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Horses, Mindfulness and the Natural Environment: Observations From a Qualitative Study with At-Risk Young People Participating in Therapeutic Horsemanship

Dr Hannah Louise Burgon
Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff, UK

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Correspondence:
H.L. Burgon
Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff, UK
c/o, 60 The Carrions, Totnes, Devon, UK, TQ9 5XX
Email: hannahburgon@hotmail.com

Abstract

The field of Equine-Assisted Learning and Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAL/T) where horses are co-facilitators in therapeutic and learning interventions claims to offer valuable benefits for young people and adults experiencing psychosocial difficulties. Some of the reported positive outcomes from participating in EAL/T include growths in self-confidence and self-esteem, increasing self-awareness and behaviour modification, building trust and attachment, and a host of other physical and mental health benefits. However, the area of how being with horses may enable participants to experience benefits from the natural environment together with aspects of mindfulness has received little attention. This paper is drawn from a qualitative, ethnographic, doctoral research study with seven "at-risk" young people aged between 11-21 years participating in a Therapeutic Horsemanship programme in the UK. In addition to similar themes identified above the study found benefits related to the mindfulness and nature therapy literature. These included "being calm" and relaxation, being "in the moment", psychospiritual aspects of "feeling free", and links to theories of "emotion regulation" and "authentic functioning" (Chambers et al. 2009; Heppner and Kernis 2007). The study has clinical implications to the fields of social work and psychotherapy as it suggests that horses may offer a valuable additional intervention for "at-risk" young people who may benefit from alternative therapeutic and learning experiences.

Keywords Equine-Assisted Learning; Equine-Assisted Therapy; Mindfulness; At-Risk Young People, Nature Therapy; Ecotherapy

Introduction

The paper is drawn from the larger doctoral qualitative ethnographic study I completed into the benefits of Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH), which also discusses themes related to the risk and resilience literature, attachment theory, and psychotherapeutic themes of relationship, identification, projection and metaphor. It is

based upon a TH programme I established whilst working for a foster care company in order to provide an alternative therapeutic intervention for young people in foster care assessed as requiring additional therapeutic and/or learning support. The young people participating in the study were understood to be "at-risk" due to their psychosocial disadvantages and backgrounds and therefore at possible increased danger of experiencing negative life outcomes (Rutter 1995; Masten et al. 1990). Therapeutic Horsemanship and its allied professions, Equine-Assisted Learning and Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAL/T), seek to provide meaningful therapeutic and educational experiences where participants can gain psychosocial skills and resilience factors to enable them to have more positive futures.

Horses have played a fundamental role in shaping our modern world since they were first ridden between 4-6,000 years ago, most visibly in transport, agriculture and war. In addition, the cave paintings of horses in Pech-Merle in France indicate that early mankind revered horses and believed them to possess magical healing powers. Indeed, the medical profession has links to the Greek philosopher Hippocrates – the word hippo meaning horse (Chamberlin 2007; Mayberry 1978). Because of their close and long relationship with humans it is argued that this has resulted in a special relationship with the horse that has archetypal and healing significance (All et al. 1999; Kohanov 2001; McCormick and McCormick 1997, 2004) and that "horses have been shown by anthropologists to be deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of culture and society" (Latimer and Birke 2009, p. 2).

More recently the field of Equine Facilitated Mental Health and Education which includes Equine-Assisted/Facilitated Therapy, Equine-Assisted/Facilitated Learning, Equine-Assisted/Facilitated Psychotherapy (all amalgamated as EAL/T for the sake of this paper) and Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH), is capitalising on the unique characteristics of the horse to provide therapeutic interventions to young people and adults (Hallberg 2008). Emerging studies are claiming that EAL/T can provide many benefits ranging from building confidence and self-esteem, increases in self-awareness and mental health, opportunity for positive behavioural change, and for building healthy attachments and relationships with both the horse and therapist (Bass et al. 2009; Bizub et al. 2003; Burgon 2003, 2011; Ewing et al. 2007; Kaiser et al. 2004; Schultz et al. 2007; Trotter et al. 2008; Virdine et al. 2002; Yorke et al. 2008).

Despite the fact that a large element of EAL/T is that it is located in the outdoors due to the nature of the horses' habitat, the natural environment is not mentioned as a factor in the therapeutic process of EAL/T in the majority of studies. A notable exception is Garcia (2010) who argues that equine-facilitated activities can provide opportunities for ecological awareness through "transformative experiences that positively influence relationship to self, others, and the ecology of the Earth" (Garcia 2010, p. 88).

Claims for the benefit of being in the natural environment are wide ranging, from its spiritual, aesthetic, and physical realms, to the more recent fields known as nature therapy, ecotherapy and ecopsychology (Rozak et al. 1995). Biophilia theory proposes that we have an innate connection and affinity with nature which is essential to our health and wellbeing (Kellert and Wilson 1993; Nebbe 2000). Other authors suggest that a multitude of conditions ranging from rising obesity, mental health issues and even a lack of vitamin D are the result of our modern technological lifestyles which have corresponded in a distancing from the natural environment (Louv 2008; Misra et al. 2008; Munoz 2009). Conversely, spending time in nature is claimed to lead to stress reduction (Korpela et al. 2001) is important in children's development and learning, for young people with attention deficit disorder (Kellert 2002; Taylor et al. 2001) and can be a useful therapeutic setting as it can "diminish hierarchies" (Berger and McCleod 2006, p. 91). Furthermore, the natural environment can provide "attention restoration" benefits where participants can get away from negative thoughts (Kaplan 1995; Korpela et al. 2001).

I go on to provide examples of how the young people participating in the TH study seemed to gain benefits from being with horses in the natural environment later in this paper, and how these have links to both the mindfulness and nature therapy literature. Mindfulness practices are based around bringing moment-to mo-

ment awareness (Kabat-Zinn 1994) and being "a method for observing what is happening right now, in our bodies, minds and the world around us" (Halliwell 2010, p.16). Mindfulness is also concerned with bringing an uncritical approach to our thoughts and feelings and instead just seeing them as "mental events" (Teasdale et al. 2000). The opposite of mindfulness has been referred to as *mindlessness* by Germer (2005) who describes this as manifesting as behaviours such as rushing through activities, being unaware of tension, carelessness, and a preoccupation with future or past events. Mindfulness in the Western medical concept of the practice evolved from ancient Buddhist meditation traditions concerned with principles of compassion, loving-kindness, empathic joy, and equanimity (Shaver et al. 2007). These authors suggest that modern psychological approaches to mindfulness have attempted to adapt these principles to fit with Western values of individualistic and less socially connected ways. A growing evidence-base claims that mindfulness practices can offer health and psychosocial benefits to a wide range of populations (Baer 2006; Biegel et al. 2009; Brown and Ryan 2003; Germer et al. 2005; Heppner et al. 2008; Kabat-Zinn et al. 1992; Segal et al. 2002; Zylowska et al. 2008). Whilst there are competing theories as to whether mindfulness is a process, practice or construct, a main reported benefit of mindfulness practice is relaxation, although authors are keen to point out that this is a side-effect rather than an aim of the practice, as a core principle of mindfulness is to be open to all experience rather than being goal-orientated, which is a Western preoccupation (Chambers et al. 2009; Germer 2005; Kabat-Zinn 2003). The main mindfulness practices to be implemented and introduced into mainstream health services are Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which have largely evolved due to the success of the stress reduction and relaxation programme developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre (Kabat- Zinn 1990; Mason & Hargreaves 2001). It will be seen that MBSR techniques appear to have the most commonality to TH and EAL/T as they include an element of body movement and experiential approaches to mindfulness practice, which are possibly more acceptable for many young people than traditional talk therapies, and are inherently part of being with horses.

In terms of work with young people it is claimed that mindfulness can provide a useful alternative therapeutic intervention as, "some adolescents do not view psychotherapy as a beneficial treatment option" (Biegel et al. 2009, p. 855). These authors suggest that MBSR techniques may be useful to employ with young people, finding significant improvements in depressive symptoms in 14-18 yr olds with mental health problems participating in their randomized control trial (Biegel et al. 2009). Other authors propose that mindfulness practices that include body exercises and "multiple sensory systems (e.g., listening, tasting, smelling) or that involve movement" (Wagner et al. 2006, p. 186) are especially relevant as they are more easily accessible to children and young people who communicate more readily through non-verbal methods than adults, and are predisposed to being in the present moment (Goodman 2005). In their study with young people diagnosed with ADHD Zylowska et al. (2008) employed mindfulness methods including walking meditation and encouraging participants to bring mindfulness to their daily routine. The authors reported improvements in attention, anxiety, and depressive symptoms and concluded that the experiential nature of mindfulness practices provide a useful medium in which to work with young people with attentional difficulties (Zylowska et al. 2008). As many young people who have encountered trauma and distress in their childhoods are perhaps not able to process their pasts through talk therapies due to their experiences being too "raw" for them, together with age-related, developmental, factors, MBSR practices that incorporate exercises such as mindful walking, yoga, stretching, and other exercises may be useful in order to encourage relaxation. It is suggested that when the mind is agitated or a person feels pressured, "it is easier to be mindful with a practice that involves physical movement than with one that does not" (Segal et al. 2002, p. 181).

Mindfulness practices have also been reported to have application in reducing aggressive behaviour, and in emotion and behaviour regulation and "authentic functioning" (Brown et al. 2007; Chambers et al. 2009; Heppner and Kernis 2007). In a nutshell it is argued that mindfulness practice results in greater insight and self-awareness which can enable individuals with fragile self-esteem who may be stuck in habitual negative reaction patterns to begin to operate in a more positive authentic manner; "mindfully informed action appears less likely to be regulated by ego-concerns, and thus is more likely to represent integrated, *authentic* function-

ing" (Brown et al. 2007, p. 218). Whilst acknowledged as containing controversial elements of determinism, authentic functioning is suggested to be where "ones actions are integrated and self-endorsed" and aligned to a "core or "true" self" (Brown et al. 2007, p. 217). It is claimed that high authenticity is related to many aspects important to healthy mental functioning such as positive relationships, low stress rates, secure self-esteem and high coping ability (Heppner and Kernis 2007; Goldman and Kernis 2002). A reduction in aggressive behaviour with adolescents and young people is also attributed to gains in authenticity and secure self-esteem achieved through mindfulness practice (Heppner et al. 2008; Zylowska et al. 2008). Shaver et al. in their paper on the links between attachment theory and mindfulness, talk of the central tenet of "a stronger and wiser other who helps a client or seeker of emotional stability become less anxious, less avoidant, more secure, and more effectively mindful..." (2007, p. 269). It will be seen later in this paper how the horse may provide elements of this "stronger, wiser other" together with many of the other claims referred to by the mindfulness literature explored above, particularly in relation to MBSR.

Being in the natural environment may also bring additional mindfulness benefits on its own merit, as it facilitates a mindful state naturally according to Coleman (2006). As The Yard practiced TH within a natural environment context and with an emphasis on the benefits that this may bring, it was considered that this may bring an additional element to TH.

Methods

The research setting: "The Yard"

"The Yard" was a Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH) programme I set up whilst working as a social worker to provide an alternative therapeutic and learning intervention for young people in foster care. A total of 9 horses of varying ages, temperaments and stages of training were resident at The Yard during the study, which followed a "natural horsemanship" approach to management. This method fitted well alongside the child-centred and experiential philosophy of TH practice followed by the practitioners and therapists at The Yard. A natural horsemanship approach believes in allowing horses to live a more natural lifestyle than traditional methods; for example the horses lived "free range" in that they were provided with a large barn with open access to fields so could choose whether to be inside or out, in contrast to conventional methods where horses are shut in stables for long periods of time. In addition, natural horsemanship believes in non-confrontational training methods working within an understanding of horse ethology as opposed to methods based on domination (Birke 2008; Rashid 2004; Rees 1984). A combination of these factors meant that the horses were generally relaxed and safe to be around as they were an established herd and did not possess the behavioural problems of many stable kept horses. The Yard consisted of a hard-standing yard area with an assortment of barns surrounded by open countryside. Positioned next to a small office within the yard was a wooden picnic table. Many TH sessions would take place sitting at this bench, drinking tea, eating lunch, and observing the horses as they mingled around or ate from their haynets. TH sessions were generally set between one and three hours, and young people would usually attend weekly or fortnightly. In line with suggested best practice guidance from the USA based Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA), a minimum of two practitioners were always in attendance. The team consisted of a play therapist, counsellor, qualified social worker (the author), a teacher, and a number of experienced horse handlers. Inherent in the activities that took place in TH sessions was an emphasis on learning about horse psychology and the effect of participants' behaviour on the horse, together with building up relationships with horses that the young people were drawn towards. These relationships provided rich ground for discussion between the participant and therapist, and were useful in terms of opportunity for metaphor and analogy within psychotherapeutic frames of reference (Chardonnens 2009; Gammage 2008; Karol 2007). Unfortunately it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss these aspects in more detail but they are covered in more depth in the larger PhD from which this paper is drawn.

The Participants

Seven young people participated in the case study over a two-year time frame. Two young people attended The Yard over the entire two-year period but generally participants attended for a number of months either weekly or fortnightly, and this was more often than not dictated by funding. The shortest number of sessions attended by a participant was six. Five of the participants were girls and two were boys. They were aged between 11 and 21 yrs old. The young people were referred to the TH programme from various agencies including the foster care agency that I worked for, a youth offending team (YOT), pupil referral unit (PRU) and residential facility. Two of the participants had a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and two had an autistic spectrum diagnosis. Another young person received medication for ADHD.

In line with a participative approach and ethical considerations of confidentiality the young people were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym names. Participants also helped choose pseudonym names for the horses. In addition to the young people a number of adults participated in the research by providing their perspective of TH and its effect on the young people. These included two of the therapists on the TH programme, a social worker, a teacher, three foster carers and the mother of an adopted participant. They contributed in detailed semi-structured interviews in addition to informal "field interviews" and completed questionnaires.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the university ethics committee and was at the heart of the research. Robust consent and confidentially procedures were in place together with child-protection and additional policies in terms of ethical practice with both the young people and horses. In line with the child-centred philosophy of The Yard, I was aligned to a participative research approach and sought the young people's collaboration on research design such as questionnaires. However, it was found that my high ideal of a fully participative approach was perhaps overambitious in the context of this research study, and raised more questions of both an ethical and practical nature than I anticipated. For example I found that some of young people in foster care seemed to find being asked questions intrusive, and I respected this. From my experience of being a social worker I was aware of this in a social work context but did not anticipate it being such an issue within the research environment of The Yard. This meant that some of the young people were more fully engaged in the research process than others and resulted in an unequal contribution to the research design and checking of my analysis.

Research design and data collection methods

I chose a qualitative, ethnographic, reflexive, case study method aligned to a psychosocial approach as this fitted with my personal value base, philosophical orientation and particular features of the study site. By situating The Yard as the case I avoided epistemological difficulties of positioning the young people as "cases". A psychosocial approach to research is interested in the unconscious as well as the conscious elements present in the research process and often adopts psychotherapeutic questioning styles such as loose, open-ended questions and reframing using participants own frames of reference (Clarke and Hoggett 2009; Hollway 2009). In addition to semi-structured and unstructured "field" interviews (Henn et al. 2006) I relied heavily on detailed fieldnotes written up shortly after each TH session, together with sessional/therapy case notes. Finally, both the adults and young people completed short questionnaires. Data analysis consisted of transcribing the interviews and looking for emerging themes amongst all the data collected. Verification of my interpretations was sought with a number of participants where possible, and this was often done within TH sessions, going back to check questions raised whilst reading over data after sessions. Coding resulted in a number of categories which were organised into themes and then positioned within theoretical frameworks (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Being a practitioner on the research site I had the luxury of already having "gained the status of insider" and having a rapport with many of the participants (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Silverman 2005). However, this required an additional reflexive analysis of my positioning and influence on the research process as there were the added complexities of being practitioner-researcher, such as blurred boundaries between my roles with ethical dimensions this raised. I attempted to counteract some of these possible criticisms by employing a qualitative approach which hoped to "give voice" to the participants experiences, and which attempted to reduce inherent power inequalities by striving to encourage a shared exchange of information (Denzin and Lincoln 2002; Moustakas 1990).

Ethnographic observations from the study

A main theme to emerge from the data, and which was a thread that ran through many of the other themes, was related to "being calm" and a "calming effect". It appeared that both the horses and the natural environment were factors in this, with the natural environment perhaps providing the "backdrop to activities" referred to by Wals (1994). By providing a safe therapeutic space within a natural horsemanship approach, together with an appreciation for the natural environment, the holistic framework of The Yard may have enabled young people to benefit from a number of factors, as opposed to an emphasis on any one single element. Links to some of the benefits claimed in the mindfulness literature became apparent through some of the exercises and activities practiced in TH sessions, including stress reduction, greater attention capacity, and growths in personal awareness together with enhanced relationships.

"Being calm", horses and nature

The young people and adults articulated their understanding of "being calm" in different ways; the young people often referring to the horse in their interpretations, whereas the adults were more descriptive in the role of the natural environment and approach of The Yard. In a questionnaire some of the young people completed for the research Minimax wrote that the "horses change your mood and they help to calm me down". Responding to the same question Cinderella simply wrote "they (the horses) have a calming effect". The foster carer Laura, referring to a participant in her care, wrote "(he) is always calm and relaxed after a (TH) session" and a youth offending team mentor, Peter, told me how Wayne was "always noticeably more relaxed as we drove away than when we arrived". When I asked Freya what it was about the mare Ruby she liked she told me that she was especially drawn to the mare because "she looks sort of kind...and calm". In an interview with the participant Lucy she went on to offer a further perspective,

> Um, when I'm angry, they make me feel a lot calmer because you have to be calm around them. You have to be calm and assertive around them, so, you kind of, you know, end up being like that. Well I do anyway.
>
> (Lucy, Participant).

That it was understood to be important for the horses' well-being to be calm around them was reiterated by some of the other young people. Kelly told me how "they like it best when you are calm around them" and Emma said it was important "to be quiet, to be calm". During one TH session when a new young horse had arrived at The Yard and was displaying some anxiety, Cinderella told me she felt we needed to be "calm and kind to her".

Both Sally, a TH counsellor, and Linda, Emma's adoptive mother, told me they believed a combination of the natural horsemanship approach together with the natural environment contributed to creating a relaxed atmosphere, Sally saying, "... the horses are relaxed too in this environment, and that's crucial". One day the participant Emma was telling me how the pony Timmy was much calmer since he had moved to The Yard, as

opposed to his previous stables where she told me he was permanently anxious. Emma told me how she believed that the approach and natural horsemanship management system were factors in this, saying;

> Well they're not forced to go in the stables (here) are they? They can come and go as they please (.). And then they've got really big fields and they're not separated.

(Emma, Participant).

Minimax would often want to spend time relaxing with his favourite mare Ruby. He would stand hugging her with his arms around her neck and his head buried in her long black mane. During one TH session Minimax began to open up with us, getting quite agitated and upset while he told us about how his younger brother was being adopted, and how upset he was about the fact that he may not get to see him again. How he found some comfort and stress relief from his interaction with Ruby is demonstrated in the short extract from fieldnotes below.

> We carried on quietly grooming the horses and giving Minimax the space to express his sadness about his brothers. During this time Ruby continued to stand calmly, not reacting to Minimax's agitation but turning her head to him from time to time to gently nuzzle him. Once he had calmed down, Minimax put down the brush he was holding in his hand and put his arms around Ruby's neck, hiding his head in her long mane and hugging her. He stood quietly like this for some time with just the rhythmical sound of the horses munching on their hay in the background.
>
> (Fieldnotes).

When the participant Wayne first started attending TH he was also very quiet and withdrawn. This presented me with a challenge in terms of conducting ethical research as he sometimes seemed to find being asked questions intrusive. During one TH session while we were sitting at the bench eating lunch I was attempting to ask Wayne some questions about the horses. However, he responded by saying he wanted to go and eat his sandwiches with the horses instead, taking his chair and placing it under the trees from where he could watch the horses in the field. I and the other TH practitioner that day respected his wishes and Wayne sat quietly amongst the trees, with the only sounds being the occasional snort of a horse and some lambs bleating in the distance. Wild flowers had just started coming out and we were in t-shirts as it was an early warm spring day and altogether very calm and relaxing. Finally Wayne came back and joined us saying "I could just sit here and watch the horses all day". As both Wayne and Minimax's referral forms stated that they had problems with concentration and hyperactivity it would appear that being in nature with the horses enabled them to relax and provided them with some of the "attention restoration" elements claimed by Louv (2008) and Taylor et al. (2001). Increases in attention and concentration levels are also claimed in mindfulness education (Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor 2010) and mindfulness meditation training with young people (Zylowska et al. 2008).

Whilst the participants did not tend to articulate these theoretical possibilities in the same manner as the adults, Cinderella did tell me that being in nature was important to her in terms of de-stressing, telling me, "it's like, if you're stressed, being in nature de-stresses you".

The counsellor Sally stated that she believed there were many elements to being in the natural environment, suggesting,

> And to be in an environment like this with beautiful views, it's very still, it's got bird song, and you know, there is something very elemental about being outdoors because you've got the air, the rain, the earth, you know, everything around you. And the building removes you from that, the kind of elemental nature of being outside.

(Sally, Counsellor).

Deana, a therapist at The Yard, spoke about how being in nature with the horses provided her with some of the aspects perhaps related to the "restorative environment" that Kaplan (1995) refers to.

> You know, how different I feel when I'm up here, in myself. I can breathe! Like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Yeah. And I stop thinking about all the things that I worry about that wake me up at 4 o'clock in the morning. You're just with the horse, smelling, feeling, riding.
>
> (Deana, Therapist).

The authors Segal et al. (2002) and Moss and Barnes (2008) write about how mindfulness is a way of *being* rather than a *doing* mode. It seems that perhaps this is what both Sally and Deana were describing when they talk of being with the horses outside in nature. Segal et al. suggest that being mode "is characterized by a sense of freedom, freshness, and unfolding of experience in new ways" (2002, p. 74). A sense of freedom gained from being outside in nature was articulated by some of the participants and therapists at The Yard. The participant Emma referred to how she felt more freedom at The Yard as opposed to school, telling me, "this place feels like it's got more freedom and stuff". Talking about a young person with aspergers with whom she worked at a residential centre, the counsellor Sally told me,

So the minute he has space around him and fresh air, he doesn't feel cooped up. He feels he can move freely and that has a big impact on his behaviour and on how he's feeling, his well-being. And that is about this isn't it? Being outside, in the elements, and just kind of feeling more free to be.
(Sally, Counsellor).

Sally went on to explain that at his residential centre this young person would often appear anxious and distressed but that as soon as he was outside at the EAL centre he would calm down and become more relaxed.

Adapting behaviour and bringing self-awareness; aspects of mindfulness with horses

How different aspects of being in the natural environment impacted on TH sessions and provided opportunities for learning and self-awareness is provided in the following extract. In this case the weather influenced how the mare Ruby behaved and provided opportunity for Wayne to gain some understanding of why this may be. Some exercises with similarities to those adopted in mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) were employed to assist Wayne to become more mindful and in-tune to his emotions and behaviour. Through having the additional element of the horse Ruby, Wayne was motivated to adapt his behaviour in order to have a successful and trusting relationship with her.

Wayne and Ruby: calm and confident

> Wayne chose to work with the mare Ruby on this rather cold, windy, winter day. Despite the wind Wayne was keen to try the obstacle course in the arena as he had wanted to do this previously but had not had the opportunity. Before commencing the obstacle course we talked with Wayne about the reasons horses can get excitable and frightened in the wind and he correctly guessed that this is partly due to them not being able to hear as well in the wind. We went on to discuss the importance of acting "calm and confident" in order to model a calming influence to

> the horse, who is always looking for a secure and safe leader to follow, whether this is horse or human. Following this discussion we taught Wayne the simple "body scan" exercise of noticing his breathing pattern and of how to slow his breathing down in order to feel calmer and so mirror this to the horse. Wayne seemed to enjoy placing his head against Ruby's warm body and feeling her slow breathing rate whilst she was at rest, then mirroring this himself so they were breathing in tandem. He also commented on how he thought, "she smells nice" whilst doing this exercise.
>
> In this session in the arena Wayne had the opportunity to put this exercise of modelling "calm and confident" and monitoring his breathing into practice when Toby (a dog) ran over the bank causing Ruby to jump sideways, snorting and almost resulting in Wayne dropping her leadrope and instinctively running away. However, once we reminded him of his body language with the simple prompt, "remember...calm and confident", Wayne was able to compose himself and remain with Ruby, standing quietly and calmly, then stroking her neck gently and telling the mare not to worry. As Ruby calmed down and turned to him for reassurance it would seem that this experience served a powerful message to Wayne that he was able to effectively control and manage his own behaviour and provide reassurance and comfort to another being, something that perhaps had not always been provided to him in his childhood. By being in the "here and now" and aware of his body language and breathing Wayne could find that he could become "calm and confident" with effective results.
>
> (Fieldnotes).

This extract provides an example of how an awareness of body language and the capacity to be able to monitor one's own behaviour and emotions is crucial in terms of working successfully with horses. Being prey animals with highly developed communication skills and a strong co-operative social structure, necessary for their successful survival over millennia, horses are uniquely positioned to offer opportunities for gains in personal awareness. Horses look to a calm, consistent, fair, and intelligent leader for survival and, lacking another horse, will seek these qualities from their human handler (Rashid 2004; Rees 1984). This gives participants in TH and EAL/T the opportunity to model positive behaviours with instant feedback, as in the case above with Wayne and Ruby.

In addition, because they live in the moment and are large, powerful, and therefore potentially dangerous, being with horses requires "relaxed concentration". Certain horse trainers and teachers have become aware of the importance of breathing exercises and body awareness in obtaining the relaxed, yet confident and mindfully embodied qualities necessary for a successful partnership with the horse, adapting yoga, breath work and Alexander techniques into horsemanship (Bentley 2001; Rolfe 2007; Tottle 1998). In terms of riding the author Game suggests that what is important is,

> *relaxed* concentration, a very focused and meditative state. Maintaining connection and rhythm doesn't work through the exercise of will power, but requires a mindfully embodied way of being (Game 2001, p. 8).

In the following example of an "invisible riding" session with Freya she discovered how a combination of exercises and a growing awareness of her own physiology and power of intention had a powerful effect on her connection and success with the mare Ruby. Elements of the "rhythmic harmonization" achieved when riding, which is when unity is felt between horse and human, may also be relevant (Evans and Franklin 2010).

Freya and Ruby: "invisible" riding

Freya arrived for her first TH session with the care worker from her residential home and initially seemed rather quiet and withdrawn, finding it difficult to engage or tell us what she would like to do with the horses. However, once her care worker had left Freya did join us putting on headcollars and grooming the horses but it soon became apparent that she had little awareness of personal safety around the horses. She put herself in quite dangerous positions and seemed oblivious to simple horse behaviour signals that other young people would usually instinctively possess. On one occasion when the horses were coming through a gateway and became a little agitated and bargy with each other, a clear signal to keep a safe distance until they had resolved their pecking order, Freya continued to stand in the middle of the gateway, potentially allowing herself to be trampled. Because of this, and because her concentration levels on keeping on task with grooming and yard tasks were difficult for her we decided to take the unusual practice on a first session of suggesting Freya ride a horse today. By being on top of a horse, physically being in one place and connected to the horse, and also because she would need to be more aware of her body in order to find the balance and control needed to stay on, we hoped that Freya may be able to find some way of being able to concentrate and become more mindful of her behaviour.

When we put the suggestion to Freya to ride, she readily agreed. Freya's reaction again appeared to confirm to us the risk-taking behaviour that was stated on her referral form. Her therapist had relayed that Freya would often put herself at risk with her peers and engage in risky behaviours outside the residential home. Once up on the mare Ruby however, Freya's distracted behaviour appeared to wane a little and she became quieter in her body language and manner, seeming to suddenly realise that she was perhaps a little vulnerable on top of the horse. This appeared to enable her to listen to us and take instruction more readily, and we took the opportunity to introduce her to some "invisible riding" techniques. In the round pen we initially led Freya around on Ruby, the mare seeming to understand that she needed to remain extra attentive and alert today, perhaps picking up on Freya's emotional and physical state. We started off with some simple stretching exercises in order to help enable Freya find her balance, tune in to the different parts of her body and gain some more confidence, as well as being fun. Next we introduced some simple "body scan" exercises where Freya concentrated on each part of her body in turn, starting with relaxing her feet and moving up her body until she relaxed her shoulders and neck. In order to make this more fun and engaging I demonstrated these walking next to Freya, who copied the exercises riding on Ruby's back. Once Freya had found her balance and was more relaxed we suggested that she close her eyes and ride Ruby with her eyes shut in order to really tune in to Ruby's movement. This is not as easy as it may appear but is a really useful exercise for refining balance and for following the movement of the horse. Together with this we demonstrated to Freya how she could slow her breathing down, and breathe in and out in order to influence Ruby's pace, and learn how to bring her to halt and to walk on again just by the smallest body movement and breathing. This exercise takes a lot of sustained concentration and body awareness, together with real intention; it will not work unless you are completely committed and "mindfully embodied". After a few attempts we knew when Freya began to get a sense of this feeling as she gained more ability in co-ordinating her body language together with her breathing and concentration. In turn Freya's confidence in her newly found body awareness grew and Ruby responded accordingly, causing Freya to exclaim, "look, she slows down when I'm just *thinking* it now". Later, as we finished the session, Freya stretched down from Ruby's back to hug her around her neck beaming, "It's like she can read my mind".

(Fieldnotes).

In this TH session it is seen that through a connection with the mare Ruby, together with the application of mindful exercises which enabled Freya to become more centred and aware of her body, Freya was able to find an awareness which facilitated a change from behaviour which arguably contained elements of *mindlessness* at the beginning of the session, to a more mindfully embodied way of being by the end. Through a body scan exercise which has similarities to those employed in some mindfulness practices; Freya became calmer and more focused. Segal et al. suggest that,

> A major aim of the body scan exercise is to bring detailed awareness to each part of the body. It is where participants first learn to keep their attention focused over a sustained period of time, and it also serves to help them develop concentration, calmness, flexibility of attention, and mindfulness (2002, p. 110).

The authors Shaver et al. draw on links between attachment theory and mindfulness to write about a "stronger and wiser other who helps a client or seeker of emotional stability become less anxious, less avoidant, more secure, and more effectively mindful..." (2007, p. 269). It may be that a combination of these factors were present in the TH session with both Freya and Wayne with experiences with the horses providing some of the characteristics of the "stronger and wiser other" who helped the participants become more "effectively mindful" in their behaviour and body language. In the case of Wayne he found how he could model these same qualities to the mare Ruby, so perhaps unconsciously allowing him to be the stronger and wiser other in this case. Another theory put forward by Singh et al. (2004) which may be relevant to TH is that of "mindful caregiving". In their study they found increases in happiness of people with complex disabilities when their caregivers participated in mindfulness training (Singh et al. 2004). Some of the proposed increased positive changes in the caregivers after participating in mindfulness training reported by the authors included them being "non-judgementally accepting" and "totally involved with the individual" (Singh et al. 2004, p. 216). As these are some of the characteristics it is claimed the horse brings to EAL/T and TH (Hallberg 2008; Lentini and Knox 2009; Vidrine et al. 2002) it would seem that participating in activities and relationships with horses may offer participants some of these same benefits. Indeed, the participant Lucy told me how "the horses don't judge you...they just take you for who you are".

During another TH session with the participant Cinderella, the horse Duchess demonstrated how she reacted to behaviour she perceived as negative by walking away. However, by Cinderella being able to discuss, process and then change her behaviour, she was able to see how the mare only judged her *behaviour* and not her as a person, responding to her as she was in that moment. This was because as soon as Cinderella was able to monitor her body language and manner she found she could have a successful and positive relationship with Duchess.

> *Cinderella and Duchess: "she's just like my mother!"*
>
> Cinderella seemed very keen and enthusiastic to be back and came skipping into the yard today. She had bought her own leadrope, hoofpick and a crop from a riding shop local to her foster home. I didn't challenge this immediately but as she was waving the crop around rather erratically, I suggested that she put this in the tack room for now and later explained that we don't generally use or have crops at The Yard, pointing out one of the policies on the wall which stated No Whips. Cinderella initially looked rather deflated and then almost immediately became very defensive, saying "well I won't (--) bother again then". I quickly reassured her that we were very pleased that she was buying her own things for the horses but suggested that they might prefer carrots to whips next time! Cinderella seemed to perceive this as criticism, and obviously

found it difficult, so I suggested that we put a special hook up for her to keep her own leadrope and hoofpick on especially for her to use with Leo when she came to The Yard. This seemed to help shift her black mood to an extent and she helped put up the hook.

The five horses were out in the field so we took headcollars and walked out to catch them. We talked about which ones to catch first in order that the rest of the herd would follow and Cinderella correctly identified the two mares, Duchess and Ruby, "its them two isn't it… coz' they're the ones the others look up to". As Ruby was over at another part of the field, I asked Cinderella if she would like to catch Duchess and stood back to allow her to do this. However Cinderella approached Duchess in a rather dominant, almost aggressive, manner, which caused the mare to walk purposefully away from her, refusing to be caught. Cinderella immediately got angry and frustrated, walking off and throwing the headcollar down then throwing herself down on the grass loudly exclaiming, "stubborn (--) cow, don't be (--) caught then". I sat down next to her and, to her surprise it seemed, praised her for her actions, telling her that sitting down and not chasing after Duchess was in fact a very good strategy and one of the tactics I may try with a horse who didn't want to be caught. I suggested that we sit in the field and relax for a while and just observe Duchess and the horses without necessarily trying to catch them, but at the same time bring some awareness as to how she felt Duchess may be feeling. After sitting quietly in silence for quite a long time with only the sound of birds and the wind in the trees in the background, and with Cinderella appearing to be ignoring me, she finally said "she probably doesn't want to leave the others and I suppose she doesn't know me yet, but she's still a stubborn (--) cow….she's just like my mother she is!". I asked Cinderella what different approaches may help Duchess to want to be caught and she replied "well, probably getting to know me a bit more first so she knows she can trust me". We followed this with a short discussion about horse's body language and whether Cinderella could see if there were any different approaches she could try to help Duchess learn to trust her. With this Cinderella agreed to try approaching Duchess together with me in a slower, more controlled, and less aggressive manner, and did then succeed in carefully putting the headcollar over her head. The other mare Ruby then followed us into the yard where Cinderella put the headcollar on her with no problem, her body language reflecting a much more gentle approach towards the horses who responded accordingly.

(Fieldnotes).

A number of theoretical frameworks drawn from the mindfulness literature may be applicable in this example of Cinderella and the mare Duchess. At the start of this TH session Cinderella seemed to demonstrate that she found criticism difficult by reacting defensively to my comment about the "no-whips" policy of The Yard. Heppner et al. suggest that young people who have experienced traumatic pasts are vulnerable to fragile self-esteem and that "aggressive behaviour may be one means by which people attempt to restore their fragile self-images" (2008, p. 487). Because Cinderella's fragile self-esteem and defensive coping strategy had already been triggered this may have contributed to her approaching the mare Duchess in an aggressive and dominant manner. Duchess responded by withdrawing and Cinderella's fragile self-esteem was further wounded, with her reacting with heightened emotion. However, by being enabled to take time to be with these feelings for a while, within the context of the relaxing natural environment, Cinderella was able to become more mindful of her behaviour and apply some understanding of what may have caused the mare to behave in the way she did. In their description of MBSR exercises Segal et al. (2002) claim that these can help participants gain an awareness of how the body can express negative emotions.

Discussion

In this paper I have discussed how being with horses in the natural environment has links to some of the benefits and features referred to in both the mindfulness and nature therapy literature. Whilst The Yard did not set out to provide mindfulness practices as such, it was found that many elements of the TH exercises employed appeared to embody similarities to some of the mindfulness techniques described by many authors (Biegel et al. 2009; Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor 2010; Segal et al. 2002; Zylowska et al. 2008). As some young people can find traditional methods of psychotherapy and learning difficult (Biegel et al. 2009) alternative methods of engaging these hard to reach and disengaged young people, including EAL/T and mindfulness techniques such as MBSR may be more effective.

Through participating in TH many of the young people in the current study were found to experience benefits which included becoming calmer and reduced anxiety, together with gains in self-awareness. These would appear to have links to the self-regulation and self-knowledge claims of mindfulness by Chambers et al. (2009) and Brown and Ryan (2003). Cinderella, Freya and Wayne were all motivated to want to develop relationships and learn new skills with the horses, which, in turn, enabled them to participate in exercises and techniques that led to some of the benefits suggested above. In addition, the natural environment was described by many of the adults involved in the study as being an important factor, and this was also articulated by a number of the young people in different ways. The natural environment may have provided some of the elements of the "backdrop to activities" described by Wals (1994) and is claimed by Coleman (2006) to offer the ideal space in which to practice mindfulness as "being outdoors provides mental space and clarity, allowing our body to relax" (2006, p. xv). Proponents of Biophilia theory believe that this is because humans have an innate connection to nature in a similar way to the Gaia hypothesis, which believes that everything is connected and inter-related (Lovelock 1979; Kellert and Wilson 1993; Nebbe 2000). Through this connection we can find "ecological groundedness" a state of healthy functioning (Cahalan 1995). This is perhaps where horses are uniquely positioned to provide young people with a pathway to experiencing some of the claimed benefits of being in nature. As horses are inherently connected to nature and largely influenced by their instincts, as discovered by Wayne with Ruby's behaviour on a windy day, they offer an unequalled opportunity for people to connect with the natural environment that is not provided by other animals. This is perhaps because horses are "in-between" animals offering a bridge to the "natural" world. They are different to the fully domesticated pet animals that live in the home, and they are unlike agricultural animals kept for our consumption and maintained at arms' length through quite complex cultural processes (Philo and Wilbert 2000). Horses perhaps offer a glimpse into the world of the wild animal, but, at the same time, are willing and curious enough to allow themselves to be "tamed" and develop partnerships with human. By entering the horses' world, riding on their back, and learning to communicate with them through body language we enter different domains of consciousness (Brandt 2004; Game 2001). The combination of all these factors can perhaps provide opportunities for experiencing some of the characteristics and benefits described in the mindfulness and nature therapy literature, of being in the moment and experiencing a connection to nature (Cahalan 1995; Coleman 2006; Kabat-Zin 1994; Rozack et al. 1995).

It is acknowledged that the small sample size of this study makes drawing generalizations across populations limited. However, Payne and Williams suggest that "qualitiative research methods can produce an intermediate type of limited "*moderatum* generalizations""(2005, p. 296). They argue that research concerned with personal experience provides valuable insights into social interaction and the construction of everyday life (Payne and Williams 2005). In this study I was interested in exploring and conveying the participants' experiences within "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1993) in order to bring some insight into the relationships and interactions between the young people, horses and both the physical and philosophical environment of The Yard. Despite a substantial research base into the separate areas of animal-assisted therapy, the natural environment and the growing area of mindfulness, investigation into the links between horses, nature, and mindfulness has received surprisingly limited attention (Hallberg 2008). Further research in this area would be useful in order to uncover additional insights and contribute to the growing awareness of the psychosocial benefits of horses.

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