assists the researcher in exploring the interpersonal experiences of the clients (Norcross, 2010). As the current study attempted to explore the client’s experience of EAP, it was proposed that the client’s perspective be studied through qualitative methods. This goal of the exploration called for detailed information from an individual perspective. Since Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis uses specific, detailed and individual cases in order to gain an insider’s perspective (Smith, 2004; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), it was the chosen research method for this study.

The participants in the study consisted of three women, who had been or were currently in EAP. Data was gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews in order to provide flexibility and to allow the participants to direct the flow of the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

This was the first EAP study to be conducted on client experiences in the South African context. Furthermore, as EAP is a relatively novel field, this study may provide relevant insights which could be utilised for future EAP research development. This research could be of benefit to mental health professionals, horse specialists and clients. A better understanding of the client’s experiences could facilitate appropriative interventions and guide the therapist’s conceptualisations and work within the therapeutic space.

1.2 Overview of chapters

Following the introductory chapter, a review of literature in regards to the client’s experience of EAP is conducted. Included in the review is a broad description of psychotherapy in order to give context to the realm in which EAP is utilised. Thereafter a discussion of previous
literature of the clients experience in psychotherapy is explored. An overview of literature on AAT and EAP is presented which will provide a closer perspective on the definition and utilisation of these approaches to psychotherapy in practice. A brief orientation to the therapeutic paradigms most frequently utilised in conjunction with EAP is described. The final section of the literature review focuses on previous studies of the client’s experience in EAP.

In Chapter three a discussion of the research methodology is offered. Following from a qualitative design, the phenomenological approach and more specifically an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis research method pertaining to the study’s aims is explained.

Chapter four consists of the intra-individual analysis of each of the three participants. Supporting excerpts from the relevant participant’s interviews are provided. This will be followed by the inter-individual analysis wherein the commonalities and differences between the descriptions of the participant’s experiences are discussed.

Chapter five entails the description of the central themes that emerged from the inter-individual analysis with links to exiting literature that was presented in chapter two.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter for this study and provides a summary of the study. An overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the study, along with recommendations for the application of the study’s findings’ in clinical practice and in future research are discussed.

1.3 Conclusion

The following chapter will explore and review the literature on previous research which is relevant to this study, where the focus is on the client experiences and EAP.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this study is to explore the experiences of clients in EAP. This chapter serves to contextualise the aim of the study by discussing four central aspects of relevant psychological research. The first aspect defines the practice of psychotherapy and discusses previous research on client experiences in psychotherapy, generally. Following this, a detailed description of EAP as an approach within the field of Animal-Assisted Therapy is presented. As EAP is utilised in conjunction with various therapeutic approaches, the most common therapeutic orientations utilised with EAP, as found in previous EAP research, are detailed. Finally, research on client experiences of EAP specifically is outlined and examined.

2.2 Client experience of psychotherapy

2.2.1 Defining psychotherapy

The word ‘psychotherapy’ appeared in the English-, French- and German-speaking areas of the world around the end of the 19th century (Shamdasani, 2005). However, in over a hundred years no universal definition of the term has been formulated (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). Current definitions of psychotherapy differ, depending on theoretical orientation. This creates disagreement on a single universal definition of psychotherapy (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). However, broad definitions of the general practice of psychotherapy have been attempted. These definitions are not linked to one specific theory. Norcross (1990 as cited in Prochaska & Norcross, 2009) broadly defined psychotherapy as:

The informed and intentional application of clinical methods and interpersonal stances derived from established psychology principles for the purpose of assisting
people to modify their behaviours, cognitions, emotions and/or other personal characteristics in directions that the participants deem desirable (p. 218).

In discussion of his definition, he highlighted that psychotherapy should be conducted for the purpose of assisting people toward mutually agreed upon goals. These goals are agreed upon from the perspective of both client and therapist (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009).

Additionally, Corey (2013) defined psychotherapy as, “the process of engagement between two people, both of whom are bound to change through the therapeutic venture. At its best, this is a collaborative process that involves both the therapist and the client in co-constructing solutions to concerns” (p. 7).

Both definitions of psychotherapy describe a working alliance between the client and the therapist in order to achieve agreed upon change. This appears to be a common factor in psychotherapy. This core factor as well as other previously identified core factors in psychotherapy is discussed in the following section:

2.2.1.1 Core factors across psychotherapeutic orientations

The broad practice of psychotherapy consists of a variety of theoretical orientations. These theories describe different views of human development, personality, and the therapeutic process (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). However, despite the diversity in theoretical approaches, and the difficulty in formulating a universally accepted definition of psychotherapy, core psychotherapeutic commonalities have been identified by psychotherapists, clients and researchers. These core factors seek to distinguish the general practice of psychotherapy from other human sciences (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). Such commonalities were identified as early as 1936 by psychiatrist Saul Rosenzweig. He proposed that there were ‘unrecognised factors’ apparent in all psychotherapeutic settings (Rosenzweig, 1936). Since the proposal of these factors by Rosenzweig, significant research on the common factors of psychotherapy has been conducted (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990). This common-factor approach seeks to determine the core factors shared
by diverse theoretical orientations within psychotherapy, with the eventual goal of producing generally effective treatment (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990).

As a result of the surge of research on psychotherapeutic commonalities, a range of core factors became apparent. In an attempt to clarify specific core factors, Grencavage and Norcross (1990) conducted a study which focused on the commonalities among therapeutic core factors. These authors identified five categories that cut across nearly all aspects of psychological treatment. These categories included the therapeutic alliance, the acquisitions of new behaviours for the clients, the client’s positive expectations, the therapist’s qualities, and a rationale for change. However, these common elements continue to be highly debated. One element which has received the greatest convergence among psychotherapists is the development of a strong therapeutic alliance or relationship (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009).

Norcross (2010) described the therapeutic relationship as the core component across all therapeutic orientations. He identified it as the primary mechanism of change, as recognised by clients in psychotherapy generally, and described it as a crucial determinant to treatment outcomes. This relationship is formed between therapist and client and is developed over time. It includes elements of trust and consistency, which are essential in facilitating experiences of safety and containment (Norcross, 2010).

As the development of a therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client has been identified as a central factor common to all psychotherapies, it is imperative that the experience of both the therapist and the client be emphasised in psychotherapy research (Duncan & Miller, 2000). However, research which attempts to describe the experiences of the client in psychotherapy has been relatively underemphasised when compared to research that describes the experiences of therapists. This aspect is now discussed in further detail.
2.2.2.1 Existing research on the experience of the client in psychotherapy

Since psychotherapy is described as a collaborative process between client and therapist, it is important that the experience of both participants be considered in psychotherapy research (Duncan & Miller, 2000). Butler and Strupp (1986) maintain that psychotherapy is an interpersonal process, with the views of both the client and the therapist being acknowledged as important to the therapeutic relationship. If the therapist does not acknowledge what the client is bringing to the therapeutic alliance, the interpersonal process will be mismatched, leading to actions and meanings that do not correspond (Butler & Strupp, 1986).

Elliott and James (1989) proposed that the acknowledgment of the client’s perspective in psychotherapy research was necessary for the development of theoretical understanding. They maintained that the advancement of theoretical knowledge could be gained through the exploration of therapists’ interventions as experienced and expressed by the client (Elliott & James, 1989). These authors have emphasised that this exploration may contribute to predicting outcomes and thus aid in the efficacy of psychotherapy (Elliott & James, 1989).

More recent studies in client experience have indicated that the client is the single most powerful contributor to the outcome of psychotherapy (Duncan & Miller, 2000). Miller, Duncan and Hubble (1997) found that psychological model and psychotherapeutic technique accounted for only 15% of psychotherapeutic outcome variance. If the aim in psychotherapy research is to improve the effectiveness of therapy then the client, as the most powerful contributor to the therapeutic process, needs to be heard more clearly (Macran et al., 1999).

Nonetheless, research which attempts to describe the experience of the client in psychotherapy has been relatively under-emphasised when compared to research that describes the experience of the therapist (Duncan & Miller, 2000). Early research on the process and outcome of psychotherapy focused primarily on the point of view of the therapist (Paulson, Truscott, & Stuart, 1999). The focus on the therapists’ experiences in
past psychotherapy research may be attributed to the popularity of psychotherapy models such as Psychodynamics, Behaviourism and the Medical Model (Macran et al., 1999). These paradigms typically viewed the therapist as more active, while the client was perceived as more passive and relatively lacking in awareness. From these perspectives, the therapist's interventions were the primary variables for facilitating change (Macran et al., 1999).

However, as research on the efficacy of psychotherapy developed, the importance of the client's experience in psychotherapy enjoyed greater emphasis. The first quantitative study conducted on client experiences of therapy was piloted by Lipkin (1978). He interviewed thirty seven clients in order to explore their experiences of non-directive psychotherapy. Over the past twenty years, research on client experiences has continued to expand, with the emphasis on more qualitative research methods (Elliott, 2008).

Research by Elliott and James (1989) analysed client experiences of psychotherapy from the perspective of the client, therapist and/or observer. Their study concluded that clients have more agency and awareness than previous studies had acknowledged (Elliott & James, 1989). Paulson, Truscott and Stuart, (1999) interviewed thirty-six clients in order to gain an understanding of what the clients had found personally helpful in psychotherapy. These authors identified four categories in this regard: client resolution, gaining knowledge about the self, emotional expression and emotional relief, and accessibility of the therapist.

Elliott (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of six studies that focused on research of client experiences in therapy. This study described three questions that were answered as a result of studying client experiences. These questions focused on what clients found helpful or harmful in therapy; how the client viewed change; and how clients dealt with difficulties in the therapeutic process. Clients reported finding the therapeutic relationship, the therapists' use of empathy and the therapists’ specific techniques as helpful, while they found therapist judgements hindering. Clients further reported major improvements in their presenting of
problems as well as an increase in self-acceptance. Lastly the client’s role as an active agent of change in the therapeutic process was highlighted.

As client experience is important for psychotherapy outcomes, it is imperative that the client perspective continues to be highlighted. In order to continue emphasising the experience of the client in psychotherapy, Elliott and James (1989) recommend that further qualitative, exploratory psychotherapy research be conducted from the perspective of the client.

This study aims to explore the experience of the client, from a qualitative perspective, within the psychotherapeutic approach of EAP. EAP is discussed in the following section.

2.3 The EAP approach

EAP is a sub-discipline of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). For this reason the field of AAT was examined in order to establish a context for the practice of EAP.

2.3.1 Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)

2.3.1.1 The history of AAT

The utilisation of animals in therapy has increased over the last 40 years. However, descriptions of the involvement of animals in health care dates back as far as the 1700s, where doctors utilised animals such as birds and dogs to improve the physical and psychological wellbeing of patients (McConnell, 2010). Boris Levinson is considered to be one of the first therapists to study the possible psychological impact of animals on people (Mallon, 1994). Levinson began to explore the psychological benefit of animals after coincidently observing an uncommunicative child client express his emotions to Levinson’s pet dog, Jingles. From this experience Levinson realised that animals could be utilised as an integral part of therapy and started documenting his therapeutic work with animals (Levinson, 1969).
After the publication of Levinson’s work, therapeutic work with animals continued to grow across America (Cepeda, 2011). Over the last two decades the general topic of AAT has been relatively well researched (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). In 1977, the Delta Society was established to monitor and promote the work with animals in improving the physical, emotional and psychological aspects of individuals. In 2012 the Delta Society changed its name to Pet Partners (Pet Partners, 2012). Pet Partners defines the term AAT as:

A goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession. AAT is designed to promote the improvement in human physical, social, emotional and or cognitive functioning (Pet Partners, 2012).

In AAT, animals are incorporated into a variety of treatment programmes. The manner in which the animals are utilised depends on the goal of treatment. Treatment goals may include: physical wellbeing such as improving fine motor skills, improving balance or improving wheelchair skills, mental health such as increasing self-esteem, reducing anxiety or depression, educational such as improving memory or learning concepts, or motivational such as improving interaction with people (Pet Partners, 2012).

A discussion of the utilisation of animals specifically in psychotherapy follows.

2.3.1.2 Rationale for the use of animals in psychotherapy

Fine (2000) described several possible reasons for viewing animals as potentially beneficial in a psychotherapeutic context. He believed that the presence of an animal assists in the facilitation of trust and rapport in the therapeutic relationship (Fine, 2000). This facilitation of trust is thought to be especially helpful to children (Cepeda, 2011). Fine (2000) maintained that the presence of an appropriate animal in the therapy session created a containing
environment which provided the client with a sense of security. As the client became more comfortable with communicating and being with the animal in the session, he/she could transfer this sense of comfort to being with the therapist (Cepeda, 2011).

Animals may also provide a catalyst for emotional expression (Hart, 2000). Fine (2000) alleged that animals are able to provide a sense of unconditional acceptance to the client, which may assist the client in expressing experiences or feelings that are difficult (Fine, 2000). Fine (2000) further maintained that a client’s emotional response could be modified through an animal’s reactive behavioural response. By means of temporarily distancing themselves or pulling away from the person, the animal could serve as a possible indicator of how other people may perceive or react to the person in general interactions (Fine, 2000).

Furthermore, Cepeda (2011) hypothesised that clients may project their feelings on to the animal. The therapist is then able to utilise these projections to further explore the client’s behaviours and the animal’s reactions to these behaviours. This exploration could potentially be linked to other areas of the client’s life.

### 2.3.1.3 Efficacy of AAT

Various authors have described the psychological benefits of working with human-animal interactions in psychotherapy (Burch, 1995; Fine, 2000; Hayden, 2005). In a meta-analysis of AAT programmes conducted by Nimer and Lundah (2007), it was found that AAT has been practised in a variety of settings such as in psychiatric wards, hospitals, schools, nursing homes, acute care units, critical care units, prisons, and rehabilitation facilities. The meta-analysis found that AAT was described as beneficial to several population groups including the elderly, children, people with disabilities, young offenders, and adults of both genders (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007).

AAT has been successfully utilised with people suffering from a number of psychiatric disorders including dissociative disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, substance abuse, behavioural disorders, sexual abuse, schizophrenia and mood disorders (Barak, Savorai,
Mavashev, & Beni, 2001; Barker & Dawson, 1998; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Overall, results of studies conducted with AAT have assisted in legitimising AAT as an effective therapy (McConnell, 2010; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007).

2.3.2 Horses and therapy

Equine therapy falls under the category of AAT (McConnell, 2010). Equine therapy involves horses and other equines such as donkeys, ponies and miniature horses in the therapy process (EAPISA, 2012). A history of the utilisation of equines in various modes of therapy is examined in the following section.

2.3.2.1 History of Equine Therapy

Equine-Assisted Therapy is a broad term that covers all activities which utilise horses for either physical therapy or psychotherapeutic purposes. The history of equine therapy includes the utilisation of the horse for a variety of therapeutic activities, above and beyond psychotherapy. The psychotherapeutic use of horse riding was first documented in the 1800s when German physicians utilised horses as a treatment for hypochondria and hysteria (Riede, 1988). These physicians found horses to be useful aids in facilitating relief from emotional suffering. However, forerunners of EAP primarily focused on the use of horses for physical therapy, such as for people with spinal injuries, brain injuries and/or disorders such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).

In 1969, The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NAHRA) was founded to standardise and provide accreditation for therapeutic riding for clients with physical impairments. The utilisation of horses for mental health interventions was only officially classified in 1996 when NAHARA formalised a special section for mental health, specifically called the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). This division was dedicated exclusively to the utilisation of equines in psychotherapy (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).
Following the establishment of EFMHA, The Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) was founded in 1999. This organisation focuses entirely on improving mental health through the utilisation of equines in psychotherapy. EAGALA advocates interventions with clients working with horses on the ground, and does not endorse work that includes horse riding. This differentiates the organisation from those who include other forms of equine therapy and advocate horseback riding (mounted work) as part of their programmes (Hallberg, 2008). The Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Institute of South Africa (EAPISA) was founded in 2007 after the demand for EAP in South Africa increased (EAPISA, 2012). EAPISA describes their organisation as:

A professional body that strives to maintain the strictest ethical and legal standards as required by the constitution of the Health Professions Council of South Africa. This is achieved by support and training on an ongoing basis to both the horse specialists and the registered psychologists in their respective fields of expertise. This ensures that these professionals are adequately trained to promote an effective and professional service to all clients. This training is professionally regulated by the constitution of EAPISA (EAPISA, 2012).

EAPISA is an established committee with regional branches in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Bloemfontein. EAPISA members are required to be either a registered mental health practitioner or a trained horse specialist (EAPISA, 2012).

2.3.2.2 Different forms of equine therapeutic activities

As previously stated, equine-assisted therapy is a broad term that covers all activities which utilise equines, either for physical or psychological purposes. There are four main categories in equine-assisted therapy: hippotherapy, therapeutic riding, therapeutic vaulting and EAP. The common thread running through all four categories is the utilisation of the horse as a catalyst or instrument in the therapeutic process (McConnell, 2010). Broadly, these categories include a mixture of mounted, groundwork or mixed technique (EAPISA, 2012).
Groundwork activities include tasks such as grooming (which includes brushing, washing, feeding or other care activities), lunging (the horse is connected to the client by a nylon rope or line and the client’s goal is to make the horse walk or trot in a circle) or putting a halter on the horse’s head (Peterson, 2012; Whitely, 2009).

Hippotherapy is defined as the remedial utilisation of horses for patients with special needs such as physical or occupational therapy (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005). This type of equine therapy refers to the utilisation of the movement of the horse to provide motor and sensory input for the patient. The patient sits on the horse’s back, with the assistance of the therapist who is on the ground. As the horse walks, the movement leads to a response in the patient which is similar to the movement patterns of human walking. Through the utilisation of horse’s gait, the therapist is able to grade the degree of input for the patient. Thus, it is considered beneficial as a physical therapy. This type of therapy is appropriate for physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, unilateral paralysis and cases in which the muscles are spastic and rigid (Frame, 2006).

Therapeutic riding is category of equine therapy that teaches various equestrian skills to people with physical disabilities and/or emotional or psychological disorders, based on the premise that these skills will be transferred to other aspects of their lives (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005). Therapeutic riding is also known as Equine Facilitated Therapy and Riding for the Disabled (Strides, 2012). This type of therapy aims for physiological and psychological change (Frame, 2006). Clients participate in groundwork and mounted activities. Clients of Equine Facilitated Therapy have shown clinical improvement in physical, psychomotor, and psychological parameters (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).

Therapeutic vaulting is the third type of equine therapy. This method is based on the client performing gymnastics exercises atop a moving horse, while the horse is controlled by a therapist through the use of a lunge line. Thus, while the therapist controls the horse the client is free to focus on the experiences of shared energy, impulsion, rhythm and balance.
Therapeutic vaulting is highly structured and concentrates on spatial relationships, organisational skills and body awareness (Vidrine et al., 2002). Successful vaulting depends on a trusting relationship between the individual and the horse. This relationship must be built on a foundation of communication and cooperation. In this way, the client learns how to be part of a team and gains a sense of positive self-esteem (Frame, 2006).

EAP is the fourth type of therapy that utilises horses. This is an experiential approach to psychotherapy that focuses on the interactions between the horse and the client in the present moment (McConnell, 2010). The central difference between this type of equine therapy and hippotherapy, therapeutic riding, or vaulting, is that this type of programme is used in combination with traditional psychotherapy (McConnell, 2010). EAP is not a theoretical orientation, but an approach that can be utilised in conjunction with a variety of psychotherapeutic orientations (Masini, 2010). EAP works solely on the ground, whereas other forms of equine therapy utilise horseback riding. This type of equine-assisted therapy is the focus of enquiry for this research study.

2.3.3. Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

EAGALA (2012) provides a formal definition of EAP:

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and a horse professional working with the clients and horses to address treatment goals. EAP is experiential in nature. This means that participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, and then processing (or discussing) feelings, behaviours, and patterns (www.eagala.org).

Elements described in this definition of EAP are now discussed in more detail.
**2.3.3.1 EAP as an experiential approach**

EAP is an experiential approach in which the horse is utilised as a tool in the session (Masini, 2010). The word ‘experiential’ is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “relating to or derived from experience” (Merriam-Webster, 2013). Thus EAP is defined as experiential because the client physically participates in various activities in the session. This must be differentiated from Experiential Therapy which is a theoretical orientation that underpins therapeutic understanding and practice. Experiential Therapy focuses on the feeling process of the client. It aims to achieve deeper resonance with the client’s experiencing at the moment, by staying with the client’s processes (cognitive, emotional, behavioural and physical), getting deeper into it and co-existing with it (Friedman, 1976).

As an experiential approach, the aim of the therapeutic sessions is to provide an experience for clients to assist them in learning about themselves and about how they impact the world around them (Hallberg, 2008). Sessions in EAP are ‘hands on’ whereby clients have to physically participate in the session (McConnell, 2010). This represents a shift away from traditional therapy which mostly consists of talking, not doing (Esbjorn, 2006). The treatment team includes a licensed psychotherapist and an equine specialist or horse professional (who has equine experience and an understanding of horses) (Whitely, 2009).

As an experiential approach, EAP has elements of experiential learning (EAGALA, 2012). Experiential learning refers to the manner in which clients become aware in the present and proceed to process this information in the session (EAGALA, 2012). The experiential learning process in EAP has five stages: experiencing, sharing, processing, generalising and applying. These stages function together in a circular manner in order to facilitate change (EAGALA, 2012; EAPISA, 2012).
Firstly, the client is required to have an experience in the ‘here and now’. EAP is activity-based, and attempts to use the experience the client has with the horse when endeavouring a series of goal-related activities (Hallberg, 2008). Activities are set up on the ground and include horses either directly or indirectly. Ground work activities include numerous aspects, such as grooming, haltering the horse while it is standing, hoof picking or getting the horse to move in a ring with or without a lead rein (Esbjorn, 2006). However, the focus of the session is not on successful completion of the activity. Rather, the activity itself is a vehicle to facilitate an experience for the client (Hallberg, 2008).

At the beginning of the session the client is given ambiguous instructions on the activity (EAPISA, 2012). The client works through the planned activity while experiencing a variety of challenges and successes that elicit different emotions, cognition and behaviours (Esbjorn, 2006). As the client may have a variety of experiences during the session that cannot be planned, it is usual for the client to feel a measure of uncertainty in the process (EAGALA, 2012).

The experience of uncertainty in EAP has been additionally researched in reference to clients with anxiety. Eller (2012) reported that anxiety is often worsened by fear of the unknown or of unpredictability in situations. He maintained that in the experiential EAP sessions, clients are exposed to their own anxiety and therefore experience uncertainty in a ‘safe’ environment. According to Eller (2012), the aim is for clients to learn how to deal with their uncertainty and create strategies that can be utilised in other spheres of their life.

However, in the initial stages of therapy the experience of exposure may lead to an increased amount of fear and uncertainty (Eller, 2012).

This leads to the second stage which is where clients are given a space to reflect on their experience with the treatment team (Esbjorn, 2006). As the client spends the first part of the session participating in the planned activity with the horse, a specific period is purposefully set aside for the client to discuss their experience. Clients may reflect on what happened,
what they struggled with, what they succeeded in, how they felt and/or what they thought in regard to their interactions with the horse and the horse’s responses (EAPISA, 2012). Feelings of uncertainty and anxiety may also be reflected upon.

This stage of sharing leads to the third phase of the experiential approach which is processing of the experience (EAPISA, 2012). Clinical interpretation is provided by the therapist with a focus on the client’s emotions, cognition and behaviours. The equine specialist provides feedback in regard to the horse’s behaviour during the session (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005). Through this combined feedback, the therapist provides the client with an opportunity to discuss current behaviours and problems as well as attempt new behaviours, which may be generalised to various spheres in the client's life (Esbjorn, 2006).

The process of generalisation is the fourth stage of the experiential approach. In this phase, change or self-awareness, which has been elicited through the session and made explicit through the processing phase, is generalised to other areas of the clients’ life (EAPISA, 2012). Esbjorn (2006) hypothesises that the client’s behaviour in the session can be viewed as a metaphor for some aspect of their own personal life. As a way to establish metaphors, Whitely (2009) suggests that therapists observe the client’s reaction to the horse’s physical communication in the session. For instance, does the client react with distance or anxiety when the horse rejects their advances? Literature has also suggested that clients may at times relate to the horses’ behaviour. For example, identification with the horse’s fear and need for safety may provide a metaphor for how the client feels (Karol, 2007). Through the use of metaphors, the therapist assists the client in making connections and generalisations.

The fifth and final phase of the experiential process circles back to the first phase of experiencing. However, during this stage, the aim is for the client to apply the awareness and interpretations that have been made in the previous phases in order to create a shift in their interactions (EAPISA, 2012). Thus, difficulties that occurred during the previous activity are reflected upon and then reattempted. The client is given an opportunity to attempt new
ways of interacting with the horse and the task, in order to consolidate what has been discussed and experienced (Esbjorn, 2006). Thus, direction or ‘steps’ to change are not concretely set out by the team but are developed with the client and practised through experiencing something new in the present (EAGALA, 2012).

The above discussion detailed a general approach to the experiential process that is utilised in EAP models (EAGALA, 2012; EAPISA, 2012). However, the manner in which the experiences are processed and the interpretations that are offered will differ depending upon the theoretical orientation that is utilised by the therapist (McConnell, 2010).

2.3.3.2 Rationale for the use of horses in EAP

What makes EAP unique in comparison to AAT is its exclusive utilisation of equines in the psychotherapeutic session. The literature has suggested unique qualities of horses that differentiate their therapeutic use from other animals in AAT. However, much of this literature is based on anecdotal reports. Nevertheless, it comprises much of the literature available and will thus be reviewed.

Specific equine qualities have been identified which differentiate horses from other animals utilised in AAT (Lentini & Knox, 2009). One of these differentiating factors is that the horse is a prey animal. As prey animals in the wild, horses are hunted or caught for food. Thus, for survival, horses are governed by flight instinct (Kohanov, 2001). Due to this instinct, horses pay considerable attention to detail, making them hypersensitive to their environment (Lentini & Knox, 2009). As a result of this ‘hypersensitivity’, research has found that horses are able to perceive reactions in other herd members over large distances and react on this sensation without hesitation (Kohanov, 2001). Esbjorn (2006) suggests that due to their ‘hypersensitive nature’ horses can teach people how to be sensitive and aware.

Additionally, as prey animals, horses appear to have developed the ability to ‘read’ the intentions of their predators. For example, horses can sense if a predator is on the hunt or if they have just eaten (Kohanov, 2001). The horse’s ability to ‘read’ the behaviour cues of the
surrounding animals in the wild translates into the ability of domesticated horses to ‘read’ humans (Kohanov, 2001). Moreover, it is proposed that horses are able to mirror what they sense in other animals as a way of protecting themselves (Kohanov, 2001). For example, if they sense fear, they will react with fear, if they sense serenity, they will react accordingly. This ability to mirror has been utilised in psychotherapy with humans. Frewin and Gardiner (2005) maintain that horses are able to mirror the behaviours, emotions and non-verbal communications of humans through their reactive behaviours (Frewin & Gardiner 2005). Furthermore, Masini (2010) suggests that horses may be perceived as ‘biofeedback machines’ that mirror the reactions of what is occurring in people on an emotional and cognitive level.

Cody, Steiker, and Szymandera (2011) elaborate on horses’ mirroring abilities by suggesting that horses will respond to the ‘authentic self’ of a person in one way and the ‘false self’ of a person in another way. Following this notion, it is assumed that the horse will naturally move toward the human who is showing his or her ‘authentic’ self. The ‘authentic’ person is a person who has insight into their emotions, cognition and behaviours, and acts in accordance with who they are (Cody et al., 2011). Conversely, the horse will not move toward the client who is suppressing feelings or is disconnected from parts of himself or herself (Cody et al., 2011).

Furthermore, it is suggested that a person who is disconnected or incongruent, may send mixed messages to the horse (Kohanov, 2001). For example, the body language of someone ‘putting on a happy face’ is incongruent with the rise in blood pressure, muscle tension, and emotional intensity transmitted unconsciously by an individual who’s actually afraid, frustrated, or angry (Kohanov, 2001). Horses do not appear to feel at ease around these confused messages and will move away from them (Cody et al., 2011). The horse thus gives immediate feedback on the person’s state of congruency. By means of the horse’s feedback and interpretations from the treatment team, the individual may be able to
gain awareness of their own emotional and cognitive processes and thus ultimately achieve
greater congruency (Frewin & Gardner, 2005).

An additional differentiating quality of horses is their size. Various authors have
hypothesised that the size of a horse presents an opportunity for the client to overcome fear
and increase self-esteem, as the client’s confidence may be increased through the
experience of accomplishment of a task with a horse (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005). Lentini and
Knox (2009) maintain that the horse’s power and size provide opportunities to explore issues
related to vulnerability, power and control.

Although limited, current literature examines specific characteristics that differentiate the
horse from other animals utilised in AAT. These specific characteristics of horses are utilised
in the psychotherapy session and form a vital part of the psychotherapeutic process.

2.3.3.3 Efficacy of EAP

Research on the efficacy of EAP as a therapeutic approach has been conducted on different
populations, with various problems and disorders and within different contexts. A review of
previous efficacy studies is now presented.

EAP was found to be effective for treatment with individuals, groups, families (Esbjorn, 2006)
and couples (Russel-Martin, 2006). Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown EAP to
be positively utilised in children (Owen-Smith, 2000; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins,
2007; Tetreault, 2006; Trotter, 2006), in adolescents (Burgon, 2011; Mann & Williams, 2002;
Whitely, 2009) and in adults (Christian, 2005; Esbjorn, 2006; Russel-Martin, 2006).

A large range of client populations, with a variety of presenting problems and diagnoses,
have reportedly been effectively treated with EAP. Several efficacy studies have found that a
range of psychiatric disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders and eating disorders as
well as dissociative identity disorder, have been effectively treated with EAP (Christian,
2005; Esbjorn, 2006; Frewin & Gardiner, 2005; McConnell, 2010; Whitely, 2009). Research
has also demonstrated effective EAP treatment with a variety of childhood disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, autism (Esbjorn, 2006), oppositional defiant disorder (Tyler, 1994) and other behavioural and educational difficulties (Trotter, 2006). Literature has additionally shown EAP to be effective with victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, people suffering from stress or grief as well as people seeking personal growth (Esbjorn, 2006; McConnell, 2010; Owen-Smith, 2000; Schultz et al., 2007). Furthermore, EAP has been noted as an effective approach to utilise with resistant clients (Frame, 2006; Mann & Williams, 2002; Owen-Smith, 2000), as often it is the horse that opens avenues for rapport building (Masini, 2010).

Efficacy research on EAP has noted a broad range of potential areas of improvement in client functioning. These include but are not limited to, greater levels of satisfaction, improved self-esteem and confidence, and increased emotional awareness (Burgon, 2011; Russel-Martin, 2006). Clients have expressed experiencing better communication within their relationships (Schultz et al., 2007), as well as experiencing improved social skills (Tetreault, 2006) and relationship skills (Whitely, 2009).

Results of efficacy studies conducted with EAP have found EAP to be a beneficial psychotherapy within a broad range of client populations and problem definitions (McConnell, 2010). However, all these studies have been conducted abroad. Current EAP research within the South African context will now be considered.

2.3.3.4 EAP research within a South African context

No research was found specifically on EAP in the South African context, after searches through Google Scholar, psycINFO and psycARTICLES. This apparent lack of research suggests a need for research to be conducted on EAP within the South African context.

Limited studies on equines utilised in other forms of therapy in the South African context were found. Bronkhorst (2006) focused on the use of ‘horse whispering’ with an aggressive child in a qualitative study. Bronkhorst (2006) defined the action of ‘horse whispering’ as:
Mimicking methods of discipline that horses use in the wild, the trainer uses his physical stance to either drive the horse away from him or allow it to come and connect with him … The moment is often referred to a ‘joining-up’ … the effect is a strong bond of trust and devotion that provides a foundation for further training (p.9).

This study appeared to utilise natural horsemanship techniques following renowned ‘horse whispers’ such as Monty Roberts, but did not focus on any psychotherapeutic model or intervention. The study did not describe the intervention as EAP but rather as ‘horse whispering.’

Helfer (2006) conducted a study in the Western Cape utilising equine-assisted therapy on children with disabilities. This qualitative study examined the effects of equine-assisted therapy on assisting disabled children to meet their psychosocial developmental milestones. The study found that the participants reported a significant increase in areas of social participation, confidence, self-image, emotional control, discipline, cognitive and educational stimulation (Helfer, 2006).

The relative lack of studies on EAP in South Africa presents a need for research in the field of EAP within the South African context.

2.4 Therapeutic orientations and EAP

As previously stated, EAP is considered to be an approach that can be utilised in conjunction with a variety of psychotherapeutic paradigms; however, it is not a theoretical orientation in itself (Masini, 2010). As psychological theory guides the manner in which the therapist understands the client in the session (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009), it is important that the paradigm that the therapist employs be described. McConnell (2010) maintains that often no therapeutic theory is mentioned in the EAP literature to describe how EAP was utilised. In order to understand the psychotherapeutic use of EAP, the paradigm that supports the therapist’s understanding of the client needs to be examined. For this reason, the most
common therapeutic orientations used in conjunction with EAP, as described in the literature, are presented.

A psychotherapeutic orientation is based on a particular theory which directs and describes human behaviour, psychopathology, and the mechanisms of therapeutic change (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). Such psychotherapeutic theories provide the therapist with foundation for therapeutic work, a method to diagnose and to treat, and a manner of articulating goals (Brew & Kotler, 2008). Every therapeutic orientation differs in the techniques utilised, skills required and the overall intervention which is applied (Brew & Kotler, 2008). Thus the theoretical orientation contributes to how the psychotherapeutic sessions are conducted and how client change is viewed (Esbjorn, 2006). Main theoretical orientations include, but are not limited to psychodynamic therapies, existential therapies, person-centred therapies, gestalt and experiential therapies, interpersonal therapies, cognitive behavioural therapies, systemic therapies, and integrative therapies (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009). In order for EAP to constitute a method of psychotherapy, a foundational theory needs to be articulated.

Several studies have been conducted which have examined the practice of EAP with regard to therapeutic orientation. These studies have provided information in regard to therapeutic orientations that are most commonly utilised by therapists in EAP. McConnell (2010) stated that experiential therapy was the most widely (68%) utilised theoretical foundation in the EAP programmes that she included in her exploratory study of EAP. Frame (2006) examined the experiences of fifteen EAP therapists and found that gestalt therapy, experiential therapy, cognitive-behavioural therapy and object relations therapy were the theoretical frameworks most often utilised. Esbjorn (2006) explored the experiences of thirty-five EAP practitioners and found that gestalt therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and object relations therapy were the most prevalent theoretical orientations. However, many other theoretical orientations were mentioned in these studies including Jungian therapy, systems therapy, humanistic therapies, Adlerian therapy and reality therapy. Chardonnens (2009) supported a client-centred frame for EAP, while transpersonal psychology has also been
advocated (Esbjorn, 2006). South African studies are yet to be conducted in this regard, thus the most popular orientation in the South African context is unknown. However, EAPISA purports to utilise a systemic paradigm (Kidson, personal communication, 21 June, 2012).

From a review of these studies, it became apparent that there is much variation in the theoretical foundations described within EAP. For the current literature review, the most popular theoretical orientations as found by McConnell (2010), Frame (2006) and Esbjorn (2006), were considered. These included gestalt therapy, experiential therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and object relations therapy. A brief description of the utilisation of systemic therapy in EAP is also included. A discussion of these orientations and their utilisation in conjunction with EAP as an approach, follows.

2.4.1 Common theoretical orientations utilised with EAP

2.4.1.1 Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy may be defined as an experiential therapy which stresses awareness and integration of the body and the mind in the present moment. Central importance is given to the I/Thou relationship (Corey, 2013). The premise of gestalt therapy was explained by Perls (1973) who said: “... the neurotic is not merely a person who once had a problem, he is a person who has a continuing problem, here and now in the present” (p. 62). For this reason, the client is not required to focus on their past traumas and problems, but rather to re-experience their unfinished experiences in the present (Frame, 2006).

Gestalt EAP focuses on the client’s use of body language as the primary method of communication (Esbjorn, 2006). The non-verbal communication and interaction that occurs between horse and client in the here and now is important, as it provides the therapist with information about the client’s problems (Frame, 2006). According to Kirby (2010), horses represent the ‘essence of gestalt’, as they have a natural capacity for congruency, awareness and self-regulation. It is proposed that being with horses evokes a heightened
state of awareness (Kirby, 2010), which may assist the client in becoming more aware of the environment in the here and now.

The suggested role of the therapist in Gestalt EAP is to focus on developing awareness and relational experiences, exploring the client’s interactional style, and addressing core themes that unfold in the therapeutic relationship (Kirby, 2010). The gestalt therapist should model the ability to be present and have an authentic relationship with the horse (Kirby, 2010). Literature proposes that the ability to be present in the here and now in EAP relates to being aware of the small, subtle signals the horse presents, as well as being aware of the client’s reaction to it (Kirby, 2010). The therapist calls attention to these throughout the session and attempts to create an opportunity for the client to experiment with different behaviours with increased awareness in the present moment (Kirby, 2010).

Gestalt orientated EAP has been reported to address unfinished business, core introject-projections and adjustments. Literature has suggested that such identified problems may be brought into awareness through the relationship with the horse, as this relationship offers an opportunity to reconnect the client to the natural world and the immediacy of the environment (Kirby, 2010).

2.4.1.2 Experiential Therapy

Experiential therapy may be defined as an approach in which the central axis of change is focused on experiencing. Accessing deeper experiencing is the core of experiential therapy and is the criterion for the success of experiential therapy (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009).

Experiential therapy is a synthesis of client-centred therapy and gestalt therapy (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988). It emphasises the client’s feelings, perceptions and physical state in the here-and-now (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988). Experiential therapy focuses on increasing the client’s awareness, in order to learn about themselves and how they impact the world around them (Hallberg, 2008). The experiential approach to psychotherapy assumes that people have the capacity to be self-aware (Watson, Goldman, & Greenberg, 2011). The central
characteristic of experiential therapy is in-therapy experiencing. Various activities are utilised in session as part of treatment to promote participation, expression and reflection for the client (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988). The therapist works actively with the client to enhance emotional awareness and deal with emotion-laden material (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988).

The focus of experiential EAP is on the client experiences with the horses as they participate in various activities. This provides opportunities to understand and rework the client’s emotions, cognition and behaviours (Frame, 2006). In experiential EAP, horses are viewed as catalysts and metaphors as they assist in enabling clinical issues to surface (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007). The manner in which the client interacts with the horse in the here and now provides insights into how they may deal with others in their lives. Clients are then given the opportunity to modify maladaptive behaviours through experiences with horses, which provide more positive immediate outcomes and extend to positive relationships outside therapy (Frame, 2006). Through the process of physically participating in exercises with the horse, clients may be able to perceive their own interactions and what they bring to relationships.

In experiential therapy the most common reasons for utilising horses in therapy are for the development of self-efficacy, mirroring behaviour and development of confidence (McConnell, 2010). Various EAP treatment facilities have begun to employ experiential therapy as part of their treatment programmes (Frame, 2006). Klontz et al. (2007) conducted a quantitative study utilising equine-assisted experiential therapy with thirty participants. A key finding in this study was the clients’ reported ability to work through ‘unfinished business’. The term ‘unfinished business’ can be defined as unexpressed feelings which are linked to the past, carried into the present, and interfere with the person's ability to function (Corey, 2013). According to this experiential EAP study, the use of horses in the therapy session gave clients the opportunity to re-experience significant life events and work through unresolved emotions (Klontz et al., 2007). Results of this study indicated less psychological stress, fewer psychiatric symptoms and overall more positive feelings in the participants.
involved. The improvements were still present after a six-month follow-up (Klontz et al., 2007).

2.4.1.3 Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) may be defined as an approach that considers cognition to be the major determinant of how a person feels and acts. It is a psycho-educational model which emphasises therapy as a learning process of acquiring and practicing new skills to create more effective problem-solving skills (Corey, 2013).

CBT deals with four primary interacting systems; a person’s cognition (thoughts and beliefs), emotions, behaviour and physiological states (Westbrook, Kennerley, & Kirk, 2007). Through experiences in life (most often childhood) each person develops a set of core beliefs and assumptions. Many of the core beliefs and assumptions are useful as they help the individual to function in the world (Westbrook et al., 2007). However, these beliefs may become dysfunctional when triggered by negative experiences. This may cause the person to view the world in an irrational way, thus leading to dysfunctional cognition, emotions, behaviours and physiological states (Westbrook et al., 2007). Such dysfunctional assumptions can often be seen as rules for living, or as conditional statements that can be culturally reinforced (Westbrook et al., 2007).

From a CBT perspective, thoughts create feelings. When dealing with negative feelings, the perpetuating cycle of negative self-talk and reactive responses to stressors is identified in order to recognise patterns (Mandrell, 2006). Thus in order to change dysfunctional assumptions, the client needs to acknowledge that they are largely responsible for their emotional problems. Secondly, they need to accept that they have the ability to change their problems significantly. Finally, clients need to recognise that emotional problems largely stem from irrational beliefs; therefore they should observe these beliefs, work hard to change them and finally, practise the techniques as developed in the session (Mandrell, 2006).
EAP through a CBT lens appears to focus on the horse’s feedback mechanisms by providing responses to the client’s behaviours (Frame, 2006). Cognitive or behavioural shifts in the clients result in immediate changes in the horses’ behaviour, thus reinforcing positive experiences. Therapists may additionally utilise sessions to teach the client how to identify cognition. Through this identification, as well as the resulting response from the horse, clients can become aware of how cognition and behaviours are linked (Frame, 2006). Cognitive-behavioural therapists may further utilise a client’s interpretation of a horse’s movements, behaviours or reactions as a metaphor to identify and change negative patterns of thinking (Sapir, 2007).

CBT utilised in conjunction with EAP, may help clients to assess how their thoughts impact their behaviour, to notice patterns in their behaviour and embrace options for changing these patterns (Sapir, 2007). EAP from this CBT perspective attempts to assist people to improve their skills in various situations. These skills include assessing situations accurately, generating problem-solving, increasing awareness of how thoughts may be distorted and increasing ability to evaluate choices and outcomes (Sapir, 2007). Other skills developed through the session may include increased awareness of one’s physiological state, positive self-talk, guiding statements, willingness to test assumptions, increased ability to recognise and label precipitants to emotions and the use of self-reinforcement (Sapir, 2007).

2.4.1.4 Object Relations Theory

Object relations theory is a psychodynamic approach to psychotherapy. Object relations theorists emphasise relationships between the self and objects (the other) as the major principle in people’s lives. Object relations are the mental representations of self and others (the objects). Object relations theory views relationships, beginning with the mother-infant dyad, as primary in a person’s development (Prochaska & Norcross, 2009).

Winnicott (1960) describes how early failure of the maternal figure to successfully attune to the needs of the infant can lead to development of a false self. This false self is a defense
against the unthinkable anxiety of annihilation of having no self. A false self develops and is able to protect and preserve the infant despite his failed environment (Winnicott, 1960). Winnicott states (1960) that the therapist’s task is to provide a holding environment for the client, so that the neglected needs from infancy can be met and the true self may have space to emerge. Thus, in-therapy goals focus on enabling the client to regress in a safe ‘holding’ environment. Through regression to infancy, unmet needs can be experienced (Winnicott, 1960). Transitional objects such as the therapy session or the therapists themselves are utilised to help the client transition from a defended false self to an independent true self (Winnicott, 1971).

Fine (2000) suggested that the use of animals in therapy could provide a window to examine the clients’ earlier object experiences. Object relational therapists who practise EAP have reported that clients feel held by the horse, thus allowing a regression into earlier object experiences which may lead to exploring of the true self of the client (Frame, 2006). Additionally, the horse may be seen as a transitional object (Esbjorn, 2006). Furthermore, the utilisation of the horse in therapy can also be understood as a way to establish a deep connection with another living being. This is especially true for people whose early mother-child relations were not successful. The presence of the horse in the session may present an opportunity to re-establish a connection to another living being that may have been missed in the client’s early relationships (McCormick & McCormick, 1997).

Working with the horse in the session may also provide an environment for play and fantasy which may be utilised to explore early object relationships. From this perspective, the horse may be viewed as an object representation within the session. Clients may project their feelings toward other people in their lives, onto the horse (Frame, 2006). Therapists may ask questions such as “Who does he remind you of?” or “Does anyone you know act like that?” which may elicit information from the client (Frame, 2006, p.86).
Karol (2007) utilised a psychodynamic orientation to describe equine facilitated psychotherapy. To conclude, Karol (2007) summarised the benefits of EAP within a psychodynamic orientation by stating:

… in sum, this method allows the clinician to guide the development of insight as well as affect the client’s inner world through preverbal and nonverbal intervention. Thus, the agents of change are multifold, as the client’s intellectual facilities are combined with knowledge gained through sub symbolic, sensory or bodily experience toward the integration of several levels of transformation (p. 89).

2.4.1.5 Systemic Therapy

The systemic approach to psychotherapy is a broad orientation which generally integrates three different fields of study: family systems theory, ecology and cybernetics (Human, 2006). In this approach, the focus falls on the system and not the individual (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). The therapist concentrates on assessing and describing patterns of interaction as they happen in the here and now (Becvar & Becvar, 2009).

In order to describe a systems functioning, the development and maintenance of a system needs to be considered. According to this approach, a system consistently moves towards homeostasis and independence. Consequently, at times a system will continue dysfunctional patterns of behaviour in order to maintain its autonomy and structure. The term ‘cybernetics’ proposes that interactions within and between systems should be viewed in terms of the patterns that connect them (Bateson, 1972). The interactions take place by means of circular feedback loops. Positive feedback creates a change in the system, while negative feedback stabilises the system, thus maintaining the system’s homeostasis (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). Whenever there is positive feedback, this brings about a change in the system. As the system strives for homeostasis, new interactional patterns will form and a new equilibrium will be created (Becvar & Becvar, 2009).
Systemic EAP can be utilised with families, groups or individuals (Kidson, personal communication, 21 June, 2012). The premise of this approach to EAP is that the client, therapist, equine, horse specialist and the surrounding context (such as the stables, the grounds and the area in which the client works) all form a system of their own. Within this larger system, sub-systems may develop, for example, between the horse and the client and/or between the therapist and horse specialist. The novel environment in itself presents a disequilibrium in the system to which the client needs to adjust (Kidson, personal communication, 21 June, 2012).

The therapist presents ideas in the form of process comments that focus on the interactions of the members in the present. Redundant patterns of interaction can be identified when the client or family system continues to act in the same manner despite the changes in the system. This presents the therapist with information that can be fed back into the system through various methods such as reframing, or paradoxes. Thus, in this orientation the focus is not mainly on the horse or client but on the sub-systems that are formed, and are in circular communication with one another (Kidson, personal communication, 21 June, 2012).

Following from an overview of the most prevalent orientations utilised in EAP, the client experiences of EAP are examined. This is explored with reference to the limited research available.

2.5 Client experience of EAP

Throughout the literature review, the central role of the client in psychotherapy and EAP has been highlighted. Peterson (2010) emphasises the crucial role of the client in EAP in the following statement:

Therapists may walk alongside the clients through their journey, assisting them as they learn and develop, and helping them when necessary. The horse is the client’s catalyst for change, ever guiding, ever revealing. However, it is the client who must
be willing to accept what needs to be changed and work towards effectively changing it; thus they are the most important part of the team (p. 36-37).

Despite this, research focusing specifically on clients’ experiences and perceptions of EAP is relatively limited.

As described in the previous section, a considerable amount of earlier research on EAP has focused on the therapists’ perceptions of interaction between the client and the horse (Peterson, 2010). In her review of EAP literature, McConnell (2010) found that the effectiveness of EAP was mostly measured quantitatively by therapist analysis, equine therapist analysis and psychometric testing. As EAP is experientially based, it is the client’s actual experiences that are the foundation for exploration and change (Karol, 2007). Therefore, further investigation is required specifically into client experiences. Only three studies have been found to focus exclusively on client experiences. These are reviewed below.

Peterson (2010) conducted a phenomenological narratology study focusing on the clients experience of EAP. The aim of the study was to gain insight into the perceptions of clients so as to understand what occurs for the client in the therapeutic process. Five clients, between the ages of thirteen and thirty, that had undergone EAP, were interviewed. Questions focused on the reasons for the participants entering into equine psychotherapy, duration of treatment and their memories of the interaction with the horse and the therapists. Participants in this study described the role of the horse as vital to their overall experience. Peterson (2010) described the relationship between client and horse “a friendship that it there to guide one when the path becomes dark and to support the client when they become weary” (p. 69). However, clients were also given their own space for general narrative to flow. From the narrated experiences of the clients, seven themes were described. Participants felt EAP was effective in building trust, friendship, bravery, alternative fun, responsibility, confronting one’s self and finding peace.
Meinersmann, Bradberry and Robertson (2008) explored the experiences of five women over the age of eighteen who had suffered abuse and undergone EAP treatment. Open-ended interviews were conducted and the women were able to describe their experiences. Interpretations were verified by most of the participants. The women reported experiencing a sense of unconditional positive love and acceptance from the horses that enabled them to find a new sense of control and respect for their personal boundaries and the boundaries of others. The participants identified the horse as a crucial aspect of their experience. Participants further described the horse as ‘a place to lean on’ in sessions. Four themes were identified throughout the interviews with the participants: I can have power; doing it hands on; turned my life around; and horses as co-therapists. Clients described experiencing increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, feelings of empowerment, as well as decreased anxiety and depression (Meinersmann et al., 2008).

Hayden (2005) focused on the experiences of ten adolescent youths that were considered to be ‘at-risk’. She utilised a phenomenological approach to allow the participants to use their own words to describe their perceptions and experiences. These adolescents were diagnosed with an Axis I disorder, or qualified for an Axis IV stressor. Each participated in at least four equine therapy sessions, which included both mounted and ground work. Sixteen themes emerged from these interviews: “enjoyable”, “experience of a challenge”, “talking is important”, “better than previous treatment”, “effective treatment”, “horse as a metaphor”, “horse as a mirror”, “mastery”, “positive relationships”, “communication skills”, “coping skills”, “internal awareness”, “normalising from peers”, “interactions with natural environment”, “required acts of helpfulness” and “modelling” (Hayden, 2005). This study found that EAP was beneficial for these youths, especially for building resiliency. The participants identified the horse as one of the central aspects of their experience (Hayden, 2005). Hayden described the relationship between the horse and the client as “the metaphoric relationship that transcended words and makes concepts and relationships concrete in front of a witness” (p. 117).
On review of these three studies, various themes have been highlighted that relate to the client’s own sense of self, skills development and the importance of the horse as a part of the treatment team. However, these studies have focused on specific client groups. Due to the relative absence of research on client experiences of EAP in the South African context, the experience of the client in EAP was chosen as a focus for the present research study. A qualitative study was deemed the most suitable in order to explore client experiences. The method of enquiry is discussed in the following chapter.

2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, literature regarding research on 1) client experiences, 2) EAP, 3) theoretical orientations in EAP and 4) client experiences of EAP was reviewed.

EAP is considered an experiential approach that may be utilised in conjunction with a range of theoretical orientations (McConnell, 2010). The main aim of EAP is to increase the client’s awareness of their emotions and perceptions through their experiences in the session with the horse. The client experiences are of utmost importance for exploration and change (Karol, 2007). However, research on actual client experiences are relatively underemphasised in psychotherapy, generally (Macran et al., 1999) and in EAP, specifically (Peterson, 2010). Therefore, client experiences of EAP require further investigation and description. Without understanding the full process of EAP there is no foundation for evidence-based practice (Peterson, 2010). The exploration of client experiences responds to the identified need in the existing research. Thus, the client experiences of EAP are the focus of this study. The client experiences are explored through the utilisation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which aims to explore in detail how people make sense of their worlds through their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008).
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The following chapter focuses on the methodology of this study. As the study endeavours to explore the client’s experiences of EAP, this chapter proposes that the client’s perspective of their experience be studied utilising qualitative methods. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was selected as the preferred research method to meet the requirements of the study. IPA aims to generate open-ended data from which participant meanings can be identified and interpreted. This strategy draws on philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2003). After discussing the aim of the research and a brief overview of qualitative research, this chapter will expand on these philosophies as the underpinnings of IPA. Information regarding sampling, data collection and data analysis are presented. Lastly, factors intended to ensure trustworthiness of the research are highlighted.

3.2 Purpose of the research

This research aims to explore the experience of the client in equine-assisted psychotherapy through first-hand encounters with the three participants. As the client is an important part of the therapeutic alliance, it is essential that their lived experiences are given a voice (Duncan & Miller, 2000). Acknowledging the client’s perspective in psychotherapy research is necessary for the development of psychotherapy (Macran et al., 1999) and its theoretical understanding (Elliott & James, 1989). For this reason, the current research study may aid to initiate a process of theory-building in EAP as a newly developing field (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).
3.3 Research framework

3.3.1 Qualitative research

The aims of this research study are best met by a research method that uses qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is concerned with the exploration of meaning. Meaning is explored through turning to individuals who have personal experience with the phenomenon being studied (Whitley, 2002). While quantitative methods focus on observable characteristics, qualitative research goes beyond this to attempt to obtain a deeper and more human understanding (Edwards & Louw, 1997). Thus the phenomenon being studied is seen through the perspectives of those who experienced it, which is congruent to the aim of this study.

Consistent with the aim of exploring meaning in qualitative research, open-ended and inductive techniques are utilised in an attempt to understand how people make sense of their world and how they experience events (Willig, 2008). By utilising these methods, qualitative research ensures that an in-depth understanding of the phenomena is gained. The focus of qualitative research is thus on the quality and texture of the data, and not cause and effect (Merriam, 2002). For this reason, qualitative research questions call for responses that provide detailed descriptions rather than quantifiable hypotheses (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

In order to gain an in-depth understanding with regard to how people experience and make meaning in their own lives, data is gained through detailed investigation of the person’s perspectives and interpretations according to their own frame of reference, and through personal interaction (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In this way the researcher attempts to explore the experience of the client from their point of view, and to generate participant-defined meanings (Willig, 2008). Thus, variables are not predicted or defined by the researcher, as this would mean imposing meaning from the researcher’s point of view (Merriam, 2002). The objective of qualitative data, therefore, is to describe and at times explain, but never to predict.
Through such explorations of meaning, qualitative research enables an understanding of the ‘lived experience’, as it assists the researcher in describing the interpersonal experiences of the clients (Norcross, 2010). In the context of this study, such descriptions of experience allow for the development of themes, which is a starting point for understanding of the experience of EAP, and further development in the field of EAP. The client’s experiences may also include information that has not yet been recognised at a theoretical level, thus allowing new information to emerge. An open-ended design allows for participant meanings to emerge rather than imposing or perpetuating the views of limited literature, or those of the researcher (Willig, 2008). Thus, the aims of this research study are met within a qualitative paradigm.

3.3.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a broad field of philosophy that is utilised in the qualitative paradigm and that fundamentally studies experience or consciousness (Husserl, 1970). This field endeavours to illuminate what a person experiences and how they experience it. Phenomenology strives to unfold the meanings that stem from everyday existence by asking: what is this experience like? The main phenomenological intention is to ‘describe how the world is formed and experienced through conscious acts’ (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 180). When considering research data from a phenomenological perspective one seeks to ‘return to the phenomena themselves’ through the consciousness and lived experience of the participant (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006, p. 463).

Edmund Husserl is considered to be the founder of phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). In 1901, Husserl published his book *Logical Investigations* which set the framework for the phenomenology utilised today (Smith, 2011). Husserl defined phenomenology as the science of the essence of consciousness (Husserl, 1962). He argued that experience could be studied on the basis of how it appeared in consciousness, as it is experienced from a first-person point of view (Smith, 2011). Conscious experience is unique as it is something
that we *experience*, we do not merely observe it or engage in it, but we live through it. Thus, when utilising a phenomenological framework we are concerned with what the participant experiences, not why it occurred (Smith, 2011). Since phenomenology studies consciousness, interest lies with what the participant is aware of, not their possible unconscious motivations behind the experience (Smith, 2011).

In order to gain understanding of this conscious experience, Husserl proposed that individuals bracket the assumptions that they hold about the world. Husserl believed that by deliberately focusing on consciousness and bracketing any presumptions, a researcher could develop a clear description of reality from the point of view of a specific individual (Husserl, 1962). In this way, the concern is no longer with what is ‘real’, but attention is turned to the experience, specifically the content and meaning of the experience (Smith, 2011). For this reason, when conducting phenomenological research the primary concern is with the experiences of the participants. As the participants are viewed as prime knowers of their own experience, researchers are not tasked to interpret (Laverty, 2003). Rather, researchers are directed to reflect on their own biases and assumptions so that they may bracket them. In this way the researcher is able to engage with the data without any preconceived ideas that would influence the findings (Laverty, 2003).

As the interest in phenomenology grew, different forms of phenomenology began to emerge. In the field of psychology, there has been considerable divergence from Husserl’s phenomenology. One of the reasons for this divergence was the almost impossible task of bracketing all previous knowledge from an experience (Willig, 2008), as Husserl had suggested. This is especially true from a researcher’s perspective, as the researcher deals with his/her own experiences and the additional experiences of the participants. Following this concern, a form of phenomenology, namely hermeneutic phenomenology, developed. This form of phenomenology incorporates a person’s previous knowledge into experience. Hermeneutics is discussed in more detail in the following section.
3.3.3 Hermeneutics and interpretation

The diversion from Husserlian phenomenology in psychological research led to an interest in hermeneutic phenomenology. This version of phenomenology acknowledges interpretation from the researcher as an integral part of the analysis. Hermeneutic research is interpretative and concentrates on historical meanings of experience (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutics can be viewed as a process of co-creation between the researcher and the participant. In this process, meaning is produced through a circle of readings, reflexive writings and interpretations (Laverty, 2003).

This approach to phenomenology was developed by Martin Heidegger who was a student of Husserl (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). In the late 1920’s, Heidegger began documenting the human experience as he understood it. He described the human being as a Being-in-the-world (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Being-in-the-world explains how a person can only know the world in relation to his being in it, and thus can only explain the world through his encounters with it (Larkin et al., 2006). In his view, consciousness is formed through historically lived experiences (Heidegger, 1962). Thus, a person is situated in the world. This involves more than the here and now experience as Husserl referred to, but rather the experiences of the past, culture and background. Meaning is attained not only through our present consciousness, but through constructing our worlds from our background and experience (Laverty, 2003).

In line with the understanding of a ‘being-in-the-world’, Heidegger also viewed the individual and experience as unable to exist without each other. He maintained that every encounter a person has involves interpretation that is influenced by his/her background and history (Laverty, 2003). A person can only experience because he/she has attached meaning to the experience from a related pre-understanding. For this reason, interpretation is critical in the process of understanding and meaning construction. This influence cannot be eliminated.
(Laverty, 2003). Therefore, Heidegger viewed bracketing, as described in Husserl’s thinking, as impossible.

The need for interpretation and the implication of the idea of bracketing must also be understood when conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research. In hermeneutic phenomenology the researcher’s assumptions are essential to the interpretative process. As a researcher, one needs to be aware of the influences of one’s own assumptions, background and personal preferences and account for them (Laverty, 2003). Therefore an attempt to bracket is conducted in a way that allows the researcher to engage with the text, but still acknowledges presuppositions and ideas. In this way, what the researcher brings to the interaction with the participant is an integral part of analysis (Willig, 2008). The researcher is continually going through the process of self-reflection in order to give thought to their own experience and state how their personal assumptions influence the findings. This practice of self-reflection is also known as reflexivity (Willig, 2008). Thus, when ascribing to a hermeneutic phenomenology perspective, the researcher understands the experience of the participant through an interpretation of this experience. The interpretation is coloured by the participant’s background and culture as well as the background and culture of the researcher, which is constantly reflected upon.

Many other forms of phenomenology have branched off in the fields of philosophy and psychology in the last 100 years. However, a discussion of these forms is beyond the scope of this research study. Following the aim set out at the beginning of this chapter, the field of phenomenology assists in developing understanding of the experience of the participant through consciousness and interpretation. The selected method for the current study stems from the phenomenological paradigm, specifically a combination of interpretative and hermeneutic phenomenology. The chosen method of this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, will now be presented.
3.3.4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Following the description of phenomenology, hermeneutics and interpretation, IPA is presented as a qualitative research method that is a combination of phenomenological and interpretative stances (Smith, 2004). It was developed by Jonathan Smith to specifically explore how participants make sense of their worlds. This exploration is achieved through studying the meaning participants attach to their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA does not make claims regarding the external world; rather, IPA focuses on how the participant experiences the event. IPA follows an interpretative phenomenological position whereby description and interpretation are not separated but are in a circular relation to one another (Willig, 2008). Consequently, instead of attempting to bracket the researcher’s assumptions and ideas, the researcher uses them in an attempt to advance understanding of the subject. IPA recognises that research is a dynamic process of the joint reflections of both participant and researcher. Interpretations are bound by the participant’s ability to articulate their experiences and the researcher’s ability to reflect and analyse them (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

IPA has roots in the philosophies of both Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl attempted to construct a philosophical science of consciousness with a combination of hermeneutics and symbolic-interactionism. This science of consciousness suggested that the meaning an individual ascribed to an event is of central importance, but is only available through an interpretative process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). This thought has been incorporated into IPA through emphasis on the interpretation of the participant’s experiences. Following Heidegger’s ideas, the goal of phenomenology is to approach any object in a manner that allows the object maximum opportunity to show itself on its own terms, thus not in any prescribed or assumed way (Larkin et al., 2006). However, this can never be completely achieved as the researcher is herself a person-in-context. Bearing this in mind, the researcher needs to be prepared to adjust her ideas and assumptions in response to the participant, to allow for maximum transparency. This entails being sensitive and responsive.
to the subject matter. This sensitivity is central to Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology and the interpretative dynamic of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006).

IPA is phenomenological as it involves detailed examination of the subjective accounts of individuals lived experiences, in order to give voice to perceptions and concerns (Larkin et al., 2006). Lived experience refers to a person who is socio-cultural, is historically situated, and intentionally interprets his/her world in a meaningful manner (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The focus is on what it is like to be this person, experiencing in their world. This form of research focuses on what is novel. For this reason, research questions are broad and open, allowing for flexibility and detailed exploration (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is a suitable approach for this current study, as it attempts to determine how individuals perceive particular experiences, which meets the study’s primary aim.

IPA is interpretative as the researcher is active in striving to attain both meaning and understanding from the participant’s point of view (Smith, 2004). The researcher attempts to achieve this through acknowledging her own conceptions and standpoints and utilising this in the interpretations. Participants may struggle to express what they are thinking and feeling, thus the researcher needs to interpret a person’s mental and emotional state from what they say (Smith, 2004). The interpretative requirement of IPA aids to contextualise this experience from a psychological or theoretical perspective (Larkin et al., 2006). The researcher’s interpretation is influenced by her own theoretical perspectives and her interaction with the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This is what IPA would describe as a ‘hermeneutic account’ (Larkin et al., 2006). This unfolds as part of a hermeneutic circle or a two-stage interpretation. In stage one of the hermeneutic circle, the participants attempt to make sense of their world. In stage two, the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant’s attempts to make sense of their world (Smith, 2004). Therefore the researcher and the participant are both essential parts of this meaning-making process. As the researcher is an inclusive part of the world he/she is describing, it is important that reflexivity always be considered (Larkin et al., 2006). In conducting IPA research the researcher and
the reader need to be aware that IPA cannot achieve a genuine first person account, as the
description is constructed by both the participant and the researcher (Larkin et al., 2006).
Thus, the objective is to create a third person and a psychologically informed portrayal that
attempt to get as close to the participant’s views as possible (Larkin et al., 2006).

As IPA focuses on individuals in specific situations, an idiographic mode of enquiry is
utilised. Idiographic methods focus on human thought, emotions and actions, within all the
chaotic aspects of human life (Eatough & Smith, 2008). This mode of enquiry attempts to
examine individual cases and make specific statements on those individuals before
integration; it therefore does not focus on generalisability such as nomothetic, quantitative
studies (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This represents a shift from understanding causal law to a
concern for understanding meaning in individual life. However, IPA might be thought of in
terms of theoretical generalisability, as links may be made between findings within an IPA
study, personal or professional experiences, and claims in existing literature (Yardley, 2007).

It is hoped that insights gained from qualitative studies may prove useful in a similar context.
IPA is the chosen research method for this study due to the aim of exploring the client's
reality of a specific experience: That of EAP. By choosing IPA as a research method, the
researcher was committed to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating how the client
made sense of their experience of EAP. Thus it is not about the reality of EAP, but rather the
client’s perspective of his/her engagements with it (Larkin et al., 2006). This goal of
exploration calls for detailed information from an individual’s perspective. IPA is consistent
with this aim as it utilises an idiographic approach in order to gain an insider's perspective,
 gaining both meaning and understanding (Larkin et al., 2006). The participant is of prime
importance in the research process as he/she is the expert source into his/her own life
(Smith, 2004).
3.4 Research Procedures

3.4.1 Sampling

IPA utilises an idiographic mode of inquiry, thus research is conducted on small samples (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As the aim of IPA is to gain detail about individual perceptions, detailed analysis of a large sample would take a long time and may lose richness. Therefore breadth is sacrificed for depth. By focusing on individual cases, full justice is done to each person’s account. Smith and Osborn (2008) recommend a sample size of three participants when the researcher utilises IPA for the first time. This allows for sufficient in-depth engagement with each case while allowing for examination of similarity, difference, convergence and divergence (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thus, a sample size of three clients that have experienced EAP was utilised in this study.

Data for this study was collected by utilising criterion-based purposeful sampling. This method of sampling enables the researcher to find participants that can provide rich, in-depth information (McConnell, 2010). This means that the group of participants is homogeneous, in that they have all experienced EAP and other predetermined criteria. In this research study participants were between the ages of 34 and 50, and had undergone EAP interventions for at least one month, in at least one session per week. Participants were currently in EAP or had terminated therapy within the last two years, in order to give a retrospective account of their experience. A psychologist, who practises EAP under the auspices of EAPISA, was requested to forward invitations to participate in the study to current and former clients who met the above criteria, in order to preserve the clients’ right to confidentiality. After an explanation of the study and the rights surrounding participation, appointment times were arranged at a venue that was convenient to the participants.

3.4.2 Data Collection

In order to analyse how participants make sense of their experiences, a flexible data collection instrument was required. The most common method of data collection in IPA is the
semi-structured interview. Smith (2004) comments that, ‘this form of data collection might be considered the exemplary one for this type of research,’ (p.50). When utilising semi-structured interviews as a collection tool, the researcher enters the interview with a set of predetermined questions called an interview schedule. The researcher directs the questions towards the aspects of lived experience. However, the interview schedule is only a guide and is not used to dictate the interview (Eatough & Smith, 2008), but is merely a basis for conversation. Semi-structured interviews allow for greater flexibility into novel areas which produces rich data. It also aids in rapport-building (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

As the aim of IPA is to enter the psychological and social world of the participant, the participant directs the interview. Being an expert on their own experience, the participant must be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their story (Smith, 2004). However, this form of collection does reduce the amount of control the researcher has, and can take longer to carry out and analyse. Semi-structured interviews were utilised for this study in order to gain an insider’s perspective of the client experiences of EAP.

Questions on the interview schedule were not explicit or difficult in nature as this would have forced the participant to answer in a specific way, thus jeopardising the phenomenological endeavour (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Rather, questions followed a funnelling technique whereby general questions were asked first, thereby gaining the participant’s own view from the outset (Smith & Osborn, 2008). These questions were followed by prompts or more specific questions if the participant had difficulty answering. Questions were neutral, avoided assumptions or jargon, and were open-ended (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each interview was a real-time dialogue between two individuals and therefore the conversation flowed in directions that were unanticipated. Leaving the script and moving deeper into the personal experiences of an individual is at the heart of rich IPA research (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions included the researcher’s questions and all semantic notes such as false starts, pauses, laughs, apparent mistakes, or
any speech dynamic that was considered remarkable (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Following IPA, including prosodic features of talk was not necessary (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Transcriptions were analysed in conjunction with the original recordings and used as the main data source from which themes were identified.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

The aim of conducting data analysis in IPA is to understand the content and complexity of meaning rather than to measure the frequency of meaning (Smith & Osborn, 2008). To do this the researcher needs to engage in an interpretative relationship with the transcript. The meanings from the interviews are not readily available but need to be obtained through a process of interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Analysis of IPA assumes that an individual’s account tells the researcher something about their private thoughts and feelings which in turn describe their experiences. Transcripts are dealt with individually, thus the researcher goes through the same process with each transcript before merging the information.

Following from the phenomenological and interpretive nature of IPA, there are two levels of analysis that are important for the IPA researcher to attune to, in order for the research to be properly explored, understood and communicated (Larkin et al., 2006). These two levels correspond to the two primary aims of IPA. The first level, also described as first-order by Larkin et al. (2006), simply summarises what the participants have described regarding their perceptions and experiences. It is an empathetic, descriptive level of interpretation (Willig, 2009). This corresponds with the aim of describing the participant’s world and attempting to understand what it is like from their perspective. The second level of analysis requires the researcher to deal with the data in a more speculative fashion in order to provide a critical and conceptual commentary. This requires interpreting the participant’s claims from a psychological perspective, and/or a wider socio-cultural context (Larkin et al., 2006). The manner of interpreting corresponds to the aim of interpretative sense-making in IPA. This
enables the researcher to consider what it actually means for the participants to have made those specific claims about their experience. This process can go beyond what the participant would actually be aware of. Most of the interpretative levels employed in IPA are centred in empathy and meaning recollection (Eatough & Smith, 2008). It is imperative that empathetic readings are primary, and only then are critical, speculative reflections given (Smith, 2004). As the researcher is always working in the hermeneutic circle, all interpretations must be grounded in the experience of the participant (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

There are five stages in IPA. These were utilised in the analysis of data in the present study:

Stage one: First encounter with the text

Stage two: Identification of primary themes

Stage three: Clustering themes

Stage four: Creating summary tables

Stage five: Writing up

The first stage in analysis involves reading the transcript numerous times in order to become familiar with the text (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Each transcript was read and reread. While doing this, comments on language, similarities, differences, contradictions, recurring phrases, or amplifications were noted. The researcher’s own emotions, questions and descriptions were also noted in a separate column (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). At this stage notes were used to document points that the researcher had observed while engaging with the text.

Once comments had been made the researcher returned to the beginning of the text and began documenting themes. Themes were on a slightly higher level of abstraction than the previous comments, and psychological terminology was used (Smith & Osborn, 2008).
During this process connections to the original transcript were consistently made in order to clarify what the participant actually said. Hence the themes needed to allow for theoretical connection within and across participants as well as to stay grounded in what was originally said (Eatough & Smith, 2008). These guidelines were followed throughout the entire text, with no attempt to omit any sections of the transcript. At this stage, disconfirming themes were identified. When material appeared that did not fit the emerging picture, the researcher revisited earlier transcripts to confirm that nothing was missing or had been misunderstood (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008).

Emergent themes were then chronologically listed separately, as they came up in the text. Connections were sought between them. Once connections were made, theoretical clustering was undertaken. Some themes clustered together while others appeared as superordinate concepts. As the themes were clustered, meaning was once again checked with the transcript to continually verify that the themes made a connection with the participant’s words. At this point the researcher used her own interpretative resources to make sense of what the person was saying and at the same time checked that the sense made was what was really said (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The clusters were then given a name, representing the superordinate themes.

The next stage was to produce a table of themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This table was organised with the main superordinate clusters as headings, with the relating themes listed underneath each one. An identifier was added to each theme in order to easily retrace the theme to the original source. During this process certain themes that did not fit into the main superordinate clusters or were not very rich in evidence were dropped. However, disconfirming cases were discussed and noted separately.

Once the table of themes was produced for the first participant, the researcher moved on to the second and third participants. Each participant’s transcript was analysed from scratch. This was done so that each person’s experience could be clearly represented. A great deal
was learnt about each case before connections were made between cases (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Themes emerging from one person’s experiences were not used to help orient the other participants’ experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). After a table of themes was produced for each participant, a final table of superordinate themes was constructed (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In order to construct this table the convergence and divergence between each case was addressed. Themes had to be prioritised and reduced depending on prevalence, richness of the passages and how the theme illuminates the area of interest. As before, the original transcripts and earlier themes were reviewed in order to keep interacting with the data (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

The final stage was concerned with writing up the final themes in the analysis and the discussion section (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Analysis continued in the writing-up process as the table of themes was translated into a narrative account (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Here the themes were explained and illustrated. Care was taken to distinguish clearly between what was said and the researcher’s interpretation of what was said. Ideally, this final narrative should move between levels of interpretation, from description to more conceptual interpretation (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

3.5 Personal reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher’s influence is acknowledged as being part of the research process (Willig, 2008). This is called reflexivity. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting on the values of the researcher and the impact these may have on the research and its findings (Willig, 2008). This means more than just acknowledging personal biases, but also reflecting on personal reactions or emotional responses to the research context and the data. IPA acknowledges the role of the researcher as an inseparable part of the process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). As the researcher is always involved in a circular process of understanding and interpreting, reflexivity must be considered continually in all aspects of
the research. Thus, professional self-awareness must be developed and explored in each stage of IPA.

For this reason the impact of my values and ideas should be noted. As a horse owner, my interest in horses and EAP may contribute to how I construct meaning and react to the research context. My personal interests also played a role in the development of the research question. As a member of EAPISA, a training EAP practitioner and a client of EAP, I was personally interested in exploring EAP through the experiences of others. As EAP is a developing research field, I am also professionally motivated to further the research, in anticipation of a doctoral study into EAP. Thus my interest and personal experience with EAP and horses creates a bias toward EAP as a useful approach to psychotherapy and an understudied research field. This may have influenced the way in which I interpreted the text and reacted to the participants. As a part of the hermeneutic circle of IPA, I had to be aware of this and bracket my personal preferences when conducting interviews and interpreting data so as to not contaminate the participants experience with my own.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the data: Considering reliability and validity

3.6.1 Reliability

The importance of reliability in qualitative data is debatable, as qualitative research aims to explore unique experiences, and does not aim to measure a particular variable (Willig, 2008). Yardley (2007) questions if reliability is appropriate for qualitative research as the purpose of the research is to offer one of many possibilities, and thus the aim should not be in generating similar findings. However, even though generalisations cannot be made in small-scale qualitative studies, some may argue that if an experience is possible it may also be possible to see it on a universal scale (Willig, 2008). Thus, even though we do not know how many people may share the same experience, once it has been identified it is available within a culture or society. This may link with theoretical generalisability, as in order to further the research there need to be links between researches made in the same domain. In the
current study on client experiences of EAP, reliability was not the main factor considered, as
the study was focused on individual experiences. However, in due course, further research
may aim to move beyond the data and consider EAP as an approach to psychotherapy in
general.

3.6.2. Core principles for evaluating validity

In all research endeavours it is important to establish validity of the data (Willig, 2008).
Validity judges how the research has been carried out and whether the findings can be seen
as trustworthy and useful (Yardley, 2007). Core principles should be seen throughout the
research study in order to evaluate validity. During the research process the principles
outlined by Yardley (2007) have been utilised. These principles include sensitivity to context,
commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance (Yardley,
2007). This EAP research study fulfilled these criteria by observing the following:

3.6.2.1 Sensitivity to context

Sensitivity to context may be established through demonstrating sensitivity to the existing
literature and theory, the socio-cultural setting of the study (Yardley, 2007), and the material
obtained from the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus the researcher
endeavoured to demonstrate these aspects through allowing patterns and meanings to
emerge through engagement with the participants’ perspectives; by studying relevant
theoretical and empirical literature to address gaps in knowledge; by constructing open-
ended questions that encouraged open communication; and by being open to alternative
interpretations of the participants.

3.6.2.2 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2007) describes commitment that involves in-depth engagement with the topic and
through developing competence and skill in the method used. By rigour, Yardley (2007)
refers to thorough data collection and the depth and breadth of the analysis. The researcher
attempted to show commitment and rigour through applying idiographic methods which enabled detailed depth into EAP; by giving evidence to sampling techniques; by reading various information on IPA; and by maintaining continuous training and supervision through the research process.

### 3.6.2.3 Coherence and transparency

Transparency refers to how clearly the stages of the research process are described in the write-up, as well as the reflexivity of the researcher (Yardley, 2007), whereas coherence looks at the consistency between the research that has been carried out and the underlying theoretical assumptions of the approach being utilised (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher strived to attain transparency and coherence by making sense of the topic of EAP and client experiences as a coherent whole; by advocating fit between the research question, the methods used and the interpretation of the data; by not advocating the findings as fact or reality; and by allowing transparency of the procedure, the findings and researcher reflexivity.

### 3.6.2.4 Impact and importance

The final principle is impact and importance, which refers to the relative value of the research (Yardley, 2007). To this end the researcher attempted to show that this study will have a valid impact on the growing body of knowledge on EAP and client experiences of EAP, in the hope that further research may develop as a result of these findings.

### 3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are imperative for research since they serve to protect both the research participant and the researcher. One of the key ethical considerations in any research endeavour is informed consent. This provides the participant with information about the purpose of the study, how the data will be utilised and what participation requires of them (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In this study each participant signed a written consent form.
consent form outlined a description of the study, the procedure of a session, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw.

Confidentiality is another key ethical consideration. Confidentiality refers to withholding any identifying information about the participant (Willig, 2008). A registered psychologist was approached to request client permission to be recommended for the study, in order to maintain client confidentiality in the recruiting process. These participants were clients of the aforementioned psychologist. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process and report. The only people who were aware of the respondents’ identities were the researcher and the referring psychologist. Participants were made aware of this in their consent form.

All data was securely kept in a locked box at a separate location. Audio tapes were coded and the participant had the right to listen to her tape at any time and could have requested for it to be destroyed. Names and identities of clients were not disclosed.

Participants reserved the right to withdraw from the current study (Willig, 2008). Voluntary participation was explained to each client; therefore participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any stage, without prejudice. Finally, participants were informed of the aims of the research. They were invited to read the full research report upon its completion.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the methodology of the current research study. As the study aimed to explore the clients’ in-depth perspectives on EAP, the use of a qualitative paradigm was discussed. This study fits within a qualitative paradigm as it required data that had texture and quality that was focused on EAP through participant-defined meanings. Phenomenology as a broad field that fundamentally studies experience and/or consciousness was also presented. This term was reviewed in order to give context to the current study’s chosen research method. IPA, as the research method, was then highlighted. Following the method
of IPA, sampling and data collection within this framework was discussed. Lastly, analysis of
the data and ethical considerations were highlighted. This chapter presented a description of
how the current study was conducted. The next chapter discusses the analysis of the data
as specified from an IPA framework.
CHAPTER 4

INTRA- AND INTER-INDIVIDUAL ANALYSIS OF THE PARTICIPANTS’ DESCRIPTION OF THEIR EXPERIENCE OF EAP

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the participants’ individual descriptions of their experiences of EAP. These descriptions are provided with supporting excerpts from the participant’s interview. After a discussion of each participant’s themes, the overarching themes across all three participants are presented through inter-individual analysis.

4.2 Intra-individual analysis

4.2.1 Analysis of participant one

P1 is a 47-year-old divorced female. She had been attending EAP sessions for several months and had recently joined an EAP wellness programme with three other women (these women were not participants of the current study). She was attending EAP sessions at the time of the interview. P1 was unemployed and expressed a need for a new start after her divorce.

On the day of the interview P1 was neatly groomed in casual dress. She was polite and well-mannered. Rapport was established during the interview process. P1 appeared anxious at the start of the interview but warmed as the interview progressed. However, even though rapport was established, P1 presented as a reserved person, who often needed encouragement to describe her experiences. P1 did not appear to be confident in her self-expression. Her conversation was punctuated by long pauses where it appeared as if she desired time to think before expressing herself. P1 became emotional as she explored her experiences of EAP and requested time to regain control of herself during the interview process.
4.2.2 Discussion of P1’s experience of EAP and emerging themes

The exploration of P1’s transcript in regard to her experiences of EAP was discussed and analysed. This exploration resulted in the following themes.

4.2.2.1 Emotions elicited through the EAP session

A central theme which emerged from P1’s account was the experience of intense emotion during EAP sessions. P1’s emotions appeared to have been elicited through her participation in the exercises and her interactions with the horse. She appeared to have experienced emotional awareness as a result of the emotional intensity of the experience. Furthermore, P1’s increased awareness seems to have enabled her to articulate her feelings more accurately.

The intensity of the emotion provoked through her experience of EAP can be illustrated by the following quote:

- “And all the horses were coming towards us… that felt awesome to see all the horses come toward me” (becomes emotional and tearful). (Pauses).

P1 was unable to verbalise the full impact of the emotions that were elicited in the session. However, her non-verbal reactions communicated the intensity.

- Researcher: Is there one experience particularly that brings out more emotion than others, or really brings out something inside of you?

  P1: I like to hug them. (Becomes tearful and emotional. Looks down. Unable to speak for a few seconds).

P1 was able to verbalise her feelings through identification of the emotions that she experienced in the sessions. This is demonstrated in her retrospective account below:

- So I haltered Nicky but I had no dominance over her, no leadership, no control. She basically ignored me … And I was pulling and she was busy in the bucket but she
came up with her head and got me on the nose. So that was umm ... I felt silly and I felt hopeless ... That was a bad memory.

4.2.2.2 Role of the horse

P1 reported that it was her love for horses that drew her to EAP. She described having loved horses all her life, but not having had the opportunity to interact with them. Consequently, P1 expressed excitement at the opportunity of having horses involved in the therapeutic process. P1’s interactions with the horses seem to have played a considerable role in her development of emotional awareness and understanding. Her motivation for seeking EAP is illustrated by the following quote:

- I love horses, so it was basically that that prompted me to EAP.

P1 engaged with several horses during her therapy sessions. She appeared to have developed different relationships with various horses. However, P1 did not appear to have developed a close relationship with a specific horse. Four main themes relating to the role of the horse in her experience of EAP became apparent in the interview. These are discussed in greater detail below.

4.2.2.2.1 The role of the horse as a reflection of the self

A central experience that emerged from P1’s descriptions was the role of the horse as a reflection of herself. P1 appears to have experienced the horse as capable of reflecting her behaviours, characteristics and interactional patterns through its behaviour. It seems that P1 developed internal awareness through the horse’s reflections. Consequently, P1 appears to have been motivated to generate change after having been confronted with aspects of her self in the session.
This experience of reflection is illustrated through the following quotes:

- Whatever their behaviour is it brings out characteristics, not characteristics but incidents in my life. That I need to pay attention to. So it’s good.

- At one stage I queried Cindy whether I should continue or do something else. And that instance of me questioning Cindy he then walked away from me. Umm… so they explained to me why that happened. I had control of him and leadership over him. So he stood still while I walked. But the minute I doubt myself he then he started walking away. Umm…so that was quite insightful…(becomes emotional)…because I do doubt myself quite a lot.

4.2.2.2 The participant’s experience of acceptance from the horse

P1 appeared to have experienced the horses as providing her with unconditional acceptance. She described the horses as responding to her and accepting her without judgment. This experience of acceptance seems to have elicited strong emotion in P1. An example of this experience of acceptance is described below:

- They took me to the paddock the one day and … umm … we walked in through the gate, walked in. And all the horses were coming towards us. But that felt awesome to see all the horse come toward me (gets more emotional and teary). Umm … Taryn and Cindy said that it’s a sign of they … umm … they accepted me as part of their herd.

4.2.2.3 The participant’s identification with the horses’ behaviour

As P1 interacted with the horses she began to relate to their instinctive survival reactions. P1 seems to have learnt about her own reactions in her environment through relating to the horses’ natural behaviours. Consequently, P1’s identification with the horse’s behaviours appears to have facilitated personal growth and self-understanding.
This experience is highlighted below.

- I can apply their, I can relate to their – their instincts and their behaviour. If I compare how I will react in certain situations, umm. So I can relate it to their behaviour, their natural instincts.

4.2.2.3 Uncertainty in the progression of EAP

P1 appeared to have experienced uncertainty with regard to certain aspects of EAP. This uncertainty seems to have been created by difficulties experienced in the sessions. P1 identified two main aspects that initiated the greatest feelings of uncertainty. Firstly, she described her difficulty in connecting therapeutic metaphors to her own life. Secondly, she appeared to have struggled with the non-directive, open-ended nature of EAP. These two aspects are discussed in more detail below.

4.2.2.3.1 Uncertainty in the non-directive nature of EAP

Initially P1 appeared to have found the non-directive nature of the EAP sessions difficult. It seems that P1 was unsure of what was expected of her in this unusual environment. P1 appeared to have been encouraged to use her own initiative and creativity in sessions which she reported as challenging. Nevertheless, P1 seems to have persevered through the challenges. While reflecting on this process, she reported that she had learnt to take more control and be more confident in her own abilities. The quotes below demonstrate P1’s experience.

- Umm … I was standing there, don’t know really how to build the obstacles (becomes emotional) or how to make use of the equipment that’s there. Ummm … so then I will just build something just to get it done. So I don’t know if everyone experienced that or if it’s just me because of my, my whole composition (still emotional). So ya, that’s the only thing I’m battling with.
But ya, it’s difficult for me to get that creativity and to build my emotions or my future
or whatever. I get all the props, I just … can’t apply myself (becomes emotional when
discussing this).

4.2.2.3.2 The experienced challenge of making connections

A further aspect that appears to have created confusion for P1 was the connection of
metaphors to her life, discussed in session. P1 seems to have found it challenging to make
the connection between the team’s interpretations and her personal experiences. However,
she described becoming more aware of her emotions, her cognition and behaviours, as a
result of this challenge. The quotes below illustrate the challenges P1 experienced.

- Ummm … confusing sometimes. Specifically if you need to take the horse’s
  behaviour and then connect it to something in your life metaphorically.

- So I found it difficult at first to – to connect or take the horses action and apply it to
  my feelings or my life or my problems that I was sorting out.

- I think it’s necessary because, although I battled, at the end of the day that brings out
  something that I need to work on.

4.2.2.4 Personal change

P1 identified personal change as a central experience when reflecting on her EAP process.
She articulated experiencing three distinct changes: a greater awareness of her cognition,
emotions, patterns and behaviours; becoming more confident and being open to new
experiences and ways of thinking. P1 attributed these transformations to her interaction with
the horses and her experience of the EAP sessions. This is detailed in the following quote:

- The horses’ behaviour, the trust they’ve got in people, ummm … and the relationship
  that they can have with people once they’ve put their trust in people. And then just
working with the horses themselves. And then whatever comes out in the EAP in session. All of that combined.

These changes are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

### 4.2.2.4.1 Self-awareness

P1 appeared to have become increasingly aware of her cognition, emotions, behaviours and patterns of interaction during the course of therapy. It seems that as P1 pondered over her experiences of EAP she began to recognise patterns and themes. It is possible that P1’s self-awareness enabled her to consciously make changes and connect emotions and insights to areas outside of the session. The quotes below illustrate this increase in self-awareness.

- I don’t have boundaries and – and umm ... because of me being boundary-less I allowed things which was inappropriate or I myself, might act inappropriately and all that.
- … probably the control, because I didn’t have control over her. Umm … and because I tried to – to get my life sorted out as well. Umm … I’m recently divorced so going through all that … It was just the aspect … you feel so helpless. Umm … ugh, probably because that, I was feeling helpless at that stage, and I have had several in my personal life as well (begins to get emotional).

### 4.2.2.4.2. An increase in self-confidence

P1 described a change in her self-confidence as a result of her experiences of EAP. P1 attributed her experience of enhanced confidence to her increased emotional awareness and broadened capacity to confront challenges. This is illustrated below:

- I’ve learnt a bit more self-confidence. Umm ... and it opened my eyes, so I can look at things instead of withdrawing like I did in the past.
- Being more aware of myself and umm … gaining confidence, believing in myself. Ummm, I was like a turtle that was withdrawn in his shell, umm … I still tend to do that from time to time … but … umm I’ve had a few scenarios where I’ve challenged instead of withdrawn.

4.2.2.4.3 Openness to new ways of thinking

P1 described an experience of transformation in regard to the manner in which she previously encountered the world. P1 defined herself as someone who viewed the world very narrowly. However, through her interaction with the horses, she reported that she was able to ‘take the blinkers off’. This change in P1 appears to have broadened her way of thinking about and confronting the world. This transformation is portrayed in the quote below.

- they help me in umm … by taking away those eye clamps that they normally put on the horses, cart horses, to take those clamps away and have a broader view and then just the straight and narrow way of thinking.

4.2.2.5 Long term applicability

P1 reported experiencing a need for further ‘follow through’ from the EAP process. She commented that concrete applicability to her life outside of the session would be beneficial. It appears that P1 desired further connections to be drawn between the inner growth she was experiencing and her day to day life. However, P1 did not specify how this need could have been met. This experienced need is illustrated below:

- One thing I can maybe say is that umm … is good to highlight the areas in my life which you can connect metaphorically with the horse’s behaviour. Umm ... umm ... I’m trying to say is umm … the sessions are very good but umm … I’m battling myself for instance to apply those things so I’m thinking that maybe there should be a follow through or something like that.
4.2.3 Participant Two

P2, a 48-year-old white female, is divorced but living with a new partner. P2 had attended several EAP sessions over a period of months but had not attended psychotherapy for some weeks due to personal reasons. P2 had seen a number of therapists and had been exposed to a variety of psychotherapeutic paradigms. She was also a past psychology student and was able to use the terminology.

P2 presented as a fashionably dressed and well groomed woman. She was confident and outspoken during the interview process. She was eager to discuss her experiences and required little prompting or encouragement. She was cooperative and rapport was easily established. She became visibly tearful when recounting her experiences and appeared deep in thought on occasion. The impact of P2’s EAP experience was evident through her emotional tone and demeanour. Nevertheless, P2 spoke freely throughout the interview and gave detailed accounts of her experiences and thought processes.

4.2.4 Discussion of P2’s experiences of EAP and emerging themes

The description of P2’s experiences was interpreted according to an IPA framework. The following themes with regard to her experiences of EAP emerged.

4.2.4.1 The centrality of the horse to P2’s overall experience

P2 reported that the horse played a significant role for her in the course of her EAP experience. P2 appears to have developed a close bond with a particular horse, Midnight. She described feelings of safety when in the presence of Midnight. This experience of security seems have provided P2 with a space to open up and confront her life and relationships. Her descriptions of the horse and her connection with him are elaborated in the analysis below.
4.2.4.1.1 The importance of the relationship with the horse

P2 gave many examples of the importance of Midnight and their relationship during the interview. It appears that P2 experienced a connection with Midnight from the first session. She described her relationship with Midnight as a key motivation for remaining in therapy. P2’s experience of security around Midnight appears to have enabled her to be open to the communications from the team. The importance of this relationship can be detailed by means of the following quotes.

- I had to create stumbling blocks … or some track or … I had to create something in the arena with stuff. And Midnight came spontaneously from the back right up to the, the drum, he pushed it over and he started rolling the drum and then coercing me pushing me to do the same. So the two of us rolled that drum the length of the arena. And when I put it right up again, he pushed it over again and we started again. And I actually started laughing, because we are interacting and he is trying to explain something to me. And maybe it was getting rid of the stumbling blocks as Taryn explained. And that to me was absolutely amazing. Because he is such a … almost stoic horse … he is not someone who is … you know … la-di da … he is very boom … here I am, okay (changes into a deep voice), so that to me was absolutely marvellous that that happened.

- But I do love Midnight (smiles) and I’ll go back just for him (laughs).

- And he always has something to nibble on, and I ask them please don’t give him food when I take him back, you can give him the food when I leave please, because he will eat it, and then he is with his back to me. But you know what happens which is really wonderful, he will have a nibble on whatever grass that is in his stable … and then he would turn around … he would turn around and come and stand with me. And he would lick and chew and lick and chew and he would watch me until I am out of sight and then only would he go and eat.
4.2.4.2 The role of the horse for the participant

P2 appears to have experienced Midnight as fulfilling various roles in the process of EAP. These roles are illustrated in the following sections.

4.2.4.2.1 The participant's experience of the horse as a source of support

P2 appears to have experienced Midnight as fulfilling a supportive function in the session. P2 reported that when sessions were particularly difficult, Midnight would create a barrier between her and the team by means of his body. When this occurred, P2 described Midnight as a filter which enabled her to feel safe to share painful experiences. P2 seems to have turned to Midnight for security at times when she felt uncomfortable or nervous. She described feeling more confident to explore her experiences, emotions and cognitions as a result of the support she experienced from Midnight. This theme is demonstrated by the following quotes.

- He was the barrier which made it possible to say things that I don’t think I would have said in the first session, the second, the third, the fourth. It would have taken me a very long time if ever, to share some of the things with my psychologist.

- He often moved between us, blocking me off. So that they are on the other side, and he is quite a high horse. So it’s almost as if he … I experienced it as … not protecting, but he is creating this invisible shield umm, it’s okay share. I will filter it for you. And they can get it on the other side.

- And when I’m very sore and I can’t speak, he would come behind me, almost putting me in the middle of the circle. He is not moving me but he is putting me in the middle of the circle.
4.2.4.2.2 The horse as an emotional sponge

P2 appeared to have experienced Midnight as a ‘sponge’, which could ‘absorb’ the intensity of her emotions. In the interview P2 described her emotions as flowing into Midnight. This experience appeared to have assisted her in coping with difficult emotions that were elicited in the session. P2 described experiencing feelings of relief and comfort by means of Midnight’s ‘absorbing’ function. This experience is illustrated by the following quotes.

- The moment I stepped into the ring … and the horse was there … it was … (sigh) … it was drawing me to it. And I just…not grabbed the horse … but I … I … touched it immediately. I almost hung on the horse, and it was like a sponge. It takes everything that is in you, it takes out. By that I mean the negative stuff. The worries, the anxiety, the stressful, the hurtful.

- This horse was just there like a sponge. Waiting for me to spill whatever emotion there was. Not verbally necessarily … umm … to spill it and to give it to him.

4.2.4.2.3 The participant’s experience of the horse as a facilitator

P2 described experiencing Midnight as a facilitator in EAP sessions. She reported that Midnight facilitated the session by physically positioning the therapist, horse specialist and herself through his movement. P2 stated that Midnight’s behaviour enabled the team to form a more cohesive unit. Furthermore, P2 commented that Midnight would ‘conduct’ the sessions in a manner that was most beneficial to her. P2’s experience of the horse as a facilitator is described in the quotes below.

- He made it possible for us to form a group. A triangle, actually. He just moved in a way that moved Cindy to stand in a certain way, Taryn in a certain way and me. Because I started to retreat a little bit. Umm … and he made it possible for us to form this triangle.
• Midnight was umm … he was like a … orchestra conductor, I would say. He would be there and he would direct us, who standing where and why. And it often happened, especially when I’m sharing something that is really sore, that I would move away … in distance. And I would fold my arms, and I didn’t know that I was doing this, but I was retreating. And Midnight had this magic way of, in some or other way he moved and he brought Cindy and Taryn closer. Not me closer, he left me exactly where I am, but he moved them closer. So that we in a triangle again. It’s continuously this triangle thing.

4.2.4.2.4 The behaviours of the horse as a reflection of internal states

In addition, P2 appeared to have experienced Midnight’s behaviour as a reflection of her thoughts and emotions. This experienced reflection appeared to have assisted P2 in becoming more self-aware. P2 reported that she was able to connect Midnight’s behaviour to her life with assistance from the therapeutic team. She described this experience of reflection by the following remark:

• Whatever the horse is doing, is a projection of what I’m doing, what I’m thinking, what I’m feeling.

4.2.4.3 Intensity of the experience of EAP

P2 described her overall EAP experience as intense. She reported that the intensity of her encounters in session often remained with her for a prolonged period. The intensity of the experience appeared to have been due to several factors. These included, the experience of strong emotions elicited in the sessions, the impact of the horse’s behaviour, the interpretations of the therapeutic team and her personal accomplishments. These themes are illustrated in greater detail:
4.2.4.3.1 The experience of overwhelming emotion

P2 described experiencing overwhelming emotions in the EAP sessions. Her emotions appear to have been elicited through her participation in the activities and her interactions with Midnight. P2 also described the intense emotional release that came from being in Midnight’s presence. P2 became visibly upset when reflecting on these experiences of emotion during the interview.

The experience of overwhelming emotion is illustrated in the quotes below.

- But with this horse, it was as if, and he was just standing, he was standing very umm … still … but strong. And he just took everything away. And it was completely overwhelming.

- He was just standing there and he was absorbing everything that was in me at that moment. And that is the intensity. I cried a lot.

- But the moment I touched the horse, it was like a magic something. All the emotion came out. And I held him … and I spent a lot of time crying.

The experience of overwhelming emotions appeared to have been a catalyst for P2. Consequently, she decided to admit herself to a psychiatric clinic for inpatient treatment. P2 ascribed this decision to the intensity of EAP and her relationship with Midnight:

- I think to be honest it drove me to the point where I ended up in a psychiatric clinic. It was bound to happen, it’s not Midnight’s fault, but it was bound to happen, it was always sort of smoothed over. Let’s not go there, in normal sessions, let’s not go there, or I didn’t realise that I could share this, or I had no … the feedback was different. But with the horse and the horse’s feedback and the intensity of the emotion with the horse, I think, brought us to that point much sooner and in a more effective way.
4.2.4.3.2 Feedback from the horse’s behaviour

P2 further described the intensity of her experience of the feedback that was communicated through the horse’s behaviours. The meaning of the horse’s behaviours was interpreted by the therapeutic team and confirmed by P2. P2 appeared to have found this feedback intense as she experienced it as coming directly from the horse. She portrayed this feedback as being honest, consistent and unavoidable. This is illustrated in the following quotes.

- That whole episode with that horse was for me so intense and so ... upsetting ... because I’m … and I’m sure that happens when – when … you don’t get honest feedback from people and now you get it from an animal and you don’t want to accept it. I’m sure maybe that’s why I’m so upset about it.

- And the feedback therefore is also very consistent. And it comes and it comes. And you can’t prevent the feedback. You can’t say I don’t want to talk about that right now. Midnight will still do it. You can’t avoid it. I think that’s what pushes, not pushes, yes pushes it to the point, to the breaking point, or to the crux or to the whatever point you need to get to, you get to with the horse very quickly.

4.2.4.4 Personal accomplishments

P2 described the joyous but intense feeling that came from success in the EAP arena. P2 appeared to have experienced this intensity for a prolonged period after sessions. Her confidence and trust appeared to have increased by means of these accomplishments. P2 explained this theme when reflecting on a successful join-up exercise she experienced after several failed attempts:

- But when she told me (that P2 had achieved join-up with Midnight) I was floating home that day (laughs). I think I drove at 20km an hour. It was the most magnificent feeling for me ... that I managed a join-up and maybe because of that join-up everything after that was so positive with Midnight.
4.2.4.5 The experience of uncertainty and ambivalence in EAP

Although P2 described feelings of security when with Midnight, she expressed feelings of discomfort with other aspects of EAP. P2 identified two main sources of uncertainty in her experience of the EAP sessions. The first aspect appears to have been with regard to the unstructured nature of EAP and the second in regard to the presence of the horse specialist. These themes of uncertainty are illustrated below.

4.2.4.5.1 Feelings of uncertainty with regard to the nature of EAP

P2 appeared to have experienced feelings of uncertainty and discomfort with regard to the nature of the EAP sessions. P2 seems to have expected a thorough explanation of what would occur in EAP. She appeared to have required information in regard to the ‘structure’ of sessions, what was expected of her as the client, identification of team members and explanation of their roles. However, P2 did not appear to receive the information she desired, resulting in feelings of discomfort and uncertainty.

- One thing that made it difficult for me with the EAP. Which is different from normal therapy … no one explained to me what’s going to happen with EAP. I read on the internet all the good things about EAP. There is not a lot unfortunately, on the internet … umm … but the process was not explained to me. And I would have appreciated that.

During her interview, P2 mentioned that the experience of uncertainty may have been beneficial. However, her feelings of ambivalence remained. This is expressed in the quote below:

- Maybe it’s good that it wasn’t explained to me, maybe if it was explained I would have been apprehensive. I don’t know if it’s good or bad.
4.2.4.5.2 Feelings of ambivalence with regard to the presence of the horse specialist

It appears that P2 experienced ambivalence regarding the presence of the horse specialist during EAP sessions. Even though P2 seems to have understood the role of the horse specialist, she described feeling uncertain in regard to the horse therapist’s presence throughout the therapy process. However, P2 also described the value which the horse specialist’s interpretations brought to her experience of EAP. Her experience of ambivalence seems to have created feelings of apprehension with regard to sharing her vulnerability in the presence of the team. P2's feelings of ambivalence are illustrated in the quotes below.

- But the fact that Taryn was there was for me concerning. Because I don't know her... I don't exactly know what her role is. And some of things I don't want to say in her presence. Because ... not that I don't trust her it's very personal ... and I ... I don't know ... I am a very personal person.

- Umm so ... having Taryn there was ... I was anxious about that. I quickly realised that she was there to interpret what – what Midnight was doing. But still ... to this day ... it's uncomfortable for me.

- I don't see why Taryn should be there. It's just uncomfortable for me. Because of some of the things are really intensely personal. And ... which now means not only does Midnight know ... which is for me the most important element here. I almost say person (laughs). I'll take him home and put him in my room. (Laughs) umm ... I'm in love with that horse ... but not only does he know ... but Cindy knows and now there is a third person as well. And that is uncomfortable, especially because I didn't know what was going to happen. But she is good at what she does, there is no doubt about that.
4.2.4.6 An expressed desire for more time to reflect

P2 conveyed experiencing a need for more time to process and discuss her experiences in session. She described the sessions as too short to accomplish the activity and reflect on the experience. P2 described attempting to reflect on the sessions at home, but appeared to have found this unhelpful. It appeared that P2 required time to reflect on the session in order to facilitate connections and personal growth. P2’s expressed need is illustrated by the quote below.

- And also I had something significant to tell them. You see, and that’s what … it makes it so difficult sometimes with the EAP is that, if something happened during the week or there is something really important to tell, there is no time for exercise. Then you want to spend time telling it … It’s almost as if you want to now, umm … reflect on okay, this is where we are now, this is where we plan to go next … is there anything significant that you need to reflect on. What next can we do with the horse, that kind of thing. And I think if that is there, umm … it would be even more effective.

P2 stated that alternating between office sessions and arena sessions could have maximised her time utilisation and personal benefit in EAP.

- And then it’s almost as if I want to say, have three EAP session, one office session, three with the horse, one office, three with the horse, one office because that one office one is stuff that – that you need to share but it’s almost wasted to do it with the horse.

4.2.4.7 EAP as an effective psychotherapy

Overall, P2 described experiencing EAP as an effective psychotherapy. P2s description of efficacy seems to have been based on her experiences with other types of psychotherapy. P2 described EAP as effective for her with reference to the experiential nature of EAP and the role of the horse. These themes are now discussed in more detail.
4.2.4.7.1 Efficacy of EAP in comparison to other therapies

P2 described EAP as effective in comparison to other psychotherapies she had experienced. P2 seems to have attributed the experienced effectiveness of EAP to its experiential nature. She commented that EAP engaged various aspects of her self, including her emotions, cognitions and all five senses. P2 commented that she experienced more ‘progression’ in EAP in comparison to other forms of psychotherapy. She described noticing change after each session. This theme is made apparent in the following quotes.

- EAP…maybe I should say, first, over the years I’ve experienced psychoanalysis, like right from childhood … Umm … well, two, three other types of therapy. And of all the therapies that I have ever experienced, EAP is the most effective.
- EAP works very fast, very intense and very specific. Whereas other forms of therapy that I have experienced takes a very long time, and you regurgitated half the session what you’ve done the previous session and then you start with something new in the next session. Something like that. With Midnight, from the first time to the last time with Midnight, I could see the difference in myself.
- Normal therapy it is content-driven. You say something, someone reacts, asks a question, whatever. In EAP it doesn’t necessarily work like that, you would say something that is content, someone would react to that content, but the horse’s behaviour almost overrides the content. The horse’s behaviour speaks to your reaction to it. Your emotional reaction to it your … even your cognitive reaction to it. It speaks to that. I think that is the main difference, it is not content-driven. I think maybe therapy is not about the content. You’d know if it was about the content, I could write a book and it should be done.
4.2.4.7.2 Efficacy of EAP as a result of the role of the horse

P2 attributed a large part of her experience of efficacy in EAP to the role of the horse. It appears that for P2, having interactions with Midnight in the sessions made the sessions more meaningful. P2 identified two specific aspects of Midnight’s behaviour that she experienced as effective. These were the experiences of consistency and acceptance. P2 described Midnight as the ‘magic ingredient’ to EAP and her personal growth. This is illustrated by the subsequent quotes.

- The fact that there is a horse there and the horse doesn’t judge and the horse doesn’t ask any questions or, umm … make life difficult for me. Makes it much easier, I don’t know if that explains it. So EAP for me is the most effective type of therapy that – that I have ever experienced, ever.

- I mean Midnight is not playing games, he is steadfast in reality. He is always the same. It’s the consistency of Midnight, I think it’s that consistency where there is no, you know, your therapist is not in a good mood or she is rushed. I think maybe that consistency of the horse makes a big difference.

- The horse is the magic ingredient. Would it work with a dog? No. Would it work with any other animal? I don’t think so. The horse is big, it’s steadfast, it’s consistent … it’s in charge. I think that’s the magic. Also, is that you are led to a point in a very special way. He leads you to a point where you can let go.

4.2.4 Participant Three

P3 is a 33-year-old white married female. She terminated therapy several months prior to the interview, after attending approximately eight EAP sessions. As part of her EAP process, P3 kept a diary in which she documented her experiences. P3 shared excerpts from this diary during the interview.
P3 was well groomed on presentation, and was dressed in casual attire. She presented as a petite woman with an animated personality. P3 was engaged and candid in our discussion and rapport was easily established. She was talkative but goal-directed, and required minimal prompting. P3’s report of her experiences was very structured. She displayed very little emotion during the interview and maintained a matter of fact attitude through most of the process. However, from time to time she would pause to reflect on her experience. On these occasions non-verbal signs of emotion were evident.

4.2.5 Discussion of P3’s experiences of EAP and emerging themes

Through the interpretation of the descriptions in P3’s transcript, the following themes pertaining to her experience of EAP emerged.

4.2.5.1 The participant’s experience of the horse in EAP

P3 described the horse as an essential element to her experience of EAP. The manner in which P3 experienced the horse can be illustrated in the quote below:

- He was my healing. He told me things that I couldn’t tell. You know what I’m saying. He spoke for me when I couldn’t speak. I didn’t know I was feeling certain ways … so he was my healing, he showed me things that I couldn’t see myself.

Or somebody wouldn’t be able to tell me myself.

P3 appeared to have experienced the horse as fulfilling three roles during EAP. Her descriptions of these roles are now presented.

4.2.5.1.1 The horse as a challenger

During the interview, P3 portrayed experiencing each EAP session as challenging her assumptions about who she was. P3 described experiences of being confronted with aspects of herself as a result of the horse’s behaviours and interactions. Consequently, P3
appeared to have experienced increased self-awareness as a result of the challenges presented by the horses.

P3’s experiences in this regard are illustrated below:

- Like everyone’s assumption is that this horse will just bond with you, walk with you, put that thing on, brush it, no sorry, it doesn’t work that way. And I think just having that because I think that’s how we are as humans; we just assume things will go our way.

- And umm eventually, when he eventually allowed me to rub him, it was the most unbelievable experience that I can ... I can’t even describe the experience that I felt ... it was like ... wow ... you know, he allowed me. It took a lot of work and it was on his grounds and not on my grounds. Because I am a control freak person, it has to be ... I want to touch you now, and I’m going to touch you now. And it wasn’t like that. He showed me that no sorry, it’s not going to happen that way. It’s going be on my terms and on my grounds.

4.2.5.1.2 The horse as a reflector of emotion

P3 appeared to have experienced the horse as reflecting her emotional state. P3 described projecting her emotions onto the horse. She appeared to have experienced the horse as ‘able’ to sense these projected emotions and reflect them by means of his behaviours. P3 seems to have become more aware of her emotional state at the time through her experience of the horse’s reflective behaviours.

This experience is illustrated by the following quotes.

- So I was feeling down, so I was projecting on the horse so he was feeling down, so he was projecting what I was feelings. That’s why he was uneasy ... and eventually when we did bond he just wanted to me to rub him, he didn’t want me to actually do
anything else but rub him. And that was actually how I was feeling. I just actually needed some love.

- So he was aware of all my emotions and umm ... ya, I had to basically ... I had to drop that. For example, if I had to sit with a person I can manipulate you and tell you whatever you wanted to hear or you know ... but with the horse you cannot do that ... it doesn't matter how you try to manipulate the horse, he can feel and sense what you are projecting.

4.2.5.1.3 The horse as a source of support

P3 appeared to have experienced the horse as a form of support in session. She described experiencing support by means of the horse’s behaviours. P3 seems to have experienced the horses as physically moving her toward the team when she felt isolated or emotional in sessions. It appeared that this experience of support provided P3 with a sense of security which enabled her to be open and vulnerable in sessions. Her experience of support from the horse is apparent in the quotes below.

- The halter on his face I was so overjoyed and he shared my happiness which brought me to such an emotional ... and yet I wanted so much to show my emotion by crying and ... I held myself back. And he took me to Cindy to show me that I do have support and its okay to show and be emotional.

- And I like wanted to cry, he actually walked with me to them, to their space. And uh ... that's when she said he is trying to show me that it is ok I have support, I must show my emotions. You know I don't have to be because I'm a very ... I keep my emotions to myself. I don't want to share, and I need support ... I need support. So that is what he showed me.
4.2.5.2 Intense emotional experiences

P3 recounted experiences of intense emotion in her interactions with the horses and the therapeutic team. She appeared to have experienced a variety of emotions, ranging from feelings of sadness to feelings of accomplishment. She described these intense emotional experiences as being the most memorable. P3 appeared to have experienced an increase in emotional awareness and emotional expression as a result of these intense emotional experiences.

This is evident in the subsequent quotes.

- I was disappointed and hurt … and I thought, but we bonded twice, why are you pushing me away, why are you rejecting me. You know I felt really disappointed because I was so excited and then I came to realise that wow, maybe that is what my husband is feeling.

- I was so overwhelmed with all the different emotions that I felt. So ya, it was very overwhelming for me … not overwhelming in bad sense … just, I don’t know … such a beautiful experience that I experienced with the horse.

4.2.5.2.1 Feelings of uncertainty

P3 described feelings of uncertainty in regard to the non-directive nature of EAP. She reported experiencing the lack of structure and direction in sessions unsettling. It appears that P3 required specific instruction and preparation throughout the EAP process. The experience of uncertainty seems to have been particularly dominant when interacting with a large herd of horses.

The experience of uncertainty is illustrated in P3’s quote of a specific EAP session.
There were about twenty horses, big ones, some with things over their eyes. She said off you go, go make a relationship, look at the horses. I was so nervous and scared of the unknown. I was not sure what these horses were going to do.

4.2.5.3 Meaning-making

P3 appeared to have developed insight into her emotions, her cognition and behaviours by means of reflection on her experiences of EAP. She seems to have made connections from insights gained in session to other aspects of her life. These connections appeared to have been facilitated by interactions with the horses and assistance from the team. By means of these connections, P3 seems to have made meaning from her experience of EAP. This meaning appeared to have been utilised outside the session in her personal relationships. P3 described the experience of these in-session connections by means of metaphors. This is illustrated below.

- The old horse was my old ways and by me taking the new horse, means that the old horse is my old ways and the new horse is my new ways … which suggests that your old ways will still try to follow you, no matter how you ignore it, it will still follow you, it is your decisions if you are going to let go of the old ways. Umm … ya, to leave the old behind me and it’s my choice, I can go back to the old horse if I want to … He was still trying to show me that he will keep following me and that old habits die hard. If I don’t let go and plan I’m going to go back to my old ways of doing things …

4.2.5.4 Personal accomplishments

P3 described the experience of achieving numerous accomplishments at the end of each EAP session. These accomplishments emerged from the connections she made in session. P3 described these connections as her ‘learnings’. A description of a ‘learning’ is presented below:
• So obviously the learnings that I received were that I’m not able to control things that are people or you know, only things that are dead. I can’t control situations or people and that I need to be able to take a step back at times and have patience. When I try and control the situation and sometimes by just stepping back and knowing it’s okay, that the task couldn’t not be done immediately, or to feel that I am a failure that I could not make a relationship with the horse, umm … in his time and when he felt that my emotion and body language was a true reflection, he allowed me to rub and bond with him.

P3 appeared to have attributed her ‘learnings’, or accomplishments, and the change that followed from the ‘learnings’ to the experiential nature of EAP. For P3 it seems to have been the physical experience of the emotions, behaviours and interactions in the session, as well as the immediate feedback from the horses, that enabled her to formulate her ‘learnings’. This is illustrated below.

• I think because it was face on, it was umm … going through feeling the emotion, being rejected, umm … having accomplishment, letting him rub me, all the exciting up and downs that made it worthwhile. Then somebody just telling me you need to be confident. And how do I do that? So it was the involvement of it, the involvement with the horse, with me. That was what the joy was. To feel it, to hurt, to be frustrated … and the most obvious out of everything … to bond with it. I think that’s the best thing that can actually happen.

4.2.5.5 Further needs experienced by P3

P3 reported that although she experienced the EAP sessions as beneficial to her increased sense of self and relationships, the intervention did not relieve the primary symptoms that brought her to therapy. P3 described her primary presenting problems as symptoms of anxiety and panic attacks. P3 appears to have experienced the anxiety and the panic attacks throughout the therapeutic process. P3 described this below:
• I really was making progress in my personal life, in my like I said, being assertive, and this and that and this and that. That made progress. But I still had the attack. I still had the anxiety and I still had the panic attacks.

P3 expressed two concerns that she felt may have limited the effectiveness of the experience of the EAP interventions for her.

It appeared that P3 experienced a need for additional direction from the team, which she felt should have specifically focused on her anxiety and panic attack symptoms. She referred to such guidance as ‘tools’ which she could have applied directly to her anxiety. P3 appeared to have experienced the EAP sessions as being too general, with a lack of focus on her primary problems.

This theme is illustrated in P3’s quote

• So she … I didn’t get tools on okay, yes, I’m a control freak, yes I’m this, yes I’m this … Okay, what do I do now, how do I change it, how do I fix it, what do I … Yes, that was lacking.

In addition, P3 reported a need for further time to process her in session experiences. She suggested that alternative arrangements be made to include ‘talk’ therapy in order for a combination of both ‘talk’ therapy and horse therapy to be utilised. This is expressed below:

• In that sense, then I could have, I could have, because you don’t get much to talk, your time is very limited. You have to do your thing, she discusses it with you and then off you go. So you don’t have much time to interact on that level. I would have preferred much more, also one on one level, to say why are you feeling like this, what to do and how to overcome it.

• I would have said okay, let’s do one horse therapy, next week let’s do one session and go through what you’ve experienced. I think that would have worked better. Then we could have processed and dealt with what I went through.
4.3 Inter-individual analysis

Six overarching themes emerged from the interviews with P1, P2 and P3. These themes centred on the experience of intense emotion; the horse as central to the overall EAP process; the role of the horse as experienced by the participant; personal growth; the experience of uncertainty in the EAP process; and finally, expression of further needs identified after the EAP sessions. The similarities and differences between the participants within these themes are discussed in the following section.

4.3.1. The experience of intense emotion

All three participants expressed the experience of intense emotions during EAP sessions. It appears that the participants’ emotions were elicited as they interacted with the horse and the team.

For P1, it seems that the experienced escalation of intensity of emotion in session enabled her to become more aware of what she was feeling. This awareness appears to have led to further emotional insight. P2 described the experience of these emotions as “completely overwhelming”. It appears that in her experience, it was the physical release of these strong emotions that deeply impacted her and enhanced her emotional awareness. P3 reported that the intensity of the experience of emotions elicited in the sessions led to emotional awareness which enabled her to gain intellectual insight into her experiences of emotion.

Overall the participants described experiencing enhanced emotional awareness as a result of the intensity of the emotions elicited in sessions. However, the meaning which the experienced emotion held for them was verbalised differently by each participant.

4.3.2. The horse as central to the experience of EAP

All the participants highlighted the horse as a central element of their experience.
P1 reported that it was her love for horses and the idea of interacting with them that led her to pursue EAP. She appears to have experienced the presence of the horses as a core component of her sessions, attributing much of her personal growth to them. P2 appears to have experienced her relationship with Midnight as her motivation to continue in therapy, even when she experienced discomfort in the sessions. On reflection, P3 attributed her growth to the presence and interaction of the horses. P3 illustrated the centrality of the horse to her experience when she described the horses as “her healing”.

P2 appears to be the only participant to have developed a close relationship with one specific horse. Although P1 and P3 found the horses to be central to their experience, they seem to have developed different relationships with a variety of horses, rather than a close bond with one specific horse.

4.3.3. The role of the horse as experienced by the participant

Large parts of the interviews with the participants consisted of discussions pertaining to the manner in which the horse was experienced in the session. Each participant experienced the horse as playing diverse roles in their interactions. The role of the horse as a reflection of aspects of the self was the only theme that was apparent in all three experiences. Participants commented on the experienced ‘ability’ of the horse to reflect their emotions, behaviours and thoughts in the session. This reflection appears to have been experienced through the horse’s behaviours, and interpreted by the participants and the team.

The role of the horse as a source of support was a theme shared between two participants. P2 and P3 described the experience of support through the physical presence of the horse. Furthermore, both participants reported feeling supported by the manner in which the horse brought them physically closer to the team in the moments of their emotional need. This theme was not described by P1.
P1 appears to have experienced the role of the horse as one of providing acceptance without judgment. She reported that this experience enabled her to feel safe and contained. This theme was not described by P2 or P3.

P2 described the role of the horse as a facilitator in sessions. She commented that “he was like an orchestra conductor” in the sessions. She appears to have experienced this role of facilitation through the horse’s movements and interactions. P2 reported that the horse was able to ‘direct’ the session by means of his behaviour. She appears to have felt safe as a result of the horse’s ‘direction’ which in turn appears to have strengthened this relationship between the participant and the horse. This theme was not described by P2 or P3.

P3 expressed her experience of the role of the horse as a challenger in her sessions. She described the interactions between herself and the horse as being “on his grounds”. This was particularly significant for P3 as she described herself as a “control freak”. She reports that the horses made her confront her problems by challenging her beliefs about herself and her interactions through their behaviours.

**4.3.4. Personal growth through EAP**

The participants’ description of personal growth was a central theme that emerged during the interviews. All of the participants reported that ‘something’ had changed for them as a result of their experiences of EAP. The participants all attributed their experiences of change to their interactions with the horses, or their relationship with the horses, to a large degree. Each participant’s description of personal growth was different and centered on their unique experience of EAP.

P1 identified specific areas that had changed for her during the EAP process. P1 reported an increase in self-confidence, an increase in self-awareness and an enhanced capacity to encounter the world in an open manner. She described this new manner of encountering the world as “taking away the eye clamps” in order to have a “broader view” of the world.
P2 appeared to have experienced a greater sense of emotional awareness as a result of EAP involvement. P2 stated that she decided to seek inpatient treatment at a psychiatric clinic in order to deal with her difficulties as a result of her increased awareness. P2 reported that the entire EAP experience facilitated development of trust and self-confidence for her.

P3 described her personal growth as an increase in self-awareness. This appears to have prompted insight into her interactional style, which reportedly facilitated a change in her personal and work relationships.

4.3.5. The experience of uncertainty in the EAP process

The participants described the common theme of the experience of uncertainty in the EAP process. This experience appears to have been related to the unstructured nature of EAP. P1 and P2 explicitly described this of their experience. However, P3 implied this experience in her descriptions. It seems that the participants may have expected more direction from the team during the EAP sessions. Each participant verbalised this theme in a distinct manner.

P1 reported that the unstructured nature of EAP compelled her to utilise her own initiative and creativity. P1 appears to have experienced this as challenging. Furthermore, P1 noted feelings of uncertainty in relation to connecting her experiences in sessions to aspects of her life.

P2’s experience of uncertainty appears to have generated ambivalence toward the process of EAP for her. Furthermore, P2 reported similar ambivalence in regard to the presence of the horse specialist, describing her presence as “uncomfortable”. However, P2 acknowledged the importance of both the nature of EAP and the presence of the horse specialist.

P3 described her experience of uncertainty as related to the relative absence of information provided in the initial stages of therapy as well as the seemingly insufficient direction experienced during sessions.
4.3.6. A need for “something more"

All participants shared the final theme of a need for ‘something more’. Although each person expressed this need in a unique manner, all participants experienced something as ‘missing’ from the EAP process.

P2 and P3 reported a need for additional time for reflection in sessions. Both P2 and P3 suggested alternating EAP and office sessions as part of the therapeutic programme. P1 was unable to articulate exactly what she felt she needed; however, she reported that a “follow through” would be have been beneficial for her.

P3 further described an experienced need for additional “concrete tools” that could be used to assist her with specific symptoms that she was experiencing. This theme was not identified by P1 or P2, but may have been implied through their reported needs for ‘more’ out of sessions.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter includes themes that were developed through the intra-individual analysis from each participant. These themes were developed from the interviews with the participants that were analysed through IPA. Each individual’s experience of EAP is unique and themes varied between the participants. Following this, an inter-individual analysis was conducted whereby common themes across all participants were identified and discussed. The aim of this chapter was to describe each client’s reflection of their experience of EAP sessions.

The following chapter will consider these common themes with reference to the previous literature, as discussed in Chapter two.
CHAPTER 5
INTEGRATION AND DISCUSSION OF THEMES

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of clients who had participated in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). Information gathered from open-ended semi-structured interviews with three middle-aged women who had been or were in EAP at the time, was analysed. Through the participants’ descriptions of their experiences, specific themes emerged. In the preceding chapter the commonalities and differences between the descriptions of the participants’ experiences were discussed. The aim of this chapter is to describe the central themes that emerged from the inter-analysis, and to compare and contrast these themes with existing literature.

Existing research on client experience of EAP is limited. Only three studies have considered the client’s perspective on EAP (Hayden, 2005; Meinersmann et al., 2008; Peterson, 2010). The majority of findings in this current study are consistent with existing EAP research as well as the above-mentioned literature on client experience of EAP. However, two themes differed from the experiences reported in earlier research. A discussion of themes that are supported by past research, as well as the themes that differed, is presented.

Six common themes emerged through the analysis process: the experience of intense emotion; the horse as central to the overall experience of EAP; the role of the horse in EAP; personal growth; the experience of uncertainty; and a need for something more. These themes, as well as minor themes, are now discussed.

5.2 Overview of theme one – The experience of intense emotions

The theme of emotional experience and the subsequent intense emotional relief was highlighted by Paulson et al. (1998) in their research on the client's experience of psychotherapy in general. They reported that clients identified emotional expression and the
subsequent emotional relief as a key element in therapy. Previous AAT and EAP literature have articulated the notion of the facilitation of emotional expression by an animal in the therapy session. In his studies on AAT, Hart (2002) described animals as catalysts to emotional expression. Furthermore, Klontz et al. (2007) in research on experiential EAP stated that interaction with the horses in EAP facilitates the expression of unresolved emotion. This appears to have led to the experience of greater awareness and resolution for the clients involved.

The experience of intense emotion was a central theme that emerged from participants’ reflections in the current study. From their descriptions, it appears that these intense emotions were elicited through the presence of and interactions with the horse. Thus the horse appears to have been the catalyst for the participants’ described experiences of intense emotional expression. Furthermore, the expression of emotion seems to have generated an experience of physical relief for the participants.

The experience of intense emotions in the session was further delineated in two minor themes, 1) becoming emotionally aware and 2) making meaning from the emotions experienced in session.

5.2.1 Becoming Emotionally Aware

Corey (2013) described one of the processes of experiential therapy as becoming emotionally aware through the expression of emotion. According to him, unexpressed emotions are carried with a person into the present and interfere with the person’s awareness and functioning. Klontz et al. (2007) echoed this notion. These authors maintained that by consciously having experienced and expressed the emotion in the present, the client may become more aware of how they feel in the moment. This may lead to increased emotional awareness and health for the client. This possibility has been further supported by research on experiential therapy (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988), as well as in the EAP literature (Hallberg, 2008). Greenberg & Goldman (1988) have suggested that by
stimulating emotional experiences in the here and now, clients become more aware of processes of which they were previously unconscious.

In the current study, participants identified an experience of improved awareness of their emotions through the process of increased emotional intensity and emotional expression. The increase in emotional awareness appears to have led participants to make connections between their emotions and life experiences.

5.2.2 Making meaning from emotions elicited in session

Meaning-making was the second minor theme that was identified under the theme of intense emotional experience. The theme of making meaning has been supported by several previous EAP studies (Esbjorn 2006; Frame, 2006; Hallberg, 2008; Hayden, 2005). Research has described the manner in which clients may develop the ability to reflect on their internal processes in order increase awareness of themselves in sessions. Frame (2006) maintained that the increase of client awareness developed through contact with the horse and the team. This interaction provided the client with the opportunity to understand their emotions and generalise this understanding to other areas of their life (Frame, 2006). By generalising the emotional awareness developed in the session, clients were able to make meaning from what they had experienced (Hallberg, 2008).

Participants in the current study described how they were able to make meaning from the emotions elicited through their interactions with the horses and processing them with the team. Each participant described the meaning attached to their emotions in a unique manner. It appears that this process of meaning-making developed from the experience of increased emotional intensity described by the participants. Participants reported the experience of making connections between the meanings developed in session and in other aspects of their lives, through discussions with the team.
5.3 Overview of theme two – The horse as central to the overall experience of EAP

The centrality of the horse in EAP has been supported by research from Esbjorn (2006), McConnell (2010) and Meinersmann et al. (2008). These authors have all described the horse as a core element of the EAP process. In EAP, the horse is utilised as a co-therapist in the session. Thus the horse occupies an important role in the client’s experience of therapy (McConnell, 2010). Findings from Meinersmann et al. (2008) identified the horse as an important facilitator of change.

The centrality of the horse has been identified as a significant theme that arose from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences in the current study. One participant described the horse as her ‘healing’. She believed that the horse was the only ‘thing’ that had created an awareness of aspects of her self, which she could not see. Thus, for this participant it appeared that the horse assisted her in developing greater awareness of her own processes. The relationship that each person developed with the various horses strengthened and maintained the central role of the horse in the participant’s experience. The relationship between participant and horse was a significant theme in the overall therapeutic process.

5.3.1 The centrality of the relationship with the horse

The centrality of the relationship with the horse has been supported by studies which have focused on the EAP experiences of clients (Hayden, 2005; Meinersmann et al., 2008; Peterson, 2010). Hayden (2005) described this relationship between human and horse as a ‘metaphoric relationship that transcended words and makes concepts and relationships concrete in front of a witness’ (p. 117). Peterson (2010) referred to the relationship between client and horse as ‘a friendship that is there to guide one when the path becomes dark and to support the client when they become weary’ (p. 69).

All participants in the current study described developing some form of relationship with the horses. The development of a relationship appears to have fostered the experience of an
intimate connection between the client and the horse. This relationship appears to have allowed for difficult emotions and sensitive information to be expressed in therapy. For one participant, her attraction to horses was her motivation for initiating EAP, while for another it was what kept her committed to the therapeutic endeavour. The importance of the relationship between client and horse, as reported in previous studies, is echoed in the current study.

5.4 Overview of theme three – The role of the horse

The role of the horse was an additional theme identified from the participants’ descriptions. This theme centred on the client’s experience of the horse in session, rather than the experience of the relationship between the client and the horse. This theme is one of the most researched themes in previous EAP literature and there is a relative wealth of information in this regard. The specific descriptions of the experienced role of the horse varied for each participant. Nevertheless, the majority of themes identified by the participants were found in previous EAP studies. These are discussed in the following section. Overall, participants described five minor themes which related to their experiences of the role of the horse in session. These five minor themes have been identified as: the horse as a reflection of oneself; the horse as a source of support; the horse as accepting without judgment; the horse as an emotional ‘sponge’; and the horse as a challenger.

5.4.1 The horse as a mirror

A common theme among participants was the experience of the role of the horse as a reflection of themselves. EAP literature has referred to this reflective function as ‘mirroring’. Past studies by Frewin and Gardner (2005), as well as Masini (2010) have commented on the process of mirroring. Masini (2005) proposed that horses act as biofeedback machines that have the capacity to mirror the reactions of a person on both emotional and cognitive levels. McConnell (2010) also noted this mirroring ability and suggested that it was one of the most common reasons for using horses in experiential therapy. This theme was also
echoed by Hayden (2005) and Meinersmann et al. (2008). This process of ‘mirroring reactions’ was identified in the current participant’s account of their experiences of the horses. All three participants appear to have experienced the horse as reflecting their emotions and behaviours in the session. Participants reported that they became more aware of the different parts of themselves through this reflective function.

5.4.2 The horse as a source of support

A further role that was highlighted by participants was the horse as a source of support. This role of support corresponds with research by Meinersmann et al. (2008) where participants described the horse as ‘a place to lean on’ in sessions. The participants in the current study appear to have experienced the horses as providing support through the horses' presence and movements. Participants described the horse as having the capacity to ‘sense’ vulnerability in sessions. Participants reported that the horse would physically move them toward the team when they needed support. In addition, participants described feeling supported in sessions by the experience of the horse as consistent and unconditional.

5.4.3 The experience of unconditional acceptance from the horse

The experience of unconditional acceptance was an additional theme that was identified in regard to the role of the horse in sessions. In his research on animals in AAT, Fine (2000) maintained that the presence of an animal enabled the client to experience unconditional love and acceptance. He further maintained that as a result of the experience of acceptance evoked by the animal, the client felt more at ease and thus was open to discuss sensitive emotions and experiences. Frewin and Gardner (2005), describe their participants as experiencing the horse as ‘accepting’. Clients responded to the experience of acceptance by exhibiting increased openness and vulnerability in sessions. Participants in the Meinersmann et al. (2008) study reported similar experiences of acceptance.
Participants in the current study appear to have experienced the development of a capacity to be vulnerable in session as a result of the experienced acceptance from the horse. This experience of acceptance appears to have facilitated a sense of safety in sessions. While this experience was not as explicitly described among all participants in the current study, it was emphasised repeatedly by one participant, in particular. This participant experienced the horse as accepting her without judgment. She commented that this enabled her to feel safe and contained in the therapy session. While other participants did not explicitly discuss the role of acceptance, themes of acceptance as a result of the horses were apparent in their descriptions of experienced openness and vulnerability in session.

5.4.4 The horse as an emotional sponge

A further theme identified was the role of the horse as an ‘emotional sponge’. This theme does not appear to have been identified in previous EAP literature. A participant in the current study described the horse as an ‘emotional sponge’. She appeared to have experienced the horse as absorbing her negative emotions in session. This experience seems to have prevented her from experiencing her emotions as overwhelming. This theme was not identified by the other two participants in the study. However, this theme provided a powerful metaphor for the role of the horse in session. As this theme does not appear in the previous EAP literature reviewed, further research on the topic would potentially provide elaboration of this aspect.

5.4.5 The horse as a challenger

The final theme identified by participants was the role of the horse as a challenger in the session. This theme was supported by Hayden’s (2005) study of the experiences of adolescents in EAP. Participants in this study described the behaviour of the horses and the interactions with the horses as challenging (Hayden, 2005). This was further supported by the theme of ‘confronting oneself’ from research by Peterson (2010). Participants described
being confronted by their own behaviours through the behaviour of the horse (Peterson, 2010). The challenge presented to clients in EAP appears to occur through the immediate feedback provided by means of the horse’s behaviour (Kohanov, 2001).

One participant in the current study specifically discussed how she experienced the horse as challenging her sense of self in the sessions. It appears that through the behaviours of the horse, the participant experienced being presented with aspects of herself and her problems in such a way that she could no longer deny them. The participant described the experience of being forced to create a change in her behaviour in order to elicit a different reaction from the horse.

5.5 Overview of theme four – Personal growth through EAP

Themes of personal growth and change were apparent to all participants in this study. Each participant brought a variety of problems and solutions to the therapy session, and a variety of experienced shifts were reported. These experienced changes are discussed as two general themes under the overarching theme of personal growth: increase in self-awareness, and self-confidence and trust.

5.5.1 Increased self-awareness

All participants in the current study described the experience of increased self-awareness. On reflection of their experiences, participants described this aspect as a main area of growth in their overall EAP process.

The theme of increased self-awareness is supported by previous research (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005; Hallberg, 2008; Hayden, 2005; Peterson, 2010; Whitely, 2009). Peterson (2010) stated that through the processing of their behaviours, cognitions, emotions and actions in the safety of the session, clients were able to develop self-awareness and take ownership and responsibility of their actions (Peterson, 2010).
Participants in the current study reported the experience of increased self-awareness which appears to have developed through the EAP sessions. Overall the experience of self-awareness created greater understanding of the participants’ behaviours, emotions, cognitions and patterns of interactions. This progress in understanding seems to have had an impact on the participants experiencing of and contact with the world.

5.5.2 Self-confidence and trust in the self

The theme of increased self-confidence and greater trust in the self was another area of personal growth that was identified by the current participants. The experience of self-confidence and trust is apparent in past EAP research. Frewin and Gardiner (2005) commented on how self-confidence was developed in the EAP arena. They maintained that the size of the horse alone presents an opportunity for the client to overcome fear. Furthermore, confidence has reportedly been amplified through accomplishing difficult exercises during EAP sessions. This experience was echoed by participants in the Meinersmann et al. (2008) study. These participants described the confidence and trust they gained in themselves as a result of working with and being able to control a powerful animal. Peterson (2010) described a similar experience of self-confidence which she termed ‘bravery’. She maintained that this experience of confidence actually empowered participants to overcome obstacles and created a sense of accomplishment, meaning and purpose.

Two participants in the current study expressed how EAP increased their experience of self-confidence. This experience of self-confidence appears to have led to an increased sense of trust in themselves. These aspects appear to have developed through the successful completion of difficult activities and a confrontation of challenges in the session. One participant described how feeling confidence and trust in sessions led her to being open in her contact with her world. Describing herself previously as ‘a horse with blinders on’, this participant reported being able to trust herself more through EAP. Through her experience of enhanced trust and confidence in herself, it appears that this participant was able to grow
and confront the world with a changed perspective. Overall, participants described experiencing change as a result of the EAP sessions. They reported experiencing greater self-awareness and confidence in their lives generally.

5.6 Overview of theme five – Uncertainty in the EAP process

The experience of uncertainty was described by all participants in the current study. The experience of feeling of uncertainty was related to the unstructured nature of EAP. This theme was detailed by Eller (2012), who described how client anxiety and uncertainty may be exposed in the unpredictability of an EAP session. This was further supported by EAGALA (2012). EAGALA (2012) maintains that it is common for the client to feel a measure of uncertainty in EAP due to the unpredictable nature of experiential learning. This principle of experiential learning may be an important factor to deliberate when considering the theme of uncertainty.

Participants in the current study described experiences of uncertainty and discomfort with regard to not knowing what to expect in EAP sessions. This uncertainty seems to have been related to the openness of the outdoor environment and the lack of direction with regard to what ‘must’ be done in each session. Furthermore, none of the participants had interacted with a horse before. This appears to have created additional experiences of uncertainty. However, participants commented that their experiences of uncertainty decreased as the sessions progressed. The participants described the experience of uncertainty as important for their own growth and change. They reported that experiencing uncertainty assisted them in developing creativity, initiative and emotional awareness.

5.6.1 Uncertainty in regard to the presence of the horse specialist

The experience of uncertainty in regard to the presence of the horse specialist was identified by one participant in the current study. On reflection of the EAP literature discussed in this study, it appears that uncertainty pertaining to the horse specialist had not been previously mentioned in the literature reviewed. The experience of uncertainty may relate to the

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inclusion of a second human therapist to the therapeutic process. The development of the relationship between the therapist and the client is an essential element of psychotherapy in general (Norcross, 2010). This is referred to as the therapeutic relationship (Corey, 2013).

The therapeutic relationship is a core component across all therapeutic orientations (Norcross, 2010). Norcross (2010) described the therapeutic relationship as essential in facilitating experiences of safety and containment in order to facilitate self-expression in session (Norcross, 2010). In EAP, a therapeutic relationship is not only developed with the therapist but is also developed with the horse. It is by means of these relationships that expression and experience is facilitated (Peterson, 2010). However, the therapeutic team also consists of a horse specialist (Whitely, 2009). As previously discussed in the literature review, the role of the horse specialist is to reflect and interpret the behaviours of the horse (Frewin & Gardner, 2005). However, after a review of the EAP literature, it appears that the impact of the horse specialist on the client and on the therapeutic relationship has yet to be explored.

The participant in the current study described experiences of uncertainty in respect of the addition of a second person with whom to share sensitive information. She reported experiencing concern in regard to possible judgment from the horse specialist. In one particular session, the participant described asking the horse specialist to stand at a distance from the arena in order to feel safe to share her personal information with the psychotherapist. The experience of the participant and the resulting feelings of uncertainty were clearly represented in her accounts.

This theme suggests the possible impact of a third person on the therapeutic relationship and in turn the client’s feelings of trust and experience of safety. The possible implication of the presence of the horse specialist for the ethical issues of confidentiality and professionalism should be noted and clarified in future research on clinical practice in EAP.
5.7 Overview of theme six – A need for something more

The final theme that emerged from the experiences of the participants was a need for ‘something more’ from the EAP experience. This experience of requiring ‘something more’ was further defined as a need for more reflection time, the possibility of alternating office and EAP sessions, and a need for concrete direction or ‘tools’ during the session.

This experience of further needs, as identified by the participants in the current study, is not apparent in previous literature on EAP, as reviewed in Chapter Two. However, it is possible that this theme may be contextualised within the experiential model (Hallberg, 2008). The nature of EAP is described as open and non-directive, requiring the client to lead the session (EAPISA, 2012). Any difficulties that have occurred during the session are reflected upon and reattempted in the present in order to achieve change through action. Thus ‘tools’ are not concretely set out by the team, but are developed with the client and practised through experiencing something new in the present (EAGALA, 2012).

Participants expressed feeling that additional time to talk about the experiences in the session would have been beneficial. It appears that all participants desired more direction from the team, as well as more verbal processing of their experiences. It is possible that this was expressed as lacking in their experience, due to the experiential nature of EAP. However, further research is required to clarify this aspect.

The needs identified by the participants in the current study have possible implications for the structure of the EAP sessions and the experience of effectiveness for the client. Further research on the experience of ‘something more’ in a wider range of clients and therapeutic contexts would assist in clarification of the theme and may provide information that would be vital to the field and practice of EAP.
5.8. Conclusion

This chapter comprises the central themes that emerged from the inter-analysis, with links to the existing literature of EAP and the client experiences of EAP as presented in Chapter two.

Overall, all three participants reported experiences of intense emotion during the EAP session. These experiences of intense emotion appear to have led the participants to develop greater awareness of their emotional processes and to create meaning from the emotional experiences.

On reflection of their experiences of EAP, all three participants reported that the horse was central to their experience. The centrality of the horse was emphasised through the various relationships that the participants developed with the horses. One of the participants developed a close bond with one horse in particular, while the other two participants appear to have developed relationships with several of the horses they worked with.

The horse appears to have played a vital but differing role in the experience of each of the participants. Identified roles of the horse included the horse as a reflection of the self, as a source of support and acceptance, as an emotional sponge, and as a challenger.

The theme of personal growth was apparent for all participants. All the participants reported experiences of increased self-awareness, which included awareness of their emotions, their cognitions, behaviours and interactions. There were also reports of increased confidence, trust in the self, and a general sense of openness to their environments.

Finally, participants identified feelings of uncertainty in EAP with regard to the unstructured nature of EAP. One participant reported feeling uncertain and uncomfortable with the presence of the horse specialist. Participants additionally reported a need for ‘something more’ that appeared to relate to the experiential nature of EAP.
A conclusion to this study and a justification for the study is presented in Chapter six. The limitations, strengths, implications for clinical practice and recommendations for future research are also discussed.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter the current study’s research process is reviewed and evaluated. Following this, the researcher will reflect upon own process during the progression of this study. Finally, the implications for clinical practice and suggestions for future research are discussed.

6.2 Overview of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the client’s experience of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential approach in which horses are utilised in the therapeutic process (Masini, 2010).

EAP is not a theoretical orientation but an approach that can be utilised in conjunction with therapeutic orientations within the practice of psychotherapy (Masini, 2010). Psychotherapy can defined as the “informed and intentional application of clinical methods and interpersonal stances derived from established psychology principles for the purpose of assisting people to modify their behaviours, cognitions emotions and/or other personal characteristics in directions that participants deem desirable” (Norcross, 1990, p. 218 as cited in Prochaska & Norcross, 2009).

Psychotherapy is practised within a therapeutic relationship between the client and the therapist (Norcross, 2010). Therefore it is imperative that the experience of both the client and the therapist be described (Macran et al., 1999). However, research on client experiences in psychotherapy have been relatively under-emphasised when compared to research conducted on the therapist’s perspective (Macran et al., 1999). As the clients’ experiences are paramount to the outcome of psychotherapy, it is vital that the clients’ experiences be explored (Norcross, 2010)
When an animal is involved in the facilitation of therapy, it falls within the realm of AAT (McConnell, 2010). In AAT, the utilisation of animals is based on the premise that individuals may be comforted by the warmth and presence of another living being. Through the presence of the animal they may experience unconditional acceptance and approval (Mallon, 1994). Many social, psychological and physical benefits have been reported for AAT with a variety of populations (Mallon, 1994).

EAP can be defined as a type of AAT that involves horses and other equines in the therapy process. EAP involves collaboration between a licensed therapist, horse specialist, the horse and client. Being an experiential approach, structured activities are utilised with the horses in the therapy session. Through these in-therapy experiences, clients may be able to develop self-awareness as well as emotional well-being (EAGALA, 2012).

Peterson (2010) wrote that:

Clients are the most important aspect of EAP. This is because they are the cause of change. Therapists may walk alongside the clients through their journey, assisting them as they learn and develop, and helping them when necessary. The horse is the clients’ catalyst for change, ever guiding, ever revealing. It is the clients who must be willing to accept what needs to be changed and work towards effectively changing it; thus, they are the most important part of the team (p. 36).

However, there is a relative lack of research into the client’s perspective on psychotherapy since therapeutic processes have traditionally been examined from the therapist’s point of view (Paulson et al., 1999). Specifically, very little research has been conducted to focus solely on the client’s experience of EAP (Peterson, 2010).

Therefore, this relative absence of research creates a need to explore the clients’ experiences during the process of EAP (Peterson, 2010). This study examined the clients’ experiences in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy through qualitative inquiry utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA explores and interprets the participant’s
experience from their own perspective (Willig, 2008). IPA was utilised to create a description of the client's experience of their unique involvement in this therapeutic process.

Three middle-aged women who had been or who were in EAP at the time were the participants for the current study. The study enabled the individual participants to describe and explore their experiences of EAP. Interviews were semi-structured, thus enabling the participants to direct the interview process and discuss their experiences without prejudice or restriction. Data was analysed according to IPA methods. By means of this analysis process the participants' descriptions of their experiences emerged. Six main themes became apparent through the analysis: the experience of intense emotion; the horse as central to the overall experience of EAP; the role of the horse in EAP; personal growth; the experience of uncertainty and a need for 'something more'. Four of the main themes (the experience of intense emotion; the horse as central to the overall experience of EAP; the role of the horse in EAP; personal growth) were supported by the existing literature. However, aspects of the two further themes (the experience of uncertainty and a need for something more) did not appear to be supported by the existing literature. The possible impact of the current study's findings is discussed further in the chapter.

6.3 Reflection on the research process

My attention was drawn to the topic of EAP through my own experience in the field. Being an avid horse lover and owner, I was interested in combining my two passions, psychology and horses. Several years ago, I found the organisation, EAPISA. Through my interactions with them I was introduced to an approach to therapy known as EAP. As I became a more active member of EAPISA I began to experience the impact of the horse in psychotherapy. I was fascinated by the case studies and personal experiences of people who had observed and experienced therapeutic change through the utilization of the equine in therapy. Stories of change from a variety of client groups piqued my curiosity, specifically around the idea of
what it must be like to be a client in this method of psychotherapy. Having been in ‘talk’
psychotherapy before I was interested to see how I compared the two therapies.

My experience as a client in a group EAP session verified my ideas and curiosity about the
influence of EAP as a method of therapeutic change. I experienced the session to be
intense and emotional. Through processing with the team I experienced an increase of my
own emotional awareness as well as a sense of support from my horse companion. This
occurred for me in one session. At this point I must also note my own angst and sense of
uncertainty that came from my participation in the EAP session. Although I had witnessed
and read about the unusual nature of EAP, being in the middle of an arena with a large
horse, an ambiguous task, while being watched by several other professionals was anxiety
provoking. However, this intensity, in my own experience was what made the session
memorable.

As I began to read previous studies on EAP, I noticed that many of these research studies
did not consider the account of the client. As EAP is experiential I was surprised by the
amount of studies that neglected to consider the clients reflection of the process. This
presented a gap in research and an area that could possibly open many other avenues in
EAP. Furthermore, I observed the lack of research from the South African context. EAP is a
relatively new field in South Africa, and although it has begun to grow in practice, very little
research has been documented. Finally, as I began reviewing the literature for a potential
area of study I noticed that very few studies took into account the therapeutic paradigm
through which EAP was utilised. As EAP is not a therapeutic orientation but an approach
utilised in conjunction with psychotherapy I expected to see more literature which discussed
how EAP fits within different paradigms. Based on these factors I decided to design a study
that was based in a South African context which could capture the descriptions of the clients
experience as well as place EAP within psychotherapy.
As this study was of a qualitative nature, it was necessary for me to engage with the participants thus involving myself within the process to a certain degree. I experienced the interviews with the participants as intense and emotional. Participants shared their personal accounts of psychotherapy with me, which included very intimate details of their own lives and emotions. I was surprised to find that each individual became visibly emotional when recounting their experiences in the EAP arena. I do not believe that words can sufficiently capture the impact of the experience. I am grateful to all the participants for sharing their experiences with me and allowing me a glimpse into their own personal journeys.

Contributing to the intensity that I experienced in the interviews is my own experience and interest in EAP. This study has been more than a minor dissertation to me, but an area close to my heart. Thus at times during the report writing I had to be aware of my influence on the portrayal of the information and argument. I must admit that my own experience with horses and the impact they have had on my life may have coloured the way I viewed the literature. However, I believe that this was countered by the influence of my supervisor who remained a neutral outsider of the process.

Of great interest to me are the final two themes that emerged from the participants experiences. It does not appear that other EAP studies have considered more ‘negative’ accounts from the clients perspective. The reason for this can only be assumed. In my personal experience, presenting information that may be seen as ‘going against’ the approach of choice can be difficult. Especially when previous research considered does not appear to have similar findings. However, the analysis is a co-construction of both participant and researcher. As the voices of the participants were very clear in these accounts, the nature of the interviews and the possible implications need to be noted. I consider these findings to be imperative to the development of EAP as an approach within psychotherapy. I feel that in order to develop a field, the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects need to be explored and discussed openly. Insight and further research into these areas will
benefit clinicians and clients who delve into this unusual method. This may in turn strengthen the efficacy of the approach within the field of psychotherapy.

I believe that the voices of the participants were heard throughout this study. I am hopeful that this will encourage further EAP studies within the South African context as well as developing more scientific data for the emergence of EAP as a recognized model that facilitates therapeutic change.

6.4 Strengths and Limitations

6.4.1 Strengths of the present study

The following strengths of the study are acknowledged:

The study allowed the participants the opportunity to give voice to their experience as clients in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy. This is an area of study which seems to be relatively unexplored in the literature, as discussed in previous chapters. This appears to be especially relevant to the practice of EAP in the South African context.

The utilisation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis facilitated the rich and detailed descriptions of the participants’ accounts of their experiences. This was utilised in order to better understand and describe their experiences, as the focal point of this study.

Semi-structured interviews, as part of a qualitative framework, were utilised to gather data from the participants. This enabled participants to direct the interviews and focus on their experiences as they found it relevant.

A review of existing literature revealed a need for research pertaining to client experiences of EAP. This study could provide a foundation upon which similar studies may be based in the future, thus contributing to the growth of the literature on client experiences and EAP.

The participants were fully informed of the nature of the study they were taking part in. The aims and contributions were discussed with each individual and the voluntary nature of the
process was described. Thus, each person was allowed to tell their story in their own way, as they were viewed as experts of their own experiences.

Six pertinent themes were found in the current study. The themes of; the experience of intense emotion; the horse as central to the EAP; the role of the horse; and personal growth, were all supported by previous research. However, themes of uncertainty and a need for ‘something more’ appear not to have emerged in previous research. The finding of these themes may assist in facilitating appropriate interventions for clients.

The consideration of the ethical responsibility and impact of the horse specialist was also considered for the first time in reviewed EAP research. The impact of the horse specialist needs to be viewed in regard to the therapeutic relationship as well as the clients’ rights to confidentiality and protection. As the horse specialist is not governed by an ethical (and legal) body, it appears that their professional conduct is not reviewed. The Health Professional Council of South Africa defines ethics as ‘moral principles’ which are set up to ‘protect the public and guide the professional’ (http://www.hpcs.co.za). As the horse specialist is not liable to legally defined ethical codes of conduct, the protection of both the client and the model of the EAP needs to be examined. The impact of the horse specialist has yet to be clarified in the literature reviewed in this study and therefore indicates a need for further exploration.

Furthermore, as EAP is a relatively new field, this study may provide relevant insights which may be utilised for future EAP research development, and have implications for clinical practice. This research may be of benefit to mental health professionals, horse specialists and clients. A general awareness of the client’s experiences will facilitate appropriate interventions and guide the therapist’s conceptualisations and work within the therapeutic space.
6.4.2 Limitations of the present study

The following limitations of the study are acknowledged:

A limitation of the current study is the small sample size. As IPA utilises small samples for rich data the phenomenological aims of the study were met. The small sample size meant that generalisability of the conclusions were limited. However, generalisability was not an aim of the current study, as the study explored the experience of individual clients.

The current sample consisted of a homogeneous sample of three white, middle class, middle-aged women. A heterogeneous sample of differing race, culture, socio-economic status, age and gender could enrich the descriptions of the experiences.

Participants in the current study were all treated by the same psychologist and horse specialist. Variance of members within the therapeutic team may have resulted in heterogeneity of the participants’ experiences.

Although attempts to minimise researcher bias were made, the researcher is an instrument in the qualitative design. For this reason it is possible that interpretations and presentations of the experiences were coloured by my own values and perceptions. Therefore, the final outcome cannot be considered a reflection of the absolute truth regarding the experiences of the participants. Rather, the outcome may be considered a co-construction between the researcher’s personal sources, theoretical knowledge and the descriptions of the three participants.

6.5 Clinical implications and recommendations for further research

As the first study in South Africa to focus on the client’s experience of EAP, the current research may be viewed as a point of departure for the development of future studies. Therefore, future recommendations may serve to further the exploration of the emerging field of EAP.
It is suggested that for future studies a larger, more heterogeneous sample be utilised which may allow for variation in experiences, and therefore findings that are generalisable. Furthermore, the utilisation of a quantitative design or a mixed method design may assist to increase the generalisability of the study.

In terms of recommendations for clinical practice it is recommended that further research be conducted on the themes that emerged in the current study. Specific attention should be noted to the themes that did not appear in the past literature. These themes are further discussed below. This could be of value to clinicians of EAP when planning, processing and conceptualising cases.

This study has assisted in developing an increased awareness of the client's perspective in EAP. Results of the research provide a glimpse of the processes and experiences of the participants in EAP. This may offer clinicians information that is relevant for future referrals and planning.

As this study is the first study to consider client perspectives in EAP in South Africa, further research into all six identified themes is recommended to further explore these themes within our native context.

It is recommended that the themes of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘a need for something more’ be further investigated. Previous literature reviewed in this study did not reveal support for these themes. Thus this is the first study to have identified the themes of uncertainty and the need for something more in the EAP session from the client. This has great ramifications for the field of EAP as it draws attention to possible implications of the manner in which therapy is conducted and experienced by the client. These two identified themes present areas of discomfort as identified by the participants. Due to the anxiety that may develop in the sessions, it is important that psychotherapists screen their clients before introducing EAP and consider the appropriateness of EAP for more fragile clients. Possible reasons for the feelings of uncertainty, the implications of this for both the client and the therapist, and the
impact these feelings may have on therapeutic goals and change, need to be further investigated and explained. The participant’s request for the inclusion of office sessions in addition to arena sessions should also be considered and investigated.

It is further recommended that the nature of the therapeutic relationship in EAP be highlighted and explored. EAP represents an unusual therapeutic alliance between four beings. Not only does the client develop a therapeutic alliance with the therapist, but alliances are also formed in various ways between the therapist, horse specialist, client and horse/s. The impact of the unique set of potential relationships on the therapeutic process, in addition to the experience of the various relationships by the client, has not been considered in previous literature. The implications of this unique therapeutic alliance for therapeutic change, and the repercussions of this for the client’s sense of safety, trust and confidentiality need to be explored.

It is also recommended that ethical and professional considerations be made to the inclusion of the horse specialist as part of the psychotherapeutic treatment team. The role and implications of the presence of the horse specialist has not been queried in existing literature. Consideration should be given to the concerns of consent, confidentiality and general protection of the client’s rights, as the horse specialist is privy to private information discussed in the therapy session. Future research may clarify the impact and ethical implications of this practice.

6.6 Conclusion

On reflection, this study has a number of strengths and limitations as regards to the research design, participant characteristics and researcher bias. Based on these strengths and limitations, as well as pertinent themes that were identified in the study, further recommendations for research were made. These recommendations were also considered in relation to the possible implications for clinical practice.
REFERENCES


