

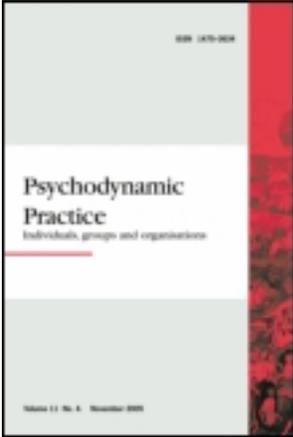
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Publisher: Routledge

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Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpc020>

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Sheldon Siporin ^a

^a Department of Psychology , Pace University , NYC , USA

Published online: 11 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Sheldon Siporin (2012) Talking horses: Equine psychotherapy and intersubjectivity, *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations*, 18:4, 457-464, DOI: [10.1080/14753634.2012.719744](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2012.719744)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2012.719744>

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OPEN SPACE

Talking horses: Equine psychotherapy and intersubjectivity

Sheldon Siporin*

Department of Psychology, Pace University, NYC, USA

Afterwards, he says, they always embrace.
The animal digs his sweaty brow
into his cheek...and they stand in the dark for an hour...
Like a necking couple. And of all nonsensical things,
I keep thinking about the horse...

Equus (Shaffer, 1973)

In the play *Equus*, by Peter Shaffer, a teenage boy displays a pathological fascination with horses. A psychiatrist is consulted, and discovers that the horse embodies powerful religious and sexual signification for the boy, along with possible therapeutic effect. Even the psychiatrist has strong emotional responses towards the animal. While the treatment outcome in *Equus* is unclear, what is clear is that horses are potent psychological symbols.

Equus echoes Freud's well known case history of 'Little Hans'. Hans' father consulted Freud about his small son's fear of being bitten by a black stallion (Temperly, 2008). Freud believed that a wild horse was 'the totemistic representation of the dreaded father' (Freud, 1911, p. 257). Examining the boy's history, Freud concluded that Little Hans suffered from castration anxiety. Later, Freud cited the case as support for his theory of the Oedipal Complex. The horse was also a metaphor for the Id, ridden by the Ego (Freud, 1932).

But horses can be more than symbols or metaphors. These large but often surprisingly gentle animals have been actively used to facilitate treatment. Horse-assisted therapy is relatively recent, but began with therapeutic riding programmes in Germany during the 1960s (Mandrell, 2006; Mayberry, 1978, p. 192). Reportedly, the impetus for this was Liz Hartel of Denmark who, despite being afflicted with polio, continued to

*Email: ssiporin@pace.edu

work with horses, and won a medal in dressage at the 1943 Helsinki Olympic Games.

I first became aware of the horse's unusual sensitivity while observing autistic or developmentally disabled children in a therapeutic riding programme in Manhattan, New York City. While horses are commonly associated with rural areas, there are several riding centres in the New York metropolitan area that are home to therapeutic riding programmes (e.g. GALLOP, Seaside Therapeutic Riding and Equestria).

I noticed that some horses seemed to modify their behaviour when interacting with autistic or developmentally disabled children. Horses that exhibited stubbornness or willfulness became more docile in the presence of these children. I also experienced this personally. After observing a colleague vigorously pet the neck of a rambunctious grey mare, I timidly approached. Surprisingly, the mare, which had moved energetically towards my colleague and aggressively rubbed its head against her shoulder, stood quietly as I slowly walked near. She delicately nuzzled the hand I gently stretched out towards her. It was as if the horse sensed my trepidation and responded accordingly. On another occasion, I took a group of dual disordered clients (diagnosed with both chemical dependency and mental illness) to observe a therapeutic riding programme in Brooklyn, New York City. Although several of the clients were reluctant to go near a horse, those who did appeared emotionally uplifted.

Therapeutic riding focuses on physical rehabilitation. Even more intriguing is horse-assisted psychotherapy. Greg Kersten coined the term equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) after working in a prison where he reported positive behavioural changes among inmates who did simple grooming exercises with horses (Kakacek & Ottens, 2008). The EAP usually includes a licensed mental health specialist, an equine specialist and at least one horse (Trask, 2010). While EAP may include riding, often it merely involves ground interactions with horses. Afterwards, clients process their experiences with their human therapists (Kane, 2009).

While Freud did not use horses in his work, he was the first known practitioner of animal-assisted psychotherapy. Freud's pet chow, Jofi, was present at all of his therapy sessions and even signaled the end of each session by pawing at the door (Walsh, 2009, p. 493). Freud communicated comments and interpretations through Jofi, and patients would understand, and communicate back (Walsh, 2009, p. 493, citing Grinker, 1979, p. 9).¹ Freud felt that dogs and other animals may have a special ability to judge a person's character. Serpell (2006) noted that 'during the nineteenth century, pet animals became increasingly common features of mental institutions in England and elsewhere' (p. 17). A survey done by Rice, Brown, and Caldwell (1973) reported that 41% of American psychotherapists used animals or animal content in treatment.

Sensitivity of horses

As I discovered, horses are peculiarly intuitive, even as compared to dogs or cats. Dogs and cats are predators, but horses, despite their intimidating size, are prey and herd animals who flee when provoked. Thus, the horse has a certain vulnerability that 'stems from being a prey animal susceptible to the aggression of other animals' and because its thin legs 'causes it to be at risk for many types of injury' (Karol, 2007, p. 81). Evolution has therefore gifted horses with acute senses. This includes not only finely tuned hearing and olfaction, but visual attention to postural changes.² Horses are also highly responsive to tone of voice (Griffin, 2009).

Psychoanalytic theory

Equine and other animal-assisted psychotherapies lack clear theoretical foundations (Brown, 2004, citing Kidd & Kidd, 1987). One survey reported at least nine studies of EAP that showed statistically significant positive effects (Selby, 2009, unpublished). Given this, a theoretical frame seems desirable.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy is among the theoretical orientations that have successfully incorporated horses (Selby, 2009, unpublished). Metaphoric use of the animal and its behaviour may play a part in therapeutic use (Kakacek & Ottens, 2008). Karol, a psychodynamic clinician and Grand Prix level dressage rider, observed that, 'The inner world is expressed through the client's interaction with the horse' (Karol, 2007, p. 81). Still, EAP deserves a more explicit model.

Self psychology

Brown (2004) used Kohutian theory to explain the human–animal bond. She posited that a companion dog might serve as a Kohutian 'self object' to a lonely or distressed person. A self-object provides crucial self-validation and emotional affirmation. Brown felt that a person may perceive a dog as providing such validation due to its attentiveness and unconditional acceptance. Thus,

when separated from the animal, the person feels a sense of emptiness, depression or disintegration until re-united with the animal (Brown, 2004, p. 70).

Clearly, a pet dog's ongoing presence can be comforting and affirming to the bereft or isolated. However, a therapy horse is seen for only an hour or so weekly, although the experience may linger in the imagination. Its absence would not normally cause a client to feel emptiness or disintegration. Further, unlike a pet dog, a therapy horse, due to its own sensitivity,

may not always provide unconditional acceptance. Something more is needed to explain the healing effects of EAP.

Attachment theory

Garrity, Stallones, Marx, and Johnson (1989) and Sable (1995) invoked attachment theory as a possible model for human–animal bonding. Attachment theory derived from work with institutionalised children. These children displayed ill effects from poor care and from lack of appropriate mothering (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory presumes that caregivers act as a trustworthy, ‘secure base’ from which ‘the child or adolescent can make sorties into the outside world and return knowing for sure he will be welcomed’ (Bowlby, 1988, p. 11). Analogous to baby monkeys, who cling to their mothers for comfort when frightened, human infants likewise need reassurance. Absent such reassurance, the infant becomes insecure and unsure of its safety in the world and within itself.

Clients in psychotherapy often suffer from early attachment disturbance and poor empathic development. As an adult, an infant with a poor attachment history may unconsciously exude ‘distrust and evasion’ with other adults, and even in a therapeutic relationship (Bowlby, 1969; see also, Lamb, Thompson, Gardner, Charnov, & Estes, 1984). Sensitive, empathic response by the therapist may build trust, provide reassurance and help ‘heal’ the insecure adult’s attachment deficit. Similarly, a friendly therapy horse can serve as a supplemental attachment figure. The sheer solidity of a 2000 pound but trustworthy animal can provide palpable reassurance unmatched by any human.

Still, psychotherapy entails more than reassurance and empathic response (Kohut, 1984). The therapy horse is more than just an extra-large teddy bear or transitional object. As a flight animal faced with a human client/predator, the horse has its own concerns and emotions, which the client must attune to. The client’s relationship with a therapy horse is not one-sided but demands mutual trust and reciprocal interaction.

Intersubjectivity

Stolorow (1992) posited that infants do not develop alone but through intersubjective sharing or ‘interaction sequences of shared involvement in a reciprocal exchange’ (Loots, Devisé, & Sermijn, 2003, p. 405). ‘When mother and baby attune to each other’s needs, empathy develops. A similar process occurs in analysis as well, except that both patient and therapist regress in the service of therapy’ (Kestenberg & Buelte, 1977, p. 344).

Communication between client and therapy horse likewise involves primitive, albeit nonverbal, trust-building interactions reminiscent of infant–mother intersubjectivity.

The language of the horse operates through the body . . . Because humans cannot convey intentions to horses through spoken language, they too must use their bodies to generate a communication style to which the horse can respond (Brandt, 2004, p. 301).

This nonverbal human–horse dialogue may occur without awareness and be unconsciously motivated. Similar exchanges also occur during psychotherapy. While psychodynamic therapy is a ‘talking cure’, ‘The most important information is often conveyed nonverbally’ (Hayes & Cruz, 2006, p. 287). Bowlby (1988) observed that

During the earliest years of our lives . . . emotional expression and its reception are the only means of communication we have . . . (p. 156)

Pre-verbal reciprocity

Beebe, Knoblauch, Rustin, and Sorter (2005) analysed gestural behaviour, body orientation, visual attention and facial expressiveness between 3 to 4 month old pre-verbal infants and their mothers. They observed reciprocal interactions and turn-taking behaviour, including ‘similarity or symmetry in behaviour’ (Beebe et al., 2005, p. 322). An infant’s nonverbal emotional expression consists of ‘intensity, timing and shape’, which translates into rhythmic patterns, vocal tones and behavioural forcefulness (Hart, 2010, pp. 50–51). Such modalities transform into ‘vital effects’ or kinesthetic qualities (e.g. ‘surging, bursting, explosive’) that are precursors to empathy (Hart, 2010, pp. 50–51). Notably, horses also display such ‘vital effects’. For example, a horse’s hoof stomping, nostril flaring or percussive snorting has emotional significance. Studies of older deaf children and their mothers also illustrate nonverbal communication.

Deaf mothers of deaf children assign intentions more to nonverbal behaviours with more pronounced nonverbal reactions, such as more body language, gesture, positive facial expression and smiling (Koester, Papousek, & Smith-Gray, p. 55).

Nonverbal communication is critical to child–caregiver interactions and to emotional development. It remains significant in the therapist–client relationship, whether conscious or not.

Gestural and body language, implicit in therapist–client relations, is explicit in human–horse communication. It urges expansion of client awareness and may evoke early parent–infant interaction patterns. Thus, with the human therapist’s careful guidance and interpretation, EAP may promote emotional healing and empathic growth. Perhaps a psychotherapist observing EAP may even learn a thing or two about nonverbal interaction.

Notes

1. Grinker reported that:

In the therapy sessions, Freud's Chinese chow, Jofi, would sit alongside the couch. Whenever Jofi became restless, Freud would end the session early, so Grinker learned to bring treats for the dog in order to get his full time. Freud frequently offered comments and interpretations through his dog. When Jofi would get up and scratch at the door to be let out, Freud would say, Jofi doesn't approve of what you're saying. When the dog scratched at the door to be let back in, Freud would playfully say, Jofi wants to give you another chance. Grinker added, Once when I was emoting with a great deal of vigor, the dog jumped on top of me, and Freud said, 'You see, Jofi is so excited that you've been able to discover the source of your anxiety!'

2. An often cited example was the odd case of 'Clever Hans', a horse purportedly trained to do calculations. Asked a question (e.g. 'what is the date of the following Friday?') Hans reportedly gave the correct answer by tapping his hoof. Researchers later discovered that the questioner's posture and facial expression changed as the horse's taps approached the right answer. Hans apparently used this cue to stop tapping. See Pfungst (1911). *Clever Hans (The horse of Mr. von Osten): A contribution to experimental animal and human psychology* (C. L. Rahn, Trans.). New York, NY: Henry Holt (Originally published in German, 1907).

Notes on contributor

The author has worked with seriously mentally ill and with chemically addicted clients. He is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor in Psychology at Pace University, New York, NY, USA. At present, his favourite riding companion is a horse named Flash.

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