

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk


An international journal rooted in South Africa

Vol. 62, No. 1, 2026, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15270/62-1-1650>


The therapeutic role of horses in equine-based therapy: An exploratory study with South African mental health practitioners

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Article received: 26/06/2025; Article accepted: 08/10/2025; Article published: 20/03/2026

ABSTRACT

Recently published literature on the use of equines in a therapeutic context has explored the connection between humans and horses in addressing social, educational, emotional and mental health challenges amongst clients presenting with various psycho-social problems. Despite the growing momentum around the therapeutic value of the human-horse connection, there is still little published literature on equine-based therapy and the role of the horse as a therapeutic partner. This study sought to deepen an understanding of equine-based therapy and the role of the horse in the therapeutic process. This understanding is crucial to establishing a strong foundation for such therapeutic efforts and for broadening its application within the field of social work. This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design as it sought to extract rich information pertaining to the process of equine-based therapy, its benefits and its significance in social work. The study was further guided by an instrumental case study approach. Non-probability sampling strategies, specifically purposive sampling and snowball sampling, were used to recruit fifteen mental health practitioners across four provinces in South Africa. Mental health practitioners who used equine-based therapy were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was used to guide the interviews. The study identified three major themes, i.e. understanding equine-based therapy in a therapeutic context, horses as therapeutic partners, and equine-based therapy as a healing tool for all through the process of inductive thematic analysis.

Keywords: equine-based therapy; horses; mental health; social work

INTRODUCTION

In recent times mental health problems have burgeoned globally (Fuller-Lovins et al., 2023). These issues require a more earnest consideration of a greater number of diverse therapeutic approaches to assisting children and families. Whilst traditional psychotherapy services have been beneficial, there is an awareness that they may not always work for those who are developmentally or emotionally not ready to openly share their thoughts and emotions during a talk therapy session (Barca et al., 2020). Equine-based therapy has emerged slowly as a relatively novel form of treatment with a few psychologists, clinical social workers or psychiatrists who have become acquainted with its methodologies (Karol, 2007). The therapeutic efficacy of horses can be attributed to several factors. Horses possess a remarkable ability to sense and respond to human emotions, functioning as mirrors for human feelings. This sensitivity allows them to detect shifts in body language and emotional states of individuals (Scopa et al., 2019). Unlike humans, who rely on both verbal and nonverbal cues, animals such as horses predominantly employ non-verbal communication to express their intentions (Jarolmen, 2018). When utilised in therapeutic contexts, horses can facilitate client self-awareness of their interpersonal approach and its impact on the interactions with others (Boshoff et al., 2015).

The use of horses for therapeutic purposes dates to the 1950s. It is only more recently, however, that horses have been used therapeutically within diverse healthcare fields such as occupational therapy, speech therapy and mental health, thereby suggesting its importance to healing and the wellbeing of humankind (Qin et al., 2024). Consequently, numerous writers have begun documenting the unique and powerful bond that can form between humans and horses and their role in therapeutic interventions (Escobar, 2019; Hallberg, 2017; Lac, 2017; Seerup & Anderson, 2025; Takacs, 2022). Empirical research, however, has grown in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, with only a few studies within the field of social work (Lee et al., 2016; Wilkie et al., 2016).

Despite this, clinical and anecdotal evidence has begun to show that equine-based therapy has become a salient therapeutic tool for mental health professionals and social workers over the past two decades (Fuller-Lovins et al., 2023; Letsoalo et al., 2024). Emerging research has positioned equine-based therapy as a dynamic modality for individual and group therapy that offers transformative outcomes for mental health problems (Harbeson, 2019; McNamara, 2017; Vincent & Farkas, 2017; Wood & Fields, 2021). During a session using equine-based therapy touch, focused attention, storytelling and symbolic learning are used as therapeutic mechanisms to facilitate social change and assist with individual growth. This occurs because horses can interpret human body language and energy, react to varying levels of human emotions and offer instant feedback using their own non-verbal cues (Fine & Andersen, 2021). Horses reflect a client's demeanour or sentiments, communicating through a somatic response and establishing a sense of rapport that fosters the client's feeling of security (Merkies et al., 2018; Scotland-Coogan, 2023). This dynamic also empowers clients to maintain a heightened self-awareness, utilising the horse's conduct and interactions as a source of feedback and opportunities to engage in introspection and process the ongoing experience during the therapeutic session (Carlsson et al., 2015; Cleary et al., 2024). This positions equine-assisted

therapy as a fitting tool for social work practice (Acri et al., 2016). The aim of this exploratory study was to deepen the understanding of equine-based therapy within a therapeutic context, specifically focusing on the perceived role of the horse as a therapeutic partner and the suitability of this modality for diverse client groups, as experienced by mental health practitioners in South Africa. The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. What is the understanding of equine-based therapy within a therapeutic context?
2. Which emotional or social problems are most suited for equine-based therapy?
3. What are the experiences of mental health care professionals about their use of equine-based therapy?

Equine-based therapy constitutes a component of a broader field, referred to as "equine-assisted activities and therapies" (Pérez-Gómez et al., 2021). These services are categorised into non-therapy "activities," such as adaptive riding or equine-assisted learning, and "therapies," where horses are integrated into physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy or mental health services provided by licensed professionals (Pérez-Gómez et al., 2021). Gleason (2019) and Kendrick (2022) highlighted the ambiguity around terms such as equine-assisted therapy (EAT), equine-assisted learning (EAL), equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) and equine-facilitated learning (EFL). In fact, despite the growing number of research studies investigating the integration of equines into mental health, educational and organisational contexts, conceptual clarity regarding these terms is poor (Acri et al., 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2022; Hemingway, 2019; Højgaard-Bøytler & Argentzell, 2023; Nieforth & Craig, 2021; Punzo et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2022; Young & Horton, 2019). Several writers have argued that there is confusion amongst both the public and practitioners with regards to "equine-based therapy" (Lentini & Knox, 2015; Pérez-Gómez et al., 2021; Pham & Bitonte, 2016; Thompson, 2019).

Hallberg (2017) described equine-assisted therapy as encompassing any therapeutic or treatment approach involving equine interactions, activities or strategies within an outdoor environment. Schultz et al. (2007) characterised equine-based therapy as a short, cooperative intervention involving the client, horse, therapist and equine expert. It encompasses experiential therapy and therapeutic exercises, which are conducted in the presence of horses. Viewed as a contemporary practice, equine-based therapy operates on the premise that interaction with horses can offer therapeutic benefits to individuals who might find conventional therapeutic or educational approaches challenging (Burgon, 2014; Fine, 2010). However, equine-based therapy should be perceived as a strategy that needs to be employed by qualified mental health practitioners, operating within the framework of their unique theoretical orientations, such as psychology and social work (Bachi, 2012; Burgon et al., 2018; Fry, 2013). Phrases like "equine therapy" or "equine-assisted learning" encompass a wide array of services, including therapeutic riding for children on the autism spectrum, interventions for veterans with PTSD, mental health support involving horses, and team building and leadership training (Williams, 2018).

Research has cast light on the potential benefits of equine-assisted activities for young people. These activities have been shown to foster socialisation, bolster self-esteem, enhance personal boundaries and elevate self-awareness. Equine-based therapy has also demonstrated effectiveness in mitigating emotional desensitisation and attachment-related challenges in

young people (Fuller-Lovins et al., 2023; McCullough, 2018; Sullivan & Hemingway, 2024). Equine-based therapy has also been shown to enhance self-confidence and motivation to learn, whilst developing skills related to attention, as well as spatial and verbal communication amongst individuals facing social and cognitive challenges. These findings underscore the potential benefits of integrating equine-assisted activities into therapeutic interventions (Törmälehto & Korkiamäki, 2020).

However, despite the growing trend in the use of horses to boost mental health and wellness, a deeper exploration of the understanding of equine-based therapy and the use of horses in a therapeutic context is required. Hence, there is a need to bridge the gap in the understanding of equine-based therapy between academic research and the beliefs and opinions of individuals who practice equine-based therapy (Battestella-Williams, 2019; Hallberg, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing, developed by White Buffalo (2015). This framework conceptualises healing as an interconnected process involving four interrelated quadrants: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. Each quadrant is viewed as contributing synergistically to overall wellbeing, emphasising that healing cannot be fully understood in terms of a single dimension, but must be approached holistically.

While the framework provides a broad conceptual lens, its application in this study aims to interpret participants' experiences of equine-based therapy rather than merely describing them. Specifically, the framework serves as an interpretative tool to analyse how different aspects of healing manifest across the quadrants within the context of human-horse relationships, thus addressing the "how" of therapeutic processes.

Biological healing pertains to physical wellbeing and the physiological processes involved in health. Braganza and Oliveira (2022) highlight that physical essentials such as nourishment, hydration and physical activity are central to this quadrant. Sheena (2020) notes that activities like horseback riding can support physical rehabilitation, improving flexibility, balance and muscle strength (Murphy et al., 2017). In this study participants described physical improvements and increased bodily awareness through interactions with horses, illustrating this quadrant's role.

Psychological healing involves mental health, including mood, emotions, cognition and self-perception. Matonti et al. (2021) emphasise that equine-based therapy can effectively address mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and trauma. Participants' narratives about enhanced emotional regulation, confidence and mental clarity reflect this dimension, which the framework helps to interpret as part of a holistic recovery process.

Social healing concerns interpersonal relationships and social integration. Zaffar (2021) and Shelton (2022) demonstrate that equine interactions foster communication skills, trust and social support. Lowe (2020) adds that such activities enable clients to develop positive relational skills, which are crucial in building community and social cohesion. In the qualitative

data, participants reported improved communication and strengthened social bonds, which the framework contextualises within broader social healing.

Spiritual healing encompasses inner belief systems, purpose and spiritual connection. Selver (2013) describes this as an inner journey toward meaning and higher purpose. In equine therapy, trust and mutual respect between humans and horses can cultivate spiritual bonds, as observed by Beetz and Schofmann-Crawford (2019). Participants expressed feelings of spiritual connection, purpose and inner peace, which the framework interprets as vital aspects of their healing process.

Despite its broad applicability, the current field of equine-based therapy lacks a unified, empirically supported theoretical explanation of “how” and “why” these relationships foster healing. This study seeks to contribute towards filling this gap by demonstrating how the holistic framework can interpret complex, multi-dimensional healing experiences, especially within diverse contexts such as South Africa.

Furthermore, integrating insights from South African scholars, such as Timmins (2022), who explored the benefits and challenges of equine-assisted psychotherapy within the South African context, and Visagie (2021), who examined teachers’ perceptions on the sustainability of equine therapy interventions in under-resourced schools, can provide valuable contextual understanding. These works highlight the unique social, cultural and resource-related factors influencing the implementation and outcomes of equine therapy in South Africa. Future iterations of this framework could benefit from further engagement with such local scholarship to enhance its cultural relevance and applicability.

Hence, the aim of this article is to deepen the understanding of equine-based therapy within a therapeutic context, specifically focusing on the perceived role of the horse as a therapeutic partner and the suitability of this modality for diverse client groups, as experienced by mental health practitioners in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory approach. Qualitative research methodology explores real-world issues and offers profound insights into the phenomenon being studied (Moser & Korstjens, 2022). This methodology was appropriate as it revolves around gathering information about participants' experiences, perceptions and behaviours, diving into the questions of "how" and "why," as opposed to the mere quantification of "how much" or "how many" (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Qualitative research encompasses various designs, such as a case study, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory and narrative research, sharing pivotal characteristics (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Moreover, Hunter et al. (2019) added that exploratory research delves into a phenomenon of interest, going beyond mere observation and recording, employing a descriptive element to gain insight. Exploratory research designs suit scenarios where a new interest or social phenomenon is under examination, such as the role and process of equine-based therapy (Stebbins, 2025; Usman et al., 2025).

The study also adopted an instrumental case study design. This design is a research approach that uses a specific case (an individual, group, organisation, event or entity) as a tool or instrument to gain insights into a broader phenomenon, theory or issue. In instrumental case studies the primary focus is not on understanding the case itself, but rather on how the case can help researchers investigate, illustrate or test a theoretical concept or research question (Zainal, 2007). An instrumental case study was conducted to explore equine-based therapy and the therapeutic role of horses in this form of therapy. It was expected that an instrumental case study would examine a phenomenon from the perspectives of mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy.

This study sought to deepen an understanding of equine-based therapy within a therapeutic context, specifically focusing on the perceived role of the horse as a therapeutic partner and the suitability of this modality for diverse client groups, as experienced by mental health practitioners, such as psychologists, social workers, wellness coaches and equine-facilitated learning practitioners. The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews to collect data from a number of mental health practitioners.

Sample

Non-probability, purposive sampling and snowball sampling were chosen. The selection of purposive sampling for this study stems from the necessity for participants to be engaged in equine-based therapy, as this forms the central theme of the research. The researcher started recruiting members from a national organisation called the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association (SAEFIA). The members from the organisation were purposefully selected as the study targeted those mental health practitioners with experience in using equine therapy. A total of nine participants were purposefully selected. However, data saturation was not reached and more participants had to be recruited.

Hence, snowball sampling was used in conjunction with purposive sampling as there were a few practitioners available in the field of equine-based therapy. The participants selected initially provided names of those who could be considered for the study. A further six participants were recruited through snowball sampling. This brought the total sample to fifteen participants. The sample consisted of three social workers, five psychologists, five equine-facilitated learning specialists and two wellness coaches. The participants were recruited from four major provinces across South Africa, namely, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Western Cape.

Data collection

Permission had to be secured from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) at the Durban University of Technology to conduct interviews with the participants, and ethics number IREC 065/20 was assigned to this study. The researcher started the interview process with the members of the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association. The participants were informed of the study by the secretary of the Association, who liaised regularly with the researcher via email and WhatsApp. She assisted in setting up the interviews with each participant from the association. The interviews were conducted in October 2020 with participants at each of their respective farms and offices. A total of nine interviews were

conducted in the initial round of interviews. However, after the interview, recordings and transcripts were reviewed, a second round of interviews had to be conducted as saturation had not been reached.

A further six participants were recruited using the snowball approach. The participants were contacted via email from the details provided by other participants during the period from October 2022 to December 2022. Although a direct approach was adopted, no coercion was used. The interviews were conducted at their respective farms and offices.

Before each interview, a letter of information and informed consent was given to each participant. Participation was voluntary. All interviews were recorded, with permission from the participants. An interview guide was used to guide the interviews. The questions in the interview schedule included: Please can you share with me what equine-based therapy is, and can you describe the types of people who benefit from equine-based therapy? Can you describe the processes that are followed for equine-based therapy? What have been some of the new benefits or stories of healing with the use of equine-based therapy? How would equine-based therapy enhance social work practice? What are some of the challenges you face when implementing equine-based therapy with your patients and the horse? How can practitioners be capacitated to work with horses? What are some of your experiences with using equine-based therapy?

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was adopted. Thematic analysis involves proceeding through a series of steps that focus on the identification of recurring themes or ideas in a textual data set as organising information is the process that follows qualitative research (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). Braun and Clarke (2019) concurred that thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The approach is described as a descriptive method that organises the data in a flexible way. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasised that it is commonly used, because a wide variety of research questions and topics can be addressed with this method of data analysis. While an independent coder was not engaged for this study, the supervisor fulfilled the role of second coder to support analytical rigour and credibility. The supervisor, with expertise in qualitative methodology and therapeutic practice, reviewed a sample of coded transcripts to verify thematic consistency, challenge assumptions and ensure alignment with the study's aims. This collaborative process facilitated reflexivity and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings, while maintaining transparency in the analytic approach.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of instrumental case studies is their limited generalisability. Since these studies often focus on a case or a small number of cases chosen for their relevance to a specific research question, it can be challenging to generalise the findings to a broader population or context. The results may not be representative of other cases or situations. The current study has focused on a small group of mental health practitioners who are using equine-based therapy, making it difficult to generalise the findings. Moreover, the researcher had

difficulty in accessing mental health practitioners who use equine-based therapy as there are only a few in the field.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the data analysis was assessed in terms of four criteria, i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Credibility

Credibility is the degree to which the findings accurately reflect the reality that the participants experienced and as such is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research (Dodgson, 2019). The researchers ensured credibility throughout the research process by maintaining an audit trail, which means that the researcher kept a detailed record of the research process, including decisions, data-collection procedures, coding, and steps of analysis. This will allow other researchers to follow the thought process and decisions.

Transferability

Transferability pertains to the degree to which the research findings can be extrapolated to alternative contexts or situations (Riazi et al., 2023). The researchers maintained transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants and the phenomena under investigation. This enables readers to understand the context and determine whether the findings may be relevant to their own context. The researchers also compared the findings with the current literature and studies conducted in different contexts. This provided insights into the potential transferability of the findings.

Dependability

Dependability pertains to the enduring and unwavering nature of the research findings across time (Haq et al., 2023). The researchers also ensured dependability through data saturation. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from the data. This ensured that the findings are stable and comprehensive.

Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the impartiality and objectivity of the findings, guaranteeing that they remain unaffected by any biases or preferences of the researchers (Ahmed, 2024). Confirmability was maintained by using participants' own words (verbatim quotes) to illustrate themes and interpretations. This not only adds authenticity to the findings, but also enables readers to judge the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. The researchers also appointed a validation committee; the findings and interpretations were shared with other experts in the field and their input was sought to ensure that the conclusions were aligned with the data.

Demographic profiles

The demographic profiles of the participants are presented in Table 1. below.

Table 1: Demographic profiles of participants

PARTICIPANT	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS	PROVINCE
Psychologists (Psych)	5	Gauteng KwaZulu-Natal
Social Workers (SW)	3	Gauteng KwaZulu-Natal Eastern Cape
Equine-facilitated learning facilitators (EFLF)	4	KwaZulu-Natal Gauteng
Wellness coaches (WC)	3	KwaZulu-Natal Gauteng

KEY FINDINGS

The findings from the study generated three major themes. These include equine-based therapy in a therapeutic context, horses as therapeutic partners, and equine-based therapy as a healing tool for all.

Theme 1: Understanding equine-based therapy

The first theme that emerged from the data was understanding equine-based therapy. The participants introduced the horse as central to the therapeutic process. They described this as follows:

It would probably be any kind of therapy where horses are central, any kind of intervention with specific goals in mind with horses being central. (Psych 3)

I would define equine-based therapy as an immersive experience. Facilitated or guided by an equine. (WC 1)

Horses are seen as very much part of facilitators in the process where they bring their own wisdom, their own gifts to the therapy process. So equine-based therapy would be for me therapy, which involves horses or therapy that is taking place in the field with horses, and they're choosing to interact or not. So equine-based therapy would be where the equines are a primary focus within the therapeutic process. (WC 2)

I'd say the horse is the magic partner in this equation and that the horse is a creature that just changes the dynamic. It changes absolutely everything, so the horse is actually the facilitator, the mental health practitioner at the centre of everything. And I think we are the human partners, we can just kind of help that along in a way. So, for me it is that the horse is the mental health practitioner. (Psych 4)

Equine facilitated work develops the relationship with the horses and through the relationship with the horse change takes place, so the horse is a constant partner in every part of the process, including the so-called processing at the end of the session. I'm in the horse's space and they share that space with me, and we bring a client into that space and in bringing the client into that space and developing the therapeutic relationship. That's where the growth and the transformation happen. (Psych 5)

Participants also introduced the mental health practitioner as a key facilitator in equine-based therapy:

Equine-based therapy is a therapy with horses and humans, human facilitators, because obviously there's generally a mental health practitioner. There's a mental health professional with a qualification and experience. And then there is the equine who facilitates the work and so I think it's right to say equine-based because without the equines there is no work. (SW2)

Other participants noted that equine-based therapy is focused on relational elements and communication. They made the following points:

It's so multifaceted. It comes down to relationship. It comes down to communication and I think those are the two fundamental aspects of equine-based therapy. It's about developing a relationship and it's about finding ways to communicate. (EFLF 3)

Equine-based therapy was also described as transformative therapy, with participants saying:

Probably the most powerfully transformative space for therapy. So, the most transformative therapy that's equine-based happens where equines are considered co-facilitators and drivers of change. The power of engaging with the prey's way of living and being and doing... it's when you look at the reciprocal relationships in nature. When I look at equine-based therapy, equine-based therapy feels like a kind of coming back to that kind of relationship with horses that says, we're bound to each other and the success of both our species depends on living in a place where you teach as much as you learn. Where you receive as much as you give. (SW1)

Other participants described equine-based therapy as an experiential form of therapy that allows clients to explore their problems more openly as opposed to traditional talk therapy. They shared the following comments:

Equine psychotherapy is just a way of being able to reach people's emotional state without them being threatened. And so, it's a really great way of helping. (Psych 1)

It broadens the opportunities for experiences that can promote wellbeing beyond the traditional talk therapy because not everybody is so open to talk therapy so it's an experiential therapy. So, I think all the benefits of experiential therapy are there. I think equine-based therapy adds to social work. I do think that the relationship with the animals brings a whole another level of experience. (Psych 2)

Everything fundamentally comes back to the individual, so if you're doing social work and you've got a dysfunctional family or one person in the family who needs to explain to the

others how he's feeling. The equine-based therapy is a wonderful quiet way because you get to be in this lovely, quiet space. No cell phones, no external interactions. So sometimes people are so closed and claustrophobic so they're in a space that just gives you space to breathe. And the way it's positioned amazes me how you see things happening to the horses and the horses hurt. That just resonates with this person's story or the family story. (EFLF 1)

Theme 2: The role of horses as therapeutic partners

The second main theme that emerged from the data is that the horse was a valuable partner in therapy. Participants expressed this as follows:

The horses provide an element that for me, no other therapy can. I've exposed myself to different play therapies and narrative therapies and art therapies and it's just having that living animal... the horses bring a unique empowering element... often when we have a really hectic client or quite a severe case or a session that I think is going to be heavy. I often leave feeling elated and empowered myself because of the process. (SW2)

Working with horses, they have a very unique element to them... they are very similar in some ways to human and nature and we find that they respond very well to humans and particularly when you have difficult clients. Clients that are difficult to talk with, clients that are unable to really touch base or are very resistant. And horses are really good because it's outside, it's an animal we find that works really well with therapy. So, from that point of view, I think it's been a really nice modality to include in the therapy. (Psych 1)

Other participants felt that horses can regulate an individual's emotions. They said:

The power of the horse is to be able to pick up accurately what the client is really feeling... If that client is saying they're not scared but they are actually terrified – the horse is able to sense that because they are designed to sense danger and to know what's going on around them. They pick up what the client is actually experiencing, and they react on that. (SW 3)

Horses are very therapeutic. So, they almost work like a magnetic field so they can slow our heart beats down as long as there's no major fear and anxiety that can overrule that. But like naturally neurochemicals are, at least when we're around persons and just being out and about and openly in the environment, they're really helpful. So, they reflect what we feel as well. (EFLF 2)

Another participant described the horses as relational animals:

We worked with the idea that horses are amazing at shifting into relational experiences. Because by their nature they are very relational, very like us, so that's by the nature, they are social. So, they have sensitivity to that and ultimately, if you want a horse to do something for you, you have to be congruent. (Psych 2)

Theme 3: Equine-based therapy as a healing tool for all

The comments reflect the diversity of therapeutic challenges for which equine-based therapy can be suitable.

One of the practitioners believed that equine-based therapy is suitable for all clients:

It speaks to so many different kinds of people. People with fears, people with trauma, people of different heights, weights, colour, race, you know, backgrounds. (SW2)

Several participants believed that equine-based therapy was extremely beneficial, specifically for children who have to deal with various challenges:

It's healing, especially with our children... it's great for kids that have gone through a lot of trauma because they shut down to opening themselves up to physical affection or connecting emotional connection. Children are able to express physical affection easily without that judgement without fear of rejection and they're able to receive affection from the horse much easier as opposed to human trying to be affectionate. (EFLF 2)

I would say kids and adolescents love it. They mainly flourish in the different kind of therapy than just talk therapy. (Psych 3)

Other participants viewed equine-based therapy as beneficial for clients with anxiety, those who are victims of gender-based violence and trauma. They commented as follows:

The versatility of the model is being able to work with people [suffering] from anxiety. Horses and their heart rate lower human heart rate, so we have had clients with anxiety. I can literally feel better after being with the horses for 10 minutes and that's it. It's an actual physical process that has been researched. (SW2)

The gender-based violence space. So, we work with women who have been abused, traumatised. We raise funds to provide programmes for women who have been abused, so the women are either in shelters or they're in counselling centres for trauma that they've suffered. (SW2)

We do work with parents caring for the carer programme, so we work with social workers, nurses, police officers, anyone who experiences secondary traumatic stress due to their exposure to and the nature of their work. That's a six-week programme, an hour long, so six participants, and that's in collaboration with organisations where we can get funding for that. (SW2)

Equine-based therapy was also found to be good for various modes of therapy. Practitioners commented as follows:

I think the equine-based therapy is as valuable for one-on-one therapy sessions as it is for family groups because families are made-up of individuals in the way that they interact and connect. (EFLF 1)

There's quite good programmes in terms of parenting, step parenting, blended families work really good for group work, helping with issues at work. (Psych 1)

DISCUSSION

Participants described horses as “drivers of change” and “partners in the process,” emphasising that they do not merely reflect clients’ emotions, but actively participate in shaping the therapeutic journey. Horses are seen as “bringing their own wisdom” and serving as “agents of transformation”, which suggests that their behaviour and responses are integral to facilitating change rather than being passive mirrors. This conceptualisation positions the horse as an equal partner, capable of influencing outcomes through their relational and behavioural responses.

Another critical aspect highlighted by the data is the intrinsic safety provided by horses’ non-judgmental and sensitive nature. Horses respond intuitively to body language and emotional cues, creating a space where clients feel accepted and understood without fear of criticism or rejection. This environment is particularly beneficial for clients who have experienced trauma or rejection, as the horses’ natural sensitivity fosters emotional exposure and vulnerability barriers often encountered in traditional talk therapy.

Furthermore, the data emphasise the embodied and metaphorical nature of interactions with horses. Engaging physically with horses whether through grooming, leading or riding serves as a powerful conduit for emotional processing. Equine assisted psychotherapy and the EAGALA model consider the use of metaphor as a significant component of therapy (Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015). The metaphor is therefore defined as “a device for seeing something in terms of something else”. Hence, the relationship between the horse and client interaction and psychosocial learning is mediated by the extent to which horses serve as metaphors for people and issues in the client’s life (Fournier et al., 2018). The natural emergence of metaphors during these interactions enables clients to project personal experiences onto the animal, facilitating insight and narrative development. These embodied experiences, combined with metaphorical reflection, deepen emotional understanding, promote self-awareness and support behavioural change.

The data also underscore how equine-based therapy specifically addresses complex trauma and emotional difficulties. Participants noted that working with horses allows individuals to express feelings such as fear, anxiety and rejection in a non-threatening context. For children who have endured trauma, the physical engagement with horses helps foster emotional expression that might be difficult through verbal means alone. The calming effects such as lowered heart rate and increased relaxation are not only physiological responses, but also symbolic of emotional regulation, which is vital for recovery from trauma.

The therapy also addresses the development of social and relational skills. Horses, as social animals, serve as mirrors for human relational dynamics. Clients learn to interpret social cues, develop trust, establish boundaries and practice patience in interactions with the animals. Observing herd behaviour and engaging in relational activities with horses provide practical lessons transferable to human relationships, fostering empathy, trust and social competence.

Moreover, the versatility and broad applicability of equine therapy emerged as significant themes. Participants highlighted that this approach is suitable for a wide demographic, including individuals with mental health challenges, learning disabilities, behavioural issues and trauma. It is adaptable across individual, family and group settings, including specialised

programmes for parenting, blended families and professional environments. This flexibility makes equine-based therapy a highly versatile modality capable of addressing diverse therapeutic needs.

Engaging actively with horses fosters self-efficacy and empowerment. Overcoming fears, caring for animals and building trusting relationships with horses can instil a sense of mastery and confidence. Participants observed that such experiences reinforce clients' belief in their capacity to effect change, contributing to a sense of personal empowerment and resilience.

These insights collectively reveal that equine-based therapy not only has relational and experiential benefits, but also possesses unique qualities such as the horse's active participation, inherent safety, embodied learning and social teaching that significantly enhance its therapeutic potential. The role of the horse as a core partner in the therapeutic process provides a meaningful connection with clients, facilitating dealing with both psychotherapy and physical challenges. The horse's behaviour reflects clients' deep emotional states, offering feedback that is translated into a narrative with the support of the mental health practitioner. Frederick (2018) similarly noted that the horse offers a unique form of feedback and emotional connection, while Hallberg (2017) elaborated on the importance of the practitioner's role in helping clients interpret these responses, encouraging reflection on their emotions and thought patterns. This reflective process can help clients gain insight into their emotional states and develop coping skills for managing stress, anxiety and other mental health conditions (Bachi et al., 2011; Wood & Fields, 2021).

This suggests that the therapeutic process is incomplete without a qualified mental health practitioner who possesses expertise in both equine-based therapy and counselling. The practitioner acts as a vital link, facilitating interactions through guided activities and creating a safe, supportive environment for self-expression and emotional processing. Priory (2022) asserted that equine-based therapy typically involves a licensed mental health practitioner working with the client and one or more horses. Stewart et al. (2014) and Bennett and Woodman (2019) added that the practitioner designs tailored activities aligned with the client's specific needs and goals.

These points reflect that equine-based therapy is fundamentally relational and focused on communication both with the horses and between the client and the practitioner. The presence of the horse in therapy sessions fosters a unique environment that encourages trust and interpersonal connection. This not only facilitates a deeper connection with oneself, but also ensures that the therapeutic guidance provided by the practitioner nurtures exploration and healing. Routley (2020) described this as a co-created learning process between humans and horses, while Schroeder and Stroud (2015) explained that individuals learn to be present, clear and consistent to communicate effectively. Lac (2016) emphasised that working with horses enables clients to integrate their experiences to better understand their behavioural reactions and their impact on relationships with self and others.

Furthermore, equine-based therapy is described as a transformative experience that fosters personal growth, self-awareness, emotional healing and empowerment in an interconnected relationship involving the horse, nature and the client. These elements collectively create an

environment conducive to transformative change. Krob (2015) supported this view, stating that the approach holds powerful transformative possibilities for all clients involved.

As an experiential, hands-on form of therapy, equine-based therapy requires active client engagement both physically and emotionally. Clients participate in various activities and exercises that foster direct interaction with the horse, moving beyond reliance on traditional talk therapy. The immersive nature allows clients to fully experience and reflect upon their emotions and behaviours, with metaphors often emerging within these interactions. These metaphors serve as symbolic representations of clients' lives, relationships and challenges, facilitating deeper understanding. Wilkie et al. (2016) highlight that this approach promotes therapeutic transformation by focusing on the present moment as a means of discovery and learning. The horse acts as a mirror, enabling clients to project personal experiences, past behaviours or emotions, and thereby process and regulate them. Bachi (2013) noted that practitioners can use these metaphors to facilitate discussion, reflection and exploration.

Horses bring a unique element to the traditional therapy environment, often proving especially effective with clients who may not respond well to other approaches. Their non-judgmental nature fosters a safe, accepting environment—particularly for clients who have difficulty opening up or are resistant to therapy. Horses' sensitivity to human emotions and body language provides immediate feedback, supporting self-awareness, emotional regulation and personal growth. Their calming presence can help clients achieve emotional regulation through creating a sense of relaxation that reflects a broader process of healing.

Developing a relationship with a horse necessitates cultivating trust, patience and effective communication. Through consistent interaction and positive experiences, clients can build trust and rapport with the horse, which can then extend to other areas of their lives. Mellor-Clark et al. (2016) describe horses as social animals that form strong bonds within their herd, providing valuable lessons for clients struggling with social skills and relationships. Kern-Godal et al. (2016) noted that observing herd dynamics and engaging with horses can teach empathy, trust and setting boundaries. Hallberg (2017) added that caring for horses instils a sense of accomplishment and purpose, fostering pride and satisfaction.

Research by Brubaker and Udell (2016), Tan and Simmonds (2018), Birke and Thompson (2017), Johnson et al. (2018) and Trzmiel et al. (2019) further supports the notion that horses can sense and reflect human emotions, providing immediate feedback that facilitates emotional exploration, trust-building and personal growth. Højgaard-Bøytler and Argentzell (2023) emphasised that equine-based therapy offers a safe, non-judgmental environment where clients can openly express and process emotions, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. The interaction often has a cathartic effect, enabling clients to explore and release feelings in a supportive setting, which enhances emotional regulation, self-confidence and coping skills.

Participants shared that equine-based therapy is particularly popular among children and adolescents, who often "love it". It extends traditional counselling by engaging children in outdoor, hands-on experiences with horses, which is especially salient for those who have endured trauma, rejection or isolation. The approach promotes self-expression, emotional regulation, social skills development and self-confidence. Bjonness et al. (2020) as well as Haig

and Skinner (2022) emphasise that equine therapy benefits children facing mental health challenges, learning disabilities, trauma and abuse, including dealing with issues such as anger, anxiety, depression, ADHD and other behavioural difficulties (Coman et al., 2018; Graves, 2010; Punzo et al., 2022).

Engagement in equine therapy fosters empowerment and self-efficacy through activities focused on problem-solving, overcoming fears and building relationships with the horses – powerful, gentle animals that instil confidence. This process can boost self-esteem and reinforce clients' belief in their capacity for positive change. Bator et al. (2020), Stern and Chur-Hansen (2019), Snowshoe and Starblanket (2016), Mendonça et al. (2019) and Ayala et al. (2021) support the view that horses provide a calming, non-judgmental presence that helps clients open up about their struggles.

Equine-based therapy is valuable both in individual and group settings. In family contexts, it can address complex dynamics by providing a neutral, safe space that encourages openness and vulnerability. The presence of horses facilitates trust and connection among family members. When working with groups sharing similar goals, practitioners facilitate activities that promote trust, communication and reflection, exploring group dynamics, emotional responses and interpersonal interactions. Trotter et al. (2008) and Perkins (2018) emphasise that such group processes foster self-awareness, communication and insight sharing, enriching the therapeutic experience for all participants.

These narratives collectively illustrate that equine-based therapy is a multifaceted, relational and experiential approach that leverages the unique qualities of horses to foster deep emotional healing, personal growth and social development across diverse populations and settings.

Despite the evident benefits and richness of equine-based therapy, a notable concern raised in the literature and practice is the lack of conceptual clarity about the field. Variability in terminology, approaches and theoretical underpinnings can lead to confusion among practitioners, researchers and clients alike. This disjuncture between the theoretical and practical conceptualisation of equine-assisted therapy often hampers the development of standardised practices, the accumulation of empirical evidence and the establishment of clear guidelines for effective implementation.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive framework of understanding, one that synthesises existing theories, practices and empirical findings into a cohesive, multidimensional model. Such a framework would serve to clarify the core principles, delineate the role of horses, practitioners, and clients, and facilitate consistent application across diverse settings. Importantly, it would also support practitioners in aligning their interventions with evidence-based practices, ensuring both efficacy and safety.

In this regard, integrating a holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework offers a promising pathway. This integrative perspective underscores how equine-based therapy naturally aligns with a comprehensive model of human wellbeing, addressing the full spectrum of human experience across its biological, emotional, relational and spiritual facets. The horse's active role as a partner facilitates this holistic healing process, supporting clients in experiencing a sense of interconnectedness and wholeness.

CONCLUSION

Equine-based therapy plays a crucial role in supporting individuals on their healing journey. By facilitating interactions between people and horses under the supervision of a mental health professional, this therapeutic approach can be effective in addressing various psychological issues, including abuse, trauma and anxiety. This form of therapy is then beneficial because horses possess an innate ability to act as emotional mirrors for humans. They can sense and reflect emotions, providing individuals with valuable insights into their own feelings. Through this unique connection, horses create a safe space for self-expression and healing. Moreover, working with horses during therapy sessions fosters essential relational skills. The experience of caring for and interacting with horses can have a profound impact on personal growth. Hence, equine-based therapy offers a transformative opportunity for healing, growth and emotional connection.

Its distinct advantages as a modality within social work practice is its capacity to engage particularly clients who may struggle with traditional talk-based interventions. Its emphasis on embodied experience, relational attunement and non-verbal communication aligns with trauma-informed and strengths-based approaches central to social work. The horse's responsiveness and presence can foster emotional regulation, build trust and support the development of relational skills, which is especially valuable for clients navigating grief, developmental trauma or relational ruptures. Moreover, the modality's adaptability across age groups and psychosocial contexts enhances its relevance for inclusive, client-centred care. By integrating equine-based therapy into social work settings, practitioners can expand their therapeutic repertoire and offer innovative pathways for healing.

This study meaningfully addresses the research questions by foregrounding practitioners' lived experiences and perceptions of equine-based therapy, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical discourse and practical application. Through thematic analysis, it reveals how practitioners conceptualise the horse as a responsive therapeutic partner, understand the modality's relational and embodied dimensions, and adapt these elements to diverse client needs. These insights affirm and extend existing theoretical frameworks by demonstrating how equine-based therapy fosters emotional regulation, relational attunement and holistic engagement. Although the original framework was not explicitly restated in the findings, its principles are reflected in the emergent themes, which collectively offer a grounded understanding of the modality's impact. The study also contributes to resolving conceptual ambiguity by clarifying the distinctions between equine-based therapy and adjacent practices such as equine-assisted learning or recreational riding. Participants emphasised intentionality, relational depth and structured therapeutic engagement elements that help delineate the modality and reduce confusion among practitioners and the public. By offering a practitioner-informed lens, the study advances conceptual clarity and complements the academic literature, laying a foundation for future research and professional dialogue.

Further inquiry could explore longitudinal outcomes of equine-based therapy in social work practice and inform the development of guidelines for designing and implementing such programmes, thereby providing clearer direction for practical application.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

The study provided a foundation for understanding equine-based therapy within a therapeutic context. The documentation of the principles, experiences and processes of equine-based therapy may inform social work practitioners of the potential benefits of equine-based therapy and serve as a guide for social work practitioners to consider the requisite preparation, process and activities for the application of equine-based therapy.

Establishing a theoretical guide for equine-based therapy in social work practice within the South African context might be a potential next step in the research agenda. According to Haig and Skinner (2022), there are two large agencies that have developed a treatment model and utilise horses for cognitive, emotional and behavioural modifications. The first is PATH International, which has a specific programme entitled “Equine-Facilitated Mental Health”; this agency focuses largely on physical and occupational rehabilitation. The second is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). EAGALA was developed in 1999 and the specific treatment model is called equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP). Both these models are based on international frameworks.

Another implication is related to standards of practice. This study included the intersection of two specialisations, namely equine-based therapy and social work practice. These two specialisations require a clear and distinct definitions of practice and competency as a blended intervention. Therefore, it is important to further understand how the complexities of the integration of equine-based therapy and social work practice intersect, and whether there are issues particular to the implementation of equine-based therapy that imply a need for specialised training and its inclusion into the social work curriculum.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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