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**A Reflexive Exploration of the Experiences of At-Risk Young People  
Participating in Therapeutic Horsemanship**

by

Hannah Louise Burgon

Cardiff University  
School of Social Sciences

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Introduction

This thesis is part of a journey that has encompassed a lifetime love of horses. It evolved from horses being a childhood passion, and led to working with horses together with young people with various disadvantages and difficulties in a therapeutic and educational capacity. The PhD research study followed as an attempt to articulate and share some of the experiences of 'The Yard', the therapeutic horsemanship (TH) programme on which this thesis is based.

Through a personal belief and understanding that contact with horses could be therapeutic in a number of ways I found myself in the fortunate position to be able to incorporate TH in my work as a social worker for a foster care company. Whilst initially this was limited to young people who were in foster placements with this particular company, the TH programme expanded through interest from outside agencies to include young people referred from youth offending and other organisations. The young people who attended the TH programme, named 'The Yard' for the purpose of this study, were generally considered to be 'at-risk' within the social work and allied professions due to their circumstances and histories. Substantial research within the literature concerned with risk and resilience claims there is a high likelihood of negative life outcomes as a result of experiencing adverse childhood experiences (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985).

It cannot be claimed that this thesis is completely impartial or objective; on the contrary it is a deeply personal and reflexive account of my experiences alongside seven of the young people who attended The Yard and participated in the study. I can only hope that through the many hundreds of hours of the meticulous process that has made up this practitioner-researcher ethnography, that I have provided some kind of useful contribution to the knowledge base of TH. In any case, at the very least, it has certainly been a hugely worthwhile endeavour in terms of gaining invaluable insight into my own practice, together with associated personal and professional growth.

## **Definition of terms**

Therapeutic horsemanship (TH) is aligned to the fields of equine-assisted learning (EAL) equine-assisted therapy (EAT) and equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP). Other known terms for these interventions are equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) equine-assisted counselling (EAC) and equine-assisted activities (EAA). For the sake of this thesis I employ the terms equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy, which I have amalgamated to EAL/T, as they provide the broadest understanding of the interventions. The fields of EAL/T and TH have evolved alongside animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as additional therapeutic interventions to both young people and adults benefiting from therapeutic and/or learning support. They work from the premise that contact with animals is therapeutic and healing in a variety of different ways and can be useful for people who may find traditional therapeutic or educational interventions challenging or difficult in some way.

In a similar way to any emerging field there are diverse differences in use of terminology and little standardisation of practice, with, as yet, no formal accreditation or qualification in EAL/T as a profession. A number of organisations are attempting to provide frameworks and training to address some of these issues. So far the most prominent have been established in the USA. These are the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) which is aligned to the longer established organisation, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), and the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) which now has a European arm. Other relevant organisations are the Equine Guided Education Association (EGEA) also based in the USA, offering training and an annual conference, and Epona, which has a number of practitioners now based in the UK. Whilst there remain various differences between the organisations in terms of ideas about best practice, a general agreement appears to be that in order to employ the terminology equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), one member of the team is required to be a trained and registered mental health professional, such as a psychotherapist, psychologist or counsellor. Another general, although not universal, agreement is that two practitioners are required to facilitate an EAL/T or TH session in order to provide a safe environment for clients and horses. The Yard followed this guideline and, in addition to this, followed the principle that both practitioners needed to have adequate equine experience, and particular knowledge of the horses employed in the practice. Most EAP and many EAL/T practices do not offer riding. The emphasis instead is on encouraging participants to uncover insights and self-awareness through ground based exercises and experiences with horses, together



with the therapist providing intervention along their own particular style of practice. Often EAP and EAL/T are time-limited. In contrast TH is often a more encompassing intervention which can include horse riding together with all aspects of horse care and management; it is understood to be *therapeutic* as opposed to being a therapy as such. Additionally, as The Yard employed a qualified play/drama/psychotherapist and a counsellor, EAT and EAP could also be offered if requested.

### **Research questions**

The study explored why horses seem to appeal to and motivate young people who have suffered exclusion and disadvantage and who may have previously found it difficult to engage with services. The research sought to examine some of the factors about the horse that lends it to providing a unique therapeutic medium, its cultural role in history, and links to *biophilia* – the study of the longstanding, historical, and, it is claimed, innate relationship between people, nature and animals (Wilson, 1984).

The broad research questions are:

- How do the young people experience their interactions with horses?
- What is the role of the horse in the therapeutic process?
- How do the adults involved perceive therapeutic horsemanship and its effect on the young people participating?
- Do the young people and adults understand and/or experience TH as leading to transferable and life skills being acquired and utilised?
- In what ways does research into TH and EAL/T have implications for practice?

### **Significance of the study**

When I initially established The Yard I found a lack of research and literature around EAL/T available, and this largely remains the case. One hope from this study is that it will prove useful for other practitioners seeking to establish TH and EAL/T by presenting through the participants own words and perceptions how they experienced TH. In addition readers are able to gain an account of how other adults and practitioners involved in The Yard believed TH to be beneficial to the young people participating. The study followed a qualitative, phenomenological, approach which seeks to allow participants to express their experiences in their own words as;

(Qualitative researchers) want those who are studied to speak for themselves, to provide their perspectives in words and other actions. Therefore qualitative research is an interactive process in which the person studied teaches the researcher about their lives. (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 1996: 61).

As there is very little research in the field of EAL/T and TH it is hoped that this study will also contribute to the research base in the widest sense. Since the field is relatively new a proportion of the available research is 'grey' literature in the form of PhD theses, dissertations and case study accounts by practitioners and therapists. The academic literature that exists consists of a handful of studies utilising both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but with limitations such as small populations, lack of control groups and short-time frames (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). In addition it has been suggested that the current research emphasis, largely led by clinical psychology, has sought to focus on quantifying the effects of horse-human relations and this misses the intricacies of the relationships and experience; 'The *how* of what happens is equally important' (Garcia, 2010: 88).

This study seeks to provide an additional contribution to the research base by providing an in-depth account of the experiences of a number of young people participating in TH through a practitioner-researcher ethnography over a two year period.

### **Overview of the thesis**

In chapter 2 I introduce the literature and research around equine-assisted learning/therapy (EAL/T) and the position of therapeutic horsemanship (TH) within the field. I go on to frame EAL/T and TH alongside the aligned field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) which has a longer and more established research base. This followed the publication of a number of key studies in the 1980s which claimed that stroking a dog could lower blood pressure and that heart attack victims who owned pets had increased life expectancy (Friedmann *et al.*, 1980, 1983). Despite the lack of research literature it is argued that the employment of horses in the therapeutic domain has a long history, with authors recording that there is evidence to suggest that Greek soldiers were encouraged to ride horses to aid recovery (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999; Barclay, 1980). With the centrality of horses in civilisation throughout history and across cultures they have held a unique place in human history. As a result horses have continued to be deeply implicated in culture as symbolic icon through fairy tales, symbolism, film, art and poetry (Scanlan, 2001; Walker, 2008).

The chapter also looks at the place of animals in the sociological literature, briefly exploring children's position in this and the ways in which animals are employed to teach cultural norms and values. Finally, I look at the natural environment and touch upon the literature which explores different aspects of nature and its importance in terms of human health, in particular for children and young people.

Chapter 3 introduces how the young people who participated in the study are positioned within the literature concerned with risk and resilience. I explore some of the theories behind the different understandings of risk and resilience and why some young people appear to overcome adversity despite negative childhood experiences. I then look at what are termed 'protective factors' and how some of these may have links to benefits from participation in EAL/T and TH. Following on from this the chapter goes on to briefly introduce attachment theory and the role of the horse in the therapeutic relationship from related psychotherapeutic perspectives. I then introduce an area which has so far received little attention in the EAL/T literature, that of the possible links between mindfulness and EAL/T and TH.

In chapter 4 I provide an account of the methods and methodologies I aligned to and employed in the study. I introduce the research design and procedures, the site and setting and give an overview of the practice of The Yard. Ethical and consent issues are discussed and some of the problems which arose as practitioner-researcher, together with a brief exploration of some of the power imbalances inherent in research with vulnerable young people.

The following chapters are the empirical chapters and explore the themes that arose from the data. These are presented as linked to the theoretical frameworks in which they are positioned. Chapter 5 looks at themes of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy and other themes linked to the risk and resilience literature. Chapter 6 explores themes related to trust and empathy between the young people and horses, framed within attachment theories. In chapter 7 some themes from the psychotherapeutic literature are explored as related to the role of the horse in the therapeutic relationship, together with themes of identification and metaphor. Chapter 8 introduces links between TH and mindfulness; such as how being with horses can bring participants into the present moment and induce a feeling of calmness and well-being. Finally, the literature surrounding the natural environment and nature therapy is discussed and explored in relation to the psychosocial, psychospiritual and physical dimensions of horses and nature.

In chapter 9 I present the conclusion to the thesis with some of the limitations and implications for policy and practice, together with suggestions for future research and the impact on myself as reflexive practitioner-researcher.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review 1: Animals, Therapy and Nature**

#### **Introduction**

In this first literature review chapter I introduce the area of my research, therapeutic horsemanship (TH) and the aligned fields of equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy (EAL/T). I give an overview of these interventions and the related field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) from which EAL/T emerged, and which has a longer established research base. Some of the debates are explored around what it is about horses which make them an effective therapeutic partner, together with a brief discussion on their place in modern society and throughout history. I provide an overview of the current research and literature in EAL/T and highlight the gaps in the knowledge base. It is hoped that the current study will make a contribution to the field by providing a qualitative account of some of the processes at play in the interactions between the young people and horses participating in the therapeutic horsemanship programme, 'The Yard'.

As EAL/T is aligned to the larger field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT), I provide an overview of some of the suggested benefits of the human-animal relationship in this literature review chapter, as there has been a longer history and more research undertaken in this area. I also briefly explore some of the sociological debates about the relationship between animals and humans and how people have relied upon animals for food, transport, clothing, and for medical and behavioural science in addition to companionship and entertainment, and of the complexities and contradictions inherent in these relationships. Following this I look at the relative lack of sociological literature on the relationship between children and animals, moving on to discuss what it is about the horse which may offer a further therapeutic dimension to children and young people experiencing emotional trauma, distress and exclusion.

Finally, I explore some of the theoretical literature concerned with claims of our connection to the natural environment and the benefits of being in nature, as these themes also arose in the current study.

### **Therapeutic horsemanship, equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy**

TH and EAL/T are interventions where mental health practitioners, social workers, teachers and other related professionals, employ horses for therapeutic and/or learning benefit with young people and adults with a range of psychosocial issues. Improvements are reported in mental health and physical health in addition to behavioural change and educational and learning opportunities. Alongside EAL/T horses are starting to be utilised in the self-development and business leadership field in the UK. Here the emphasis is on personal growth and team building for the purpose of achieving more effective skills and success in the business environment (for example see [www.egld.eu](http://www.egld.eu) and [www.leadchange.com](http://www.leadchange.com)).

Whilst some authors argue that horses have been employed as healers for centuries (Broersma, 2007; Kohanov, 2001, 2005; McCormick & McCormick, 1997, 2004), EAL/T as a contemporary profession is still a relatively newly emerging field which has largely been led from the USA. Consequently, published studies on EAL/T are limited, until recently mainly consisting of descriptive and anecdotal accounts of these interventions by practitioners and therapists. There is a slightly larger research base on hippotherapy - the employment of the horse for physical therapy - which has a longer history, having being employed by occupational therapists and physiotherapists since the 1950s (Bertoti, 1988; Davies, 1988; Engel, 1984,1997; Henrickson, 1971; Kunzle, Steinlin, & Yasikoff, 1994; MacKinnon *et al.*, 1995; Young & Bracher, 2005; Young, 2005).

In order to give an overview of different aspects of EAL/T I introduce a selection of studies undertaken which explore some of the various disciplines within the field. I have included both early and more recent studies which have made useful contributions to the knowledge base of EAL/T. It is interesting that the emerging research into EAL/T follows the traditional approach to treating psychological problems, namely the medical model, with a large proportion of recent studies utilising quantitative methods and psychological measuring techniques, and being published in psychology and health-based as opposed to sociologically orientated journals (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Ewing, *et al.*, 2007; Rothe *et al.*, 2005; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007; Trotter *et al.*, 2008; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). A number of the limited studies on EAL/T published in sociological journals have also employed psychological testing techniques (Kaiser *et al.*, 2004; Klontz *et al.*, 2007). Surprisingly, considering the infancy of research in the field as a whole, a relatively large body of the available research in EAL/T involves young people. This is in contrast to AAT where the

majority of research was initially with adults. This may be due to the fact that EAL/T has evolved largely from the riding for disabled (RDA) field which mainly caters for children and young people, whereas AAT was initially largely concerned with animals in the context of the health of adults and older people. However, as outlined above, the emphasis has been on research following a pre- and post-test design with psychological testing methods concerned with measuring change (Garcia, 2010). Wholly qualitative approaches with children are rarer and limited to a handful of published studies and descriptive sessions and vignettes by psychotherapists in the field (Brooks, 2006; Chardonnens, 2009; Karol, 2007; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002), although there is more 'grey literature' in the form of theses and dissertations (see for example Esbjourn, 2006; Frame, 2006; Hayden, 2005). It is hoped, therefore, that the current study will contribute to this knowledge base and make a useful addition to the research concerned with ethnographic observation of the processes involved, and young peoples' own understandings of, TH, rather than with measuring outcomes. Nevertheless, it is accepted that an outcome focus can provide useful additional information and is necessary for credibility and funding in the field.

I now go on to briefly explore some of the literature around the human-animal relationship in order to provide some background to the emergence of equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy (EAL/T).

## **Animals and Society**

Humans and non-human animals have occupied and shared their lives and spaces throughout the history of humankind. Whilst there are a number of competing theories behind the history of human and non-human animals, ranging from biological, Darwinian based, theories to more recent cultural and sociological understandings of animals in the lives of humans, it is claimed that;

it is now being fully recognised at the analytic level that animals are crucial to the functioning of any society, in that they provide for humans food, labour, raw materials, modes of transportation, companionship, scientific knowledge through observation and experimentation, and forms of leisure and entertainment amongst other things (Wilkie & Inglis, 2007: 3).

In addition to the roles that they play in our lives outlined above, animals, and especially horses, have also been included in stories, myths and legends throughout the ages and across cultures (Chamberlin, 2007; Davies & Jones, 1997; Howey, 2002; Jackson, 2006; Runnquist, 1957; Walker, 2008). These complex arrays of relationships are fraught with as many contradictions as there are in society. On the one hand animals are exploited, dominated, eaten, worn and experimented on in medical science, and, on the other, the same species are kept as pets, used for therapy, seen as a way for humans to have contact with nature and wilderness and used as a way of defining who we are. In order to attempt to deal with some of these complexities, industrial and post-industrial modern societies have evolved processes where the messy parts of the lives of many animals have become invisible, especially in relation to food production, with the lives and deaths of food animals such as those in the factory farm and slaughter house largely being hidden away from people's lives. Most urban dwellers are distanced from wild or farm animals but conversely 'pet' animals have become more visible. There are confusing contradictions in these relationships in that some animals, the pets, are seen as fluffy, cute and become anthropomorphized, in contrast to how other (and the same) animals are raised and farmed for food (both for humans and their pets) fur and experimentation, as well as entertainment in zoos, sports and circuses (Wilkie & Inglis, 2007).

### **Animals as 'good to think with'**

Some critics have argued that sociologists have largely neglected studying the role of animals in society due to the historical anthropocentric belief that only human animals matter (Serpell, 1999; Wilkie & Inglis, 2007). Animals in the lives of children have been almost entirely ignored by sociologists (Melson, 2001; Serpell, 1999) although the place of animals in society and culture has held higher prominence in anthropology and an emerging animal geography (Arluke & Saunders, 1996; Franklin 1999; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Drawing on the earlier work of Levi-Strauss (1968) these disciplines suggest that, 'animals offer a window into human thinking and needs' (Arluke & Saunders, 1996: 3). Because animals are both like us and not like us they are uniquely positioned to provide us with the opportunity to learn more about ourselves as, 'studying animals and human interactions with them enables us to learn about ourselves as social creatures' (Arluke & Saunders, 1996: 4). Philo and Wilbert suggest that animals are responsible for having helped shape our cultures because,



Humans are always and have always been, enmeshed in social relations with animals to the extent that the latter, the animals, are undoubtedly constitutive of humans societies in all sorts of ways (2000: 2).

These ideas are linked to some of the literature on how animals and nature are used in symbolism and the ways in which these symbols can represent some of our emotional states and feelings and other attributes. Many words and phrases which employ horses, other animals, and nature can be used to illustrate this; racehorses are described 'as fast as the wind' a reference to the Greek myth of Achilles and his marvellous horses who were said to have been born from the West Wind (Howey, 2002). Other terms are; wild horses wouldn't keep me away, sly as a fox, courage of a lion, free as a bird, slippery snake and many more. In Jungian psychology animals are often seen as representing certain aspects of ourselves in dreams, as being 'innate' archetypes held within the 'collective unconscious', although there are different perspectives on Jung's interpretations of these concepts (Jones *et al.*, 2008; Jung, 1978; Knox, 2003).

### **Differences between humans and non-human animals**

Historically how a society treats non-human animals has been used by philosophers, storytellers and artists in an attempt to explore moral issues and greater philosophical questions of who we are and why we are here (Kemp, 2007). By determining that human animals are different from non-human animals because humans possess a 'rational' self-conscious mind and are 'civilised' as opposed to 'uncivilised' animals who behave on instinct and primal needs alone, animals have been used to create an understanding of what it is to be human (Philo & Wilbert, 2000: 14).

Big questions of whether animals have feelings, souls and possess consciousness, or are machines, as Descartes declared, have accompanied our treatment of animals over time (Kemp, 2007). In feudal England humans and animals lived in close proximity to each other and 'during winter it was common throughout Britain for people and beast to share the same roof' (Franklin, 1999: 11). It has been suggested that because of this close proximity and relationships to animals it was necessary to create a division between ourselves and our non-human co-habitants in order to have some boundaries and separation, otherwise we were all in danger of being the same, and humans would have no superiority (Franklin, 1999; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Christianity provided the legitimisation of human-animal difference as religion maintained that God positioned 'man' as dominant over nature and animals; 'Man being made in the likeness of God' (Wilkie & Inglis,

2007: 8). This view was substantiated by Saint Augustine (354–430) who claimed that animals do not possess souls, were therefore vastly inferior to humans and so animal suffering and cruelty were acceptable. Because they were not seen as possessing consciousness or having a soul, it became easier to believe that animals do not feel pain like humans and brutal practices towards them, such as bear baiting, cock fighting etc, became an acceptable and necessary means of creating a distinction and distance between animals and humans (Franklin, 1999; Tester, 1991). It is obviously easier to morally justify eating, exploiting, and carrying out scientific experiments on another living being if it is considered different and inferior and does not possess feelings (Bekoff, 2007). This dominant discourse began to be challenged in the mid nineteenth century with the Enlightenment and Romantic movements, Jeremy Bentham asserting that ‘if all pain is evil then pain and suffering caused to an animal by a human must be evil despite the absence of rationality in the animal’s mind’ (cited in Wilkie & Inglis, 2007: 8). A romantic view of nature emerged and the beginnings of the animal rights movement arose alongside the rise of industrialisation and the movement away from a life with animals in the country to modern, urban, living distanced from nature and animals. The growth of capitalist society brought further changes to our relationships with animals; more leisure time together with mass consumerism gave rise to animals and nature becoming profitable marketable commodities (Franklin, 1999; Louv, 2008; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). Increased interest in nature conservation, zoos, national parks and wildlife theme parks alongside hunting and fishing as leisure and sports activities add further complex contradictions in how we relate and live with animals (Franklin, 1999; Haraway, 1991, 2008). Postmodern thinkers brought a deeper understanding that a history of exploitation of animals follows a similar trajectory to other marginalised and discriminated groups in society. The history of slavery and women’s rights together with the acknowledgement that ethnic minorities and people with disabilities have suffered discrimination and been judged as inferior to the ‘cultured man’, the white male, are compared to the history of the treatment of animals by some authors (Birke, 1994; Dunayer, 2004; Haraway, 1991, 1992). Language has been employed accordingly to reinforce this notion, with words such as bitch, cow, jackass, beastly, brutish, monkey etc, becoming terms of repression and, ‘Like sexist language, speciesist language fosters exploitation and abuse’ (Dunayer, 2004: 11).

New questions about our relationships with animals are raised with recent scientific and medical developments on the use of animals in research. As humankind has, on the one hand, begun to blur the boundaries between animal, machine and human, and animals used in science

and technology have become distanced further away from our daily lives, they are, simultaneously, potentially becoming *part* of our bodies with the ‘advances’ in medical science now making the very real possibility of animals being farmed for their organs for use in human transplants. The fusion of human and machine has been raised as having important implications by some authors, with the division between human, animal and robot becoming blurred (Haraway, 1991, 1992; Louv, 2008; Mazis, 2008). The creation of chimeras and microscopic ‘nanorobots’ capable of living deep inside our cells is now reality and ‘the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached’ (Haraway, 1991: 151). A further paradox is that whilst these particular animals become more ‘othered’ in order to become part of us, there is a burgeoning growth in the use of animals in an emotional and therapeutic context within the field of animal-assisted therapy (Chandler, 2005; Dossey, 1997; Fine, 2000; Friedmann *et al.*, 1983, Levinson, 1969, 1980; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000). This corresponds with the recent (re)emergence of a move to get ‘back to nature’ and ecological awareness and concern. The fields of nature and wilderness therapy and eco-psychology, with their roots in the sometimes controversial work of E.O Wilson’s biophilia theory (1984), believe that humans are intrinsically, biologically, related and part of nature and subsequently need contact with the natural environment in order to flourish and grow (Devell & Sessions, 1985; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Louv, 2008; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Shepard, 1982; Wilson, 1984). The animal-assisted therapy (AAT) field has a number of links to the biophilia hypothesis and I go on to explore these areas in more depth later in this chapter.

### **Children and animals – a sociological perspective**

Whilst there is limited literature on EAL/T there is even less on the relationship between children and animals within the fields of sociology, psychology or child development. Serpell observes, ‘the sad truth is that psychologists and social scientists have shown a baffling lack of scholarly interest in the child-animal relationship’ (Serpell, 1999: 92).

The research and literature agenda around animals has primarily been concerned with animal rights, ethics and animals in research (Arluke, 1994; Bekoff, 2007; Regan, 1983; Singer, 1990), how we think about animals and animals in culture (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Franklin, 1999; Haraway, 1992, 2004), and our connection with animals (Bekoff, 2007; Irvine, 2004; Serpell, 1999, 2000a; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000). As previously stated, children are almost entirely absent from this literature with a few notable exceptions such as Melson (2001)

and Myers (2007). The area of AAT has looked a little more in depth at the therapeutic and health benefits of contact between animals and children, with the often cited study of how the blood pressure of children was lowered by stroking dogs (Friedmann *et al.*, 1983), but it is still largely adults who dominate the AAT literature (Fine, 2000; Irvine, 2004; Serpell, 1999). This is perhaps linked to the long standing western tradition of denying the voice of children and giving them only limited rights (Alderson, 2001, 2004; Christensen & Prout, 2002, 2005; James & Prout, 1990). Myers takes this theme further suggesting that western culture has a deep-rooted tradition of viewing children as essentially unformed and 'animal-like' (Myers, 2007). In her study on children's lives with animals, Melson (2001) offers surprise at how the field of child psychology and development has ignored the roles of animals, and especially pets, in children's lives, considering the prominence of attachment and transitional object theories (Bowlby, 1984, 1988; Winnicott, 1953, 1965). Melson proposes that animals provide much opportunity for children to experience healthy attachments and to explore transitional experiences through animals and play, mentioning Freudian and Jungian theories of animal symbolism and suggesting that animals are useful because 'children readily access animals as material in the development of a sense of self' (Melson, 2001: 20). In addition to their role in child development, Melson suggests that animals offer many aspects that have been largely ignored by scholars writing about children, arguing that the study of children has been 'humanocentric'. She points out that pet keeping is 'apparently universal across human groups and so old it co-evolved with modern humans' proposing that this is why animals are so prominent in children's stories, myths, rhymes and fairytales (Melson, 2001: 14). Examples given of this include Goldilocks and the Three Bears, The Ugly Duckling, Little Red Riding Hood etc. It is argued that the use of animals continues in contemporary children's literature, in films, cartoons, toys, and in marketing, with Bambi, 101 Dalmatians, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and the Andrex puppy being just a few examples (Melson, 2001; Serpell, 1999).

Melson goes on to express the view that animals are useful in teaching responsibility to children together with a valuable healing role through providing companionship, emotional support and opportunity to experience love and affection (2001, 2003). The author goes on to hint that for some children, animals are more important to them than the people in their lives and that, 'for many children..... pets are more likely to be part of growing up than are siblings or fathers' (Melson, 2001:34). In addition is their role as 'social lubricant' (Corson & Corson, 1980; Fine, 2000; Wells, 2009) and their ability to enhance the therapist-child relationship, as initially

suggested by the child psychologist and pioneer of AAT, Levinson (1969), and later Fine (2000). Other authors exploring the role of animals in the family from a social work perspective support Melson's conclusion that animals are important to children suffering trauma and distress, and of the capacity that animals have to offer healthy attachment experiences (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molitor, 2005; Turner, 2005; Walsh, 2009) together with opportunities for acquisition of empathy (Poresky, 1990).

### **Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)**

A small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially.  
Florence Nightingale, 1860 (cited in Dossey, 1997: 8).

The pleasure that people appear to receive from living with animals would seem hard to dispute; there are approximately 10.5 million dogs and 10.3 million cats alone kept as pets in the UK, equating to 26% of the population owning dogs and 31% cats (Murray *et al.*, 2010). Their value as a therapeutic intervention is also acknowledged with guide dogs for the blind being the most obvious example, although pet-assisted therapy ([www.petsasterapy.org](http://www.petsasterapy.org)), an intervention mainly concerned with taking pets to visit people in hospitals and hospices, is now expanding in the UK. In addition there are therapy programmes where people swim with dolphins, although these are not without criticism (Chandler 2005), and 'donkey facilitated therapy' where donkeys are taken into residential homes for the elderly and employed in therapy with children ([www.elisabethsvendsentrust.org.uk](http://www.elisabethsvendsentrust.org.uk)). In the USA where animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is well established and has a longer history, there is a larger research base (Barker & Dawson 1998; Beck & Katcher, 1996; Bernstein, Friedman, & Malaspina 2000; Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2000). It is claimed that animals can offer benefits for people with a wide range of health issues, ranging from physical to mental health problems (Anderson, Hart, & Hart, 1984; Chandler, 2005; Dossey, 1997; Fine, 2000; Levinson, 1969; Podsberecek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000; Serpell, 1999, 2000a; Siegel, 1993). Interest in the field is rapidly expanding with the establishment of The Delta Society in the USA and The Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) in the UK. These and other organisations, such as veterinary pharmaceutical companies, have helped fund the undertaking of research into the subject.

## **Background**

Early records of the employment of AAT have been traced to the York Retreat, an asylum founded in 1792 by the Quaker movement. 'Bethel' a home for epileptics in Germany followed in 1867, both centres keeping animals for the patients to interact with and care for (Melson, 2001; Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987). Whilst early reports of the success of AAT were anecdotal and mainly consisted of records by psychotherapists (Chandler, 2005; Levinson, 1969; Serpell, 2000a), research into AAT over the past 10 years or so has largely aimed towards adopting a positivist, quantitative, approach utilising empirical, experimental, methods to test the hypothesis that AAT is effective in promoting health in many different aspects (Hooker, Freeman, & Stewart, 2002). A key study to have caught the public's attention claims to show that stroking a dog reduces stress and lowers blood pressure (Friedmann *et al.*, 1983). The previous influential study by these authors showed that pet owners had improved survival rates for patients a year after suffering from a heart attack (Friedmann *et al.*, 1980). Many other studies and publications followed, supporting similar and more health claims (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992; Beck & Katcher, 1996; Bernstein, Friedman, & Malaspina 2000; Mallon, 1994; Marr *et al.*, 2000; Serpell, 1991; Siegel, 1993).

## **Animals and pets for health and therapy**

It is suggested that pets and other animals can offer further psychosocial benefits in addition to the physical health claims of pet ownership. Siegel (1993) suggests that pet owners are happier than non-pet owners and subsequently experience less physical problems, measuring this by a study demonstrating that pet owners experienced fewer visits to their GP compared to non-pet owners over a one-year period. Other studies make similar physical health claims (Headey, 1999; Rainer *et al.*, 1999). One reason proposed for this is that because dogs, for example, need exercise, keeping animals can encourage physical activity, the health benefits of exercise on both physical and mental health being widely recognised (Halliwell, 2005; Munoz, 2009; Peacock, Hine, & Pretty, 2007). If animals can provide motivation for the previously unmotivated to exercise then mental health and physical health may therefore be improved. In addition to claims of the benefits of animals on general health, reported psychosocial benefits of AAT range from animals providing relationships and support (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Walsh, 2009; Wells, 2009; Wilson, & Turner, 1998) to encouraging responsibility, empathy and moral development (Daly & Morton, 2006; Myers, 2007; Poresky, 1990) and growth of self-

esteem and control of behaviour (Fine, 2000; Kogan *et al.*, 1999). Other psychological theories include seeing the animal as a transitional object (Triebenbacher, 1998) and acting as 'confidant' and 'holding environment' (Brooks, 2006; Melson, 2001). Many authors make links to pets and attachment theory with both children and adults (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Crawford, Worsham, & Swinehart, 2006; Parish-Plass, 2008; Sable, 1995; Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005; Walsh, 2009). In addition it is claimed that pets provide companionship and so decrease loneliness, provide security and comfort, fulfil the need for tactile stimulation and serve as non-judgemental support (Chandler, 2005; Dossey, 1997; Podsberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000; Serpell, 1999, 2000a). The psychologists Levinson (1969) and Corson and Corson (1980) wrote about how they found animals powerful facilitators in psychotherapy with both children and adults. Another suggestion is that animals can be especially helpful for those who find 'normal' social interaction difficult as they can be 'social lubricants' acting as a catalyst for people to make contact with others in an informal, non-threatening way. Corson and Corson in their study suggest that pets offer isolated and withdrawn people,

a form of non-threatening, non-judgemental, reassuring nonverbal communication and tactile comfort and thus helped to break the vicious cycle of loneliness, helplessness and social withdrawal (1980: 107).

A further theory put forward is that because of the responsibility required in looking after an animal self-esteem is increased, and it is claimed that children who have contact with animals have increased social competency (Edney, 1995) increased social skills (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000) and empathy (Daley & Morton, 2006; Paul & Serpell, 2000). Similar claims are made about AAT provided in prisons and of a reduction in violence and anti-social behaviour and recidivism rates when animals are included in prison programmes (Strimple, 2003).

Some authors (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000; Levinson, 1972; Serpell, 2000b) believe that these benefits of AAT are due to a deep connection between animals and humans related to the biophilia concept, and that animals can 'help to connect or reunite people with something fundamental within themselves – a sort of unconscious 'animal within' '(Serpell, 2000b: 110). I explore the area of biophilia and the relevance of the natural environment to the current study in more depth later in this chapter. In the following section I now explore claims that we have an especially deep connection to horses, over and above other non-human animals, due to our long

history and modern civilisation being based on our relationship with horses over millennia (Barclay, 1980; Chamberlin, 2007; Walker, 2008). Other authors make claims that horses have long been considered to have supernatural and healing powers throughout many cultures, providing further evidence of their effectiveness in the fields of EAL/T (Baker, 2004; Kohanov, 2001; McCormick & McCormick, 1997, 2004).

### **History of Riding Therapy (Hippotherapy) and EAL/T in the present day**

It is widely considered that horses have played a fundamental part in the history of humankind. Cave paintings dated around 13,000 BC show horses being hunted for their food and hides, whilst it is believed they first became domesticated and first ridden approximately 6,000 to 7,000 years ago (Walker, 2008). This led to the crucial roles horses have played in war and transport, and they subsequently became deeply implicated in our modern societies (Barclay, 1980; Budiansky, 1998; Chamberlin, 2007; Hyland, 1999). The long forged relationship between human and horse has resulted in the horse being ingrained in the human psyche (Game, 2001; Frewin & Gardiner, 2005; McCormick & McCormick, 1997) in a similar way to the innate link between humans and nature claimed by biophilia theory (Wilson, 1984). In turn, it is argued that horses can be employed therapeutically to awaken lost aspects of our consciousness (Held, 2006; Kohanov, 2001; McCormick & McCormick, 1997, 2004). These authors suggest that long before the horses' unique characteristics were harnessed by humankind and enabled our evolution as a species, they were believed to possess magical, healing powers. Cave paintings provide illustration that horses were revered as long as 20,000 years ago; palaeontologists suggesting that the cave paintings in Pech-Merle in France indicate that early man thought the horse had magical powers in warding off evil spirits and protecting against disease and danger, (Chamberlin, 2007; Mayberry, 1978). Riding as a therapy can be traced back to the fifth century BC with it being suggested that there is evidence demonstrating that wounded Greek soldiers were encouraged to ride horses to increase their morale (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999; Barclay, 1980; Cawley, Cawley, & Retter, 1994). Greek mythology has especially strong symbolism of the horse as a healer. Examples are Pegasus, who was thought to bring luck, inspiration and knowledge, and Chiron, the chief centaur, who was the god of healing – the word chiropractor having originated from Chiron. It is from the Greek philosopher Hippocrates that the medical tradition emerged - hippo being the Greek word for horse – and so underpinning the link between horses and healing within Greek culture (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999; Broersma, 2007). The Greeks continued to



play an important part in horse history; classical riding and dressage having its roots in the important trainer and philosopher Xenophon who believed in cultivating the partnership between man and horse (Chamberlin, 2007; Loch, 1999). This reverence of the horse has found its way across cultures and continents. In Iberia the horse was believed to have come out of the sea from the lost city of Atlantis as the 'Son of the Wind', an ancestor of the unicorn, who, again, like Pegasus, was thought to bring luck (Broersma, 2007; McCormick and McCormick 1997). North American Indians, who have long been admired for their natural riding ability, seemingly being at one with their horse, recognise them as healers and spiritual guides, as do the Mongolian Shamans (Baker, 2004; Isaacson, 2009). To the ancient Celts, horses were sacred creatures and associated with the life cycle, power, fertility, physical and metaphysical travel, together with good fortune. They believed the horse goddess was responsible for transporting the human soul into and out of its earthly existence at the appropriate season of life (Chamberlin, 2007; Davies & Jones, 1997; McCormick & McCormick, 2004).

### **Horses and therapy in the present day**

Fascination with the horse and its embedment in society as symbolic and cultural icon would appear to be as strong in the present day, with horses represented in fairy tales, films, books, art and poetry alongside their role in sport and recreation (Barclay, 1980; Chamberlin, 2007; Jones, 1983; Lawrence, 1984; Scanlan, 2001; Walker, 2008). Horses have long been represented in symbolism, in magic and mystery, legend, and myth. They are often considered lucky in superstition and historically were considered healers in many cultures (Howey, 2002; Jackson, 2006; McCormick & McCormick, 2004). The horseshoe is still a lucky icon and appears on cards and cakes to celebrate christenings and birthdays and is thrown as confetti at weddings. White horses (considered good luck) are often employed at weddings; either ridden by the bride or drawing a carriage, and black horses pull funeral hearses (Jackson, 2006). It is suggested that the horse offers the unique combination of being both extremely powerful and potentially dangerous, but also gentle and a 'symbol of human spirit and freedom' (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005: 4). As our lives have become safer and more sedentary some authors argue that horses fulfil an innate need to take risks, and perhaps this is one reason why it is within sport and recreation that horses have found their niche in modern society (Rosenthal, 1975). Undoubtedly horse-related sports have their roots in war and from Greek chariot racing. The hunting of wild boar and deer by lords, kings and the aristocracy followed, which led to modern day fox hunting (Barclay, 1980;

Chamberlain, 2007). Even more often, however, the horse is a symbol of power, which of course can represent freedom, as the following extract from the passage from the Book of Job (xxxix. 19-25, A.V.) illustrates;

Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted.....He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage.... (cited in Howey, 2002: 161).

A theme of how horses represent freedom and wildness on some level is something that the anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence found in her study on rodeo, which explores how horses are experienced and seen as both wild and yet also tame and, additionally, how the horse, 'serves as a symbolic bridge between nature and culture' (Lawrence, 1984: 132). Lawrence suggests that the horse's power and inherent wildness represents humans' domination over nature in some way, claiming 'I suggest the horse as an archetypal symbol of man's conquering force' (Lawrence, 1984: 134).

It is from sport that the therapeutic value of horses has emerged, although this was until recently largely based on the physical benefits of riding due to the inspiration sparked by Mme Lis Hartel, the world-renowned dressage rider of Denmark. Lis Hartel won a silver medal at the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games having taken up riding again after being severely paralysed by poliomyelitis (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999; Davies, 1988; Kaiser *et al.*, 2004). Inspired by both the physical and psychological benefits that Mme Hartel derived from riding, physiotherapists at the orthopaedic hospital in Copenhagen began to prescribe riding for patients. News of its success as a treatment spread to Britain where the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) was formed in 1970 and which now has national, member, organisations world-wide (Davies, 1988). The value of riding as a therapeutic tool for the physically disabled has been well documented and there are numerous studies that have been conducted to attempt to empirically prove the physical benefits of riding, due to the fact that,

riding provides the person with a disability a normal sensorimotor experience that contributes to the maintenance, development, rehabilitation, and enhancement of physical

skills. The sensorimotor experience involves vestibular input which stimulates the rider's balance mechanism as constant adjustments are needed with the horse's movement at different gaits (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999: 52).

Pioneering research in the 1980s by Bertoti (1988) on the benefits of hippotherapy for children with cerebral palsy showed significant improvement in posture following a ten week programme. Improvement in co-ordination was reported by Brock (1988) on his study of 15 adults with various physical disabilities, whilst MacKinnon *et al.*, (1995) found that there were significant improvements in posture, trunk control, attention span, pelvic mobility and hand control in their study of nineteen children aged between 4 and 12 diagnosed with spastic type cerebral palsy. I now introduce a number of studies which concentrate on aspects of psychosocial benefits of equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy (EAL/T) as related to the current study.

#### **Studies in equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy (EAL/T)**

An early study, which followed both a qualitative and quantitative approach was interested in exploring the participants' own meanings of their interactions with horses and looked at the benefits of horses for inmates at a prison in New Mexico. The wild mustang programme (WMP) as it was known, claimed a reduction of disciplinary reports and recidivism. This was 'particularly for those who simultaneously participated in substance abuse counselling and for violent offenders' (Cushing & Williams, 1995: 95). The rehabilitation programme comprised of 69 inmates evenly divided between those convicted of violent and property crimes with an average age of 35 years old. The objective of the programme was for the participants to each tame a wild mustang within the time limit of 1 month. Questionnaires were then given to both the correction officers and inmates as to what the perceived benefits were. Recidivism rates were also analysed and compared to the general recidivism rates of New Mexico correctional facilities. They were shown to be significantly lower for the WMP; 14.82% in comparison to the general rate of 38.12%.

Although the programme was administered along different lines than the way most general therapeutic riding and EAL/T programmes have developed, in that the horses were wild and were 'broken in', in the western sense, often a violent encounter - for both the participants and the horses -, it nevertheless served as a therapeutic experience for many of the inmates as demonstrated by their testimonials, which reported improvements in self-confidence and

development of empathy. The authors report that there was a 29% reduction in disciplinary reports during and after the programme participation and this was especially higher for major reports, with a 55% reduction.

The general perception of the success of the programme by both inmates and prison staff was, without exception, positive, but the researchers point out that as advocates of the programme they themselves could not be seen as objective, stating;

the subjective assessments obtained from the lengthy interviews and the staff surveys suggest a programme that was wildly successful. However, a somewhat cautious view is warranted upon realisation that most of the basis for the subjective assessment is in the realm of psychological outcomes and these determinations are hardly being made by dispassionate neutral scientists (Cushing & Williams, 1995: 104).

Not concerning themselves so much with questions of scientific 'validity' Vidrine, Owen-Smith and Faulkner (2002) employed a descriptive, qualitative, approach to look at an intervention employing vaulting as 'equine-facilitated group psychotherapy' for children and young people from a range of backgrounds including foster care, residential treatment settings and school problems. These sessions involved a number of children aged between 7-10 participating in vaulting sessions (learning a set sequence of controlled, gymnastic moves whilst on the back of a horse). The sessions also involved horse care and learning about horse behaviour as well as learning to work in a team. Participants attended sessions for 1½ hrs a week for 8-10 weeks. The authors provide a descriptive account of the vaulting sessions, employing a participant observation model and then interpreting the process by using their own analysis in addition to statements from the children, their carers and other professionals involved. Two of the founders of the centre, HorseTime in the USA, were a clinical psychologist and a psychiatric mental health nurse and the study is framed within a psychotherapeutic approach drawing on experiential therapy with its roots in the psychodynamic tradition of Jung.

One of the themes the authors drew from the study is that the horses facilitated healthy physical tactile experience, stating,

As clients became more comfortable in the farm environment, they were noted to be appropriately physically affectionate with both the horse and the staff. Even the boys who

were seldom seen expressing physical affections with humans were observed hugging and kissing their horse (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002: 600).

They also described how trust was built, both between the participants themselves and with their horses. 'By the end of the group, however, nearly every child had widened their circle of trust...' (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002: 599). The authors conclude that therapeutic vaulting,

offers a unique opportunity for experiential group psychotherapy experience. Participants are able to address developmental, personal and social needs in the context of a somatically engaging, challenging and enjoyable activity (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002: 602).

However, whilst Vidrine, Owen-Smith and Faulkner claim the above benefits were apparent from their study, they go on to suggest that more research 'across a variety of treatment settings and with a variety of clinical populations' is needed in order to establish the effectiveness of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (2002: 602). The study had some flaws in that the authors did not specify how many young people took part in the study, for how long the study was conducted or discuss any other factors such as staff, choosing instead to focus on providing a descriptive account of a typical group.

Utilising a similar approach to the current PhD study, but with adults as opposed to young people, a study by Bizub, Joy and Davidson (2003) followed the experiences of five adult participants in a therapeutic horseback riding program over ten weeks. Employing a case study participant observational model of enquiry, the researchers from Yale University carried out this study in conjunction with an established therapeutic riding and equine-assisted therapy centre in the USA. The participants, who volunteered for the programme, were adults with long standing mental health problems, primarily within the schizophrenia spectrum. In addition to riding, the emphasis of the programme was on bonding exercises with the horses and a post-session processing group. The researchers, who were psychology graduates and practitioners, co-facilitated the sessions each week, so demonstrating the participant observational approach of the study. Another data collection method employed consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants. The epistemological framework of the study can be demonstrated by the authors' concerns for ensuring that the participants' voices are heard and of

the methods employed being an empowering experience for the individuals concerned. In the analysis of the programme they write,

When one enters the system of psychiatry, there is the transformation of one's rich 'personal story' into a 'case history'. One way to counteract this disempowering occurrence is for people with disabilities to tell their own stories and be listened to. Thus qualitative analysis was used to describe how, and in what way, if at all, this programme was transformative for participants. By inviting individuals to describe their personal experiences so as to grasp their meaning, this method is inherently empowering (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003: 380).

A discussion of the results was presented in the participants' own words, with themes that emerged explored. These ranged from the riders describing a growth in confidence from learning a new skill to overcoming the fear associated with riding a horse for the first time. The participants began to gain insights into themselves through this, and apply it to other areas of their lives, 'because I was able to overcome a fear, that helped me' and 'I know that they (the horses) get scared and they run and I found out it's just like me' (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003: 381). Another key theme to emerge was that of the horse offering 'unconditional love' and of the participants building up strong relationships with the horses that then helped initiate other social connections. The authors concluded that this was due to it being a 'normalizing experience' (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003: 381). They liken therapeutic horse riding to exercise therapy and outdoor adventure activities but with the additional dimension of the horse offering further opportunities for rehabilitation writing that,

Getting in touch with a horse, both literally and figuratively, can enhance one's appreciation for both the horse and one's self...we suggest that therapeutic horseback riding is a promising way for such individuals ...to more fully participate in their own lives (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003: 383).

Another study into the benefits of EAL/T measured psychological well being of adults before and after participating in equine-assisted experiential therapy, finding positive outcomes (Klontz *et al.*, 2007). Other studies claim that therapeutic riding can significantly reduce anger issues with

children (Kaiser *et al.*, 2004; Kaiser *et al.*, 2006) and another looked at EAL/T therapists' perspectives on the interventions in order to gain an overview of the perceived benefits (Young & Bracher, 2005). A further, ongoing, quantitative research project is attempting to measure 'the Emotional Bond between Horses and Humans' through monitoring heart rate variability (Gehrke, 2006; Mistral, 2007). Ewing *et al.*, (2007) and Schultz, Remick-Barlow and Robbins (2007) employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) and equine-facilitated learning (EFL) programmes for children and young people with behavioural and mental health problems. Both studies employed pre and post testing with Schultz, Remick-Barlow and Robbins (2007) finding improvements in GAF (Children's Global Assessment of Functioning Scale) scores for all the children participating in EAP. However, in the EFL study by Ewing *et al.*, (2007) no statistically significant improvement was found in measurement of self-esteem using the Harter Self-perception Profile measuring technique, although, conversely, qualitative, observational data collected did report 'positive changes in conduct and social acceptance' (Ewing *et al.*, 2007: 68). The authors report finding difficulties with administering the psychological testing with this group of children, stating, 'many children had difficulty understanding the questions asked of them during testing' and 'several students would begin to display disinterest or agitation to end the testing period' (Ewing *et al.*, 2007: 70). This was something I also encountered with a number of participants when asking questions and I provide an account of an example of this on p189 in chapter 8.

Studies into EAL/T are still in their infancy and are fraught with methodological, ethical and epistemological difficulties and differences, not least when studying vulnerable and excluded children and young people within the care system, together with the multitude of challenges and variables working with both horses and young people brings. Despite this the handful of studies that have been conducted so far, in the majority, appear to substantiate that, 'Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is fast gaining recognition internationally as an effective treatment strategy for a number of different client groups' (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005: 2).

It will be seen that many of the themes and therapeutic benefits claimed from the studies introduced in this chapter arose in the current PhD study; themes of a growth in confidence and self-esteem gained from learning a new skill and overcoming fear (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Cushing & Williams, 1995) and themes of attachment and healthy tactile stimulation (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002), together with the opportunity to change behaviours (Bass, Duchowny, & Llabre, 2009; Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Kaizer *et al.*, 2004; Rothe *et al.*, 2005).

My study contributes an additional dimension to this limited evidence base through a reflexive practitioner-researcher ethnographic method interested in exploring how the young people experienced therapeutic horsemanship.

### **Why horses?**

How far animals can be a useful therapeutic intervention for children and adults with additional emotional and social needs has been demonstrated to be the subject of ongoing discussion and research. In addition, the relationship between people and horses is the subject of different theories and perspectives. As briefly explored earlier in this chapter, these range from how horses can be powerful facilitators for healing from a spiritual dimension (Baker, 2004; Broersma, 2007; Kohanov, 2001, 2005; McCormick & McCormick, 1997, 2004) to a historical exploration (Barclay, 1980; Chamberlin, 2007; Hyland, 1996). In addition, their role in our sociological and cultural space is explored by Birke (2007, 2008) Latimer and Birke (2009) and Lawrence (1984), with Brandt (2004) looking at horses within the sphere of social construction. Traditional biological theories together with natural horsemanship methods of horse behaviour are discussed by, amongst others, Budiansky (1998) McGreevy (2004) Rashid (2004) Rees (1984) and Roberts (2000).

Interestingly, horses occupy a space 'in-between' other animals. They are neither quite a pet nor classed as farm animals, and this is reflected in law in that horses, although living in agricultural spaces, are not included in legislation covering the welfare of agricultural animals (DEFRA, 2006). Horses are in our lives in an array of often contradictory ways, as work animals, sporting partners, leisure and companion animals, symbols of wilderness and freedom, therapeutic 'tools' and yet are also eaten in many countries. Horses are demanding too. They demand a lot of time, attention, money and responsibility. Perhaps it is because of these unique characteristics and the way they inhabit this 'in-between' space that horses 'have been shown by anthropologists to be deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of culture and society' (Latimer & Birke, 2009: 2).

Reasons put forward for why the horse can offer a unique dimension to the therapeutic arena are varied, but one theory suggested by practitioners in the EAL/T field is that the horse is especially effective for psychotherapeutic work as it 'is an animal of great power and grace: yet it is also one of inherent vulnerability' (Karol, 2007: 78). This vulnerability is due to the horse



being a very tasty herbivore that has had to develop highly honed communication skills within its herd to survive over millennia (Budiansky, 1998; McGreevy, 2004; Rashid, 2004; Rees, 1984). Whilst there are competing perspectives on the traditional understanding of herd structure and dominance theories (Berger, 1986; Houpt, Law, & Martinisi, 1978; McGreevy, 2004; Rees, 2009; Roberts, 2000) a growing number of horse trainers and ethologists in the field of natural horsemanship suggest that horses are inherently co-operative animals and fine-tuned to body language and emotions of both people and horses;

the thing to remember is that horses are, by nature, very co-operative and social animals. They have to be. It's the essence of living in a herd. The only reason they've survived fifty-million years..... is because they have learned how to get along with and depend on one another (Rashid, 2004: 81).

In addition to these finely-tuned skills in reading body language, horses also need a wise leader in order to survive and they are constantly on the look-out for one in whichever situation they find themselves, whether that be with people or other horses. They will seek a leader in who they feel secure and can trust, one who is calm and dependable and can keep them safe (Irwin, 2005; Rashid, 2004; Rees, 1984).

A term that has been adopted widely in the EAL/T literature and community is the term 'mirroring'. Because horses are so effective at reading a person's body language and emotions it is suggested that they offer a mirror to our own behaviour as they provide immediate and accurate feedback (Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Karol, 2000; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). If a person is displaying behaviour that the horse feels could be dangerous to its well-being, such as being anxious, agitated or aggressive, the horse may respond by either acting in a similar way or simply distancing itself from the person/behaviour by leaving, depending on the circumstances. Conversely, if a person behaves in a calm, confident, consistent and kind manner towards the horse it is much more likely to respond in a calm and co-operative way in return (Mistral, 2007; Rashid, 2004; Rees, 1984; Roberts, 2000). EAL/T can therefore offer a useful and non-confrontational way for a therapist to explore a client's behaviour as,

Horses....give accurate and unbiased feedback, mirroring both the physical and emotional states of the participant during exercises, providing clients with an opportunity to raise

their awareness and to practice congruence between their feelings and behaviours (Klontz *et al.*, 2007: 259).

However, many factors such as the age, experience and nature of the horse together with his/her environment and many other conditions will have influence on how the horse will respond to the human handler. A better analogy than mirroring may be to think of the horse as providing a useful indicator of our own behaviour as they will certainly react to how they are handled. Research is currently being undertaken which claims that the horse's heartbeat rates quickly correspond to that of the person handling them and this could provide useful additional information (Gehrke, 2006; Mistral, 2007).

Other therapists have offered the further dimension that the horse can be a metaphor for a client's behaviour and emotions, drawing on psychological theories of projection and transference (Gordon, 1978; Kohanov, 2001, 2005; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Additionally, it is suggested that clients can relate to a horse's natural desire of wanting to flee when threatened or frightened (Klontz *et al.*, 2007) and that participants seem often to be drawn to particular horses who have similar personalities, behaviours or histories to themselves, opening up further avenues of psychological exploration and self-awareness (Burgon, 2003; Cushing & Williams, 1995; Kohanov, 2001; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Rector, 2005).

## **Horses and the Natural Environment**

An assumption of The Yard was that, in addition to the learning and therapeutic gain from being with horses, being outdoors in the natural environment was beneficial for the young people who attended on a number of levels. These included the obvious physical benefits from the exercise involved in working with and caring for horses, together with the mental health advantages that have been attributed to exercise (Halliwell, 2005; MIND, 2007). In addition to these benefits are the less tangible effects of being in nature in perhaps enabling the young people to relax, to be more motivated to learn and engage and to get away from their problems by being outside in the open, in the natural environment.

These assumptions were largely supported in the research and the contribution of the horses in relation to these themes is explored in the empirical chapters. In Chapter 8 I look at the data that emerged about the perceived benefits the young people gained from being outdoors in

nature, from both their own perspectives and those of the adults involved in their care. In this literature review I now go on to provide an overview of some of the theories put forward that promote the value of the natural environment, on physical, mental and spiritual health.

### **Nature therapy and biophilia theory**

Biophilia theory argues that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world, a need which is probably biologically-based and which is integral to our development as healthy individuals (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Nebbe, 2000; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Wilson, 1984). More recent supporters of biophilia claim that there is now ‘a decade of research that reveals how strongly and positively people respond to open, grassy landscapes, scattered stands of trees, meadows, water, winding trails, and elevated views’ (Louv, 2008: 43). These authors suggest that this affinity with the natural environment is linked to our evolutionary success as a species; being attracted to resource rich landscapes and interested in nature and animals has developed from our hundreds of thousands of years living as hunter-gatherers (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1984).

Having ‘unity with nature’ (Levinson, 1972) has been suggested as having therapeutic value. Nebbe terms this nature therapy and states that, ‘People evolved with the earth, with and within the natural environment’, and therefore we are all part of the larger biosphere with which we have a natural bond (Nebbe, 2000: 391). The author gives examples of how we try to facilitate this basic need to connect with the natural environment by camping, hunting, gardening and other such outdoor activities. Katcher and Wilkins in their study on nature therapy in education support a sometimes controversial biological link for a human-nature need stating that,

The evolutionary development of the human brain was shaped by the necessity to forage and hunt. As a by-product of this necessity, humans have an innate tendency to pay attention to animals and the natural surroundings (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000: 153).

These theories are aligned to the Gaia Hypothesis and systems theory; that everything is inter-related (Lovelock, 1979). Because we are connected to nature and have a natural affiliation with it, supporters of this hypothesis argue that the natural environment can be a therapeutic setting to aid healing and bring people back in touch with a lost connection to nature and to ourselves (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000; Linden & Grute, 2002; Nebbe, 2000; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). It is argued that modern industrialised society’s obsession with materialism and

technology has resulted in an alienation from nature which is leading to devastating consequences for both children and young people's development, and the environment in general (Louv, 2008). A study in the US claims that during 1997-2003 there was a 50% decline in the proportion of young people aged between 9-12 who spent time outdoors hiking, fishing, gardening and in beach play (Louv, 2008). In the UK a report in 2009 found that less than 10% of children today reported playing in natural places, whereas 40% of adults reported playing in such places when they were young (England Marketing, 2009). These figures are blamed on a combination of factors ranging from a rise in technology, computer games and a consumerist culture (Louv, 2008) parental fear of allowing children to play outdoors unsupervised (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2008; Durr, 2008) together with busier lifestyles and a reduction in unstructured outdoor play space (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005).

### **Exercise and health**

There is a growing concern that rising obesity levels and mental health problems are linked in part to a lack of exercise, which can be the consequence of our more materialistic, sedentary, unhealthy and technological lifestyle (British Medical Association, 2005; Halliwell, 2005; Louv, 2008; Munoz, 2009). These claims are supported by research claiming that contact with nature and the outdoors can bring both physical and mental health benefits (Eggerling, Pawlak, & Ludwig, 2002; Halliwell, 2005; McCurdy *et al.*, 2010; MIND, 2007), is useful in children's development, concentration and ability to learn (Kellert, 2002; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Wells, 2000) and lead to stress reduction (Korpela *et al.*, 2001). Conversely, it is argued that not having enough time outside is leading to vitamin D deficiency in children (Misra *et al.*, 2008). As a result of these claims government policy is beginning to support 'green' exercise and promote contact with nature and the outdoors (BTVC, 2009; Halliwell, 2005; Munoz, 2009).

Subsequently, there has been a growth in horticulture and nature therapy programmes (Linden & Grute, 2002; Sempkit, Aldridge, & Becker 2005) together with referrals by GPs to 'green gyms' and exercise initiatives, such as walking exercise (BTCV, 2009; Halliwell, 2005; Priest, 2007). Alongside this has been a modest rise in the growth of AAT and EAL/T in the UK in prisons, schools, alcohol and drug rehabilitation centres, special education programmes, mental health settings and in residential centres for people with physical and learning disabilities (Bexson, 2008; Donaghy, 2006; EST, 2010; FCRT, 2010; HM Prison Service, 2004; LEAP, 2010; PAT,

2010; SCAS, 2010), although these are presently still far more established in the USA (Chandler, 2005; Mallon, 1994).

A report by Peacock, Hine and Pretty (2007) concentrated on 'green exercise' or 'ecotherapy' for mental health. Research was carried out by the University of Essex with the conclusion that 'these studies confirm that participating in green exercise activities provides substantial benefits for health and wellbeing' and, furthermore, that 'green exercise has particular benefits for people experiencing mental distress' (Peacock, Hine, & Pretty, 2007: 1). In addition the authors report that green exercise directly benefits mental health (lowering stress and boosting self-esteem), improves physical health (lowering blood pressure and helping to tackle obesity), provides a sense of meaning and purpose, and 'helps to develop skills and form social connections' (Peacock, Hine, & Pretty, 2007: 4). Another study by Sempik, Aldridge and Becker (2005) on the value of social and therapeutic horticulture (STH) focused on the perceived benefits that clients of the five projects they studied claimed they received from participating in STH. These included; being outside in the fresh air, connectedness with nature, safety, healing, peacefulness and relaxation, distraction (from problems) freedom and escape. Participants spoke of how being outside in the natural environment in all weathers made them feel 'free' and 'peaceful' and how it was good to 'get back to nature' (Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005). The authors make the suggestion that the emotional bond the participants made with their environment 'could be taken to have a spiritual meaning', in terms of spirituality meaning a connectedness with an entity larger than ourselves (Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005: 49). They conclude that 'the outdoor, natural environment provides the emotional or psychological backdrop for the many activities and processes of STH' (Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005: 52).

Within this literature on the benefits of green exercise and health 'children have been identified as one of the key social groups to examine' (Munoz, 2009: 9). Reasons for this range from concerns over childhood obesity rates to the importance of unstructured or 'free' play for learning the management of risk amongst other developmental milestones (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2008; British Medical Association, 2005; Ebberling, Pawlak, & Ludwig, 2002; Staempfli, 2009). It is claimed that being in nature can alleviate ADHD symptoms in young people (Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001) and create a sense of wellbeing and attachment to place which can alleviate stress and release tension built up in other areas of their lives (Korpela *et al.*, 2001). Some of these themes are explored in relation to both the effect of being with the horses and the natural environment in chapter 8.

## **Nature as therapeutic space and for getting away from problems**

Berger and McLeod (2006) propose that being in the natural environment can serve as a powerful space for therapy to take place. They suggest that it can ‘flatten hierarchies’ as,

Nature is a live and dynamic environment that is not under the control or ownership of either therapist or client. It is an open and independent space, which has existed before their arrival in it and will remain long after they depart from it (Berger & McLeod, 2006: 82).

What Berger and McLeod refer to as ‘sacred spaces’, has parallels with what Thomas and Thompson (2004) term ‘special’ or ‘secret’ spaces; places in nature which are important for children in terms of attachment to place and identity formation. Another area which perhaps has resonance with EAL/T is the idea that each part of nature – the landscape, the elements, the weather, animals – can ‘trigger parallel psychological and spiritual quests that can open a channel for mind-body work’ and that nature can act as ‘a bridge between people’ (Berger & McLeod, 2006: 87). The authors also draw from principles of the deep ecology movement which claims that modern, capitalist, society which concentrates on the individual rather than the collective is resulting in catastrophe for both humans and the environment with which we are intrinsically linked (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). It is suggested that by re-connecting with nature we can somehow gain a stronger connection to the universe and this can help take people outside of their own problems and issues, as will be explored in chapter 8. Kaplan (1995) and Korpela *et al.*, (2001) call this ‘attention restoration theory’ and propose that because we have a fascination with the natural environment and it takes us away from usual routines, it can help with ‘clearing away random thoughts and recovering directed attention’ in a way that creates ‘restoration’ (Korpela *et al.*, 2001: 576). These authors draw on studies with adolescents where they describe their experiences in their favourite places in nature as places to calm down, clear their minds and face troublesome matters (Korpela *et al.*, 2001). A study by Wells and Evans (2003) found that a rural environment, or even just having a view of nature, helped reduce anxiety among highly stressed children.

These are themes that emerged in the research study and have parallels to some of the experiences obtained through working with horses, with examples of how the young people and adults perceived the role of the natural environment provided in chapter 8.

### **Learning and taking risks outdoors with horses**

Working with horses involves an element of risk. This is on many levels; from their sheer size and power to their inherent 'wildness' and how, ultimately, they will act on instinct if frightened, despite millennia of domestication. The young people who attended The Yard learnt how the horse is still closely aligned and attuned to its natural environment; how it is highly influenced by the weather for example (see p177). Many of the young people lacked confidence around the horses when they first started attending TH but grew in confidence once they gained knowledge and skills as demonstrated on p101 and p108.

The importance of risk taking for children and young people's development is well documented, with government policy beginning to recognise this (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2008). Many authors write about how participating in outdoor activities which incorporate an element of challenge, such as outward bound courses, ropes courses, a surf programme for at-risk young people, and 'Green Gyms', for example, can bring both physical and mental health benefits (BTV, 2009; Carns, Carns, & Holland, 2001; Morgan, 2010; Staempfli, 2009; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). In their literature review of adventure-based interventions, Moote and Woodarski (1997) propose that these types of therapeutic interventions may be particularly appropriate and useful during adolescence. They suggest that this can be a critical time for at-risk young people who may be drawn to unhealthy and risk-taking behaviours and activities during this period of their lives for a range of reasons related to their psychosocial and childhood experiences and circumstances.

Other authors suggest that it is especially important for children to have opportunities to engage with their natural environment as it has been shown to 'have a profound effect on children's cognitive functioning' (Wells, 2000: 790). It is argued that time spent in nature can help with classroom behaviour and academic achievement (Blair, 2009) and may be 'particularly important for young people from deprived backgrounds' (Munoz, 2009: 6) as this population are overrepresented in poor, urban neighbourhoods with limited access to the natural environment (Wells, 2000). A further claim proposed by Nebbe (2000) is that new, more positive, ways of behaving can be learnt by being in nature. She suggests that 'the natural environment is a behavior setting that evokes coping rather than defensive behaviors' going on to add that examples of coping behaviours are 'self-sufficiency, risk taking, initiative, and cooperation' (Nebbe, 2000: 394). These claims are supported by Burdette and Whitaker (2005) who add that the opportunity for free play in the natural environment, in particular, provides the opportunity

for young children to learn problem solving skills, and what they term ‘attention, affiliation and affect’ (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). It was found in the current study that many of the young people who attended The Yard would appear to be more motivated to learn in the context of the outdoor environment with the horse as the focus or ‘backdrop to activities’ (see p199 and p201 for some examples). The TH programme at The Yard sought to provide engaging, motivating activities through working and learning about horses in the natural environment; in Chapter 8 I look at some of the data which emerged related to the themes of the natural environment, ecotherapy and exercise.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have introduced some of the literature, ideas and theories around the field of equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy (EAL/T). I have briefly looked at the background of EAL/T emerging from historical accounts of the role of the horse in culture and as healer together with animal-assisted therapy (AAT), alongside our complicated and often contradictory relationships with animals in society.

It has emerged that the current research into EAL/T has largely followed a demand from practitioners in the field wanting ‘evidence-based’ empirical studies to support their work in order to secure its place as a credible field and therefore obtain funding to practice EAL/T, which are costly interventions to provide (Cushing & Williams, 1995; Frewin & Gardiner, 2007; Gehrke, 2006; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Consequently it has been seen that much of the research has tended to seek to employ psychological testing techniques to measure performance indicators before and after participating in EAL/T sessions (Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Kaiser *et al.*, 2004; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007), although it is acknowledged that these studies would not be considered the most robust in terms of the gold standard of randomised controlled trials (Frewin & Gardiner, 2007).

My research attempts to provide a contribution to the gap in the research looking at the *process* of TH, concentrating not so much on the effects of therapeutic horsemanship on the young people who attended The Yard, but on *what is going on between the young people and horses*. In addition to my own observations and reflections as a practitioner-researcher, I was also interested in hearing *the participants’ own voices* what was happening for them; what horses they were drawn to want to work with and what it was about those particular horses? What themes emerged, did the horses invoke any particular feelings, or was the environment a factor?



Did the particular style of natural horsemanship practiced at The Yard have any bearing on how the participants felt and the learning/therapeutic environment at the research site?

It is hoped that by the participants being able to provide their own personal accounts of their experiences of therapeutic horsemanship, in addition to my own observations and those of some of the adults involved in the young people's care, that this will provide an additional dimension and richness to the growing body of research within the field of EAL/T. Finally it was hoped that by participants being involved in the research process that this would also be of benefit to themselves in terms of their own learning, as well as being of interest to policymakers who, ultimately, will influence the direction of EAL/T.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Literature Review 2: Psychosocial Aspects of Work with Young People considered 'At-Risk'**

### **Introduction**

The therapeutic horsemanship (TH) programme was initiated in order to provide a therapeutic and learning intervention for young people considered 'at-risk' in terms of their experiences and subsequent possible negative life outcomes. In this second literature review chapter I look at some of the literature on risk and resilience surrounding this group of young people, and especially the 'dynamic state' and ecological models. These understand their circumstances as arising within a framework including environmental, psychological and social structural processes, and of being subject to change over the life course. The Yard aimed to provide an environment where it was hoped that young people could gain some of the resources necessary to enable them to lead more successful and positive lives in ways which were meaningful for them as individuals, and drew on a multitude of theoretical frameworks and philosophies of practice. Therefore in this literature review I examine the research literature that explores the factors which, it is suggested, may help to build resilience drawn from a variety of sources. As research into risk and resilience grew alongside the developmental psychopathology and psychodynamic fields and emergence of 'attachment theory' (Bowlby, 1984; Hughes, 2004; Winnicott, 1965) and as attachment theory is referred to throughout the literature on risk and resilience and emerged as a prominent theme in the study, I include an overview of the key literature in this field. The role of the horse in the therapeutic relationship from psychotherapeutic perspectives is explored, looking at how the horse may help provide therapeutic 'rapport' with the therapist, along with themes of projection and metaphor. Finally I explore some of the concepts from the mindfulness literature which has links to TH in addition to the psychotherapeutic literature and nature therapy field.

### **Risk and Resilience**

The majority of the young people who attended The Yard had been referred due to being understood as being 'at-risk' as a consequence of their various psychosocial disadvantages. This concept of at-risk has arisen from the research literature which suggests that exposure to certain

risk factors in childhood has a high likelihood in correlating to negative outcomes in later life (Bannister, 1998; Hughes, 2004; Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985; Stein, 2006). In addition, over the last 30 years or so a substantial body of research has concentrated on looking at why certain individuals appear to overcome adversity and remain resilient despite experiencing these childhood risks. Resilience is suggested by Masten, Best and Garmezy, as being, 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (1990: 426). In contrast to the literature that sees resilience as related to individual personality traits, some authors have argued that it is important to recognise resilience as a 'dynamic state' which understands that risk varies across the life span (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Place *et al.*, 2002). These authors suggest that successful resilience is where protective factors can adapt to changing risk and, having experienced successful coping strategies in the past, the ability to cope in the future is strengthened. The work of Ungar is also relevant, for he raises the concern about, 'who defines good outcomes and appropriate developmental pathways' and argues that the important factor is how young people self-define their own health (2004: 24).

### **Risk factors**

Understanding of risk factors varies, depending on perspective, from an emphasis on wider structural understanding of the risks associated with socioeconomic status, class and environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992) to prioritising the role of neurobiology on individual differences in stress, trauma and risk research (Gunner *et al.*, 2006; Gunner & Quevedo, 2007). In addition there are the predominant behavioural and developmental perspectives on risk and resilience that emerged alongside developmental psychopathology during the 1960s and 1970s (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Werner, 1993). Whilst stress is now acknowledged within the medical professions as having an effect on physical health (Barr, Boyce, & Zeltzer, 1996; Halliwell, 2005; Levine, 2005), in the context of this study I am primarily interested in psychosocial understandings of stress, trauma and resilience on young people, and so will concentrate on presenting that literature in this review.

Risk factors can be experienced both directly and indirectly by an individual and are inter-related. Which social class a child is born into can be considered a distal risk factor as it is not

experienced directly. However, class can have a bearing on proximal risk factors, which is where risks are experienced directly; for example, where socioeconomic status results in poor nutrition and housing which can impact on health and development (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Being born with a disability can limit an individual's opportunities, but this may be experienced differently depending on socioeconomic status, family and community attitudes and available resources. It has been suggested that experiencing a single risk factor is not as damaging as exposure to multiple or cumulative-risk factors (Garmezy & Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1979, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Looking at the impact of psychosocial risk factors such as parental discord, the mother experiencing mental health problems, low socioeconomic status, household overcrowding, family criminality and being in care, Rutter (1979) found that whilst experiencing one risk factor alone did not have a significant impact on successful childhood development, measured by prevalence of psychiatric disorder, experiencing two or more of the stressors decreased the opportunity for successful childhood development. Conversely, a criticism directed at much of the literature concerned with risk and resilience is that it has followed a medically-based psychological model, concentrating on looking for universal patterns and laws in how individuals respond to stress (Lazarus, 1993) which does not allow for individual difference, and follows a normative understanding of development (Clarke, Hahn, & Hoggett, 2008; Glantz & Johnson, 1999). More recent research into factors related to risk and resilience has evolved from this psychological, medically-based, linear model of a stress-stimuli and response understanding, to a more transactional, ecological, model. This latter perspective recognises that there is a complex relationship between an individual, their environment and the interactions between them to exposure to, and the effects of, risk factors. It argues that an approach is needed which explores the interaction between genetic, biological, psychological, cultural, environmental and socioeconomic factors within a developmental framework in the study of risk and resilience theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Haggerty *et al.*, 1996; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Place *et al.*, 2002; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Despite the various differing perspectives on risk outlined above there does appear to be general agreement that exposure to early stressful and traumatic events, such as physical, sexual or psychological abuse, neglect and dysfunctional parenting and parental drug and/or alcohol abuse, for example, are some of the factors which can result in subsequent 'negative life outcomes' (Bannister, 1998; Egeland *et al.*, 2002; Gunnar *et al.*, 2006; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Hughes, 2004; Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Emotional and

behavioural symptoms in children and young people which have been attributed to exposure to these risk factors range from hyper vigilance, hyperactivity and extreme sensitivity, abrupt and extreme mood swings, lack of self-worth, depression, avoidance and addictive behaviours, to self-harming and the inability to make meaningful relationships (Egeland *et al.*, 2002; Gunnar *et al.*, 2006; Levine, 1997, 2005; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Levine (2005) goes on to suggest that illnesses such as skin and digestive disorders, a decreased immune system and many other physical conditions can manifest as a consequence of early abusive and traumatic experiences. The 'negative life outcomes' in adulthood attributed to risk factors in childhood range from problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems, criminality and unemployment to failed relationships, ill-health and early death (Born, Chevalier, & Humblet, 1997; Haggerty *et al.*, 1996; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Stein, 2006). Many of the young people who attended The Yard had been taken into care due to assessed serious risks to their health and well-being. They often came from deprived and impoverished backgrounds and with many of the behaviours listed above routinely reported in their referral forms. Preventative therapeutic interventions, such as EAL/T, together with TH offered at The Yard, are concerned with attempting to provide these young people with some of the resilience and protective factors necessary to avoid possible negative life outcomes.

### **Coping and resilience**

Whilst it is understood that risk factors can lead to negative life outcomes there is also recognition that individuals have different responses and outcomes to negative experiences during their life-span. Traumatic life events, such as loss of a parent, spouse and divorce, for instance, result in stress for most individuals concerned in the same way that certain viruses are likely to produce physical illness in the majority of people, but the extent to which people succumb psychologically varies enormously. In the 1960s and 1970s, largely as a result of research on the effects of stress and trauma on performance of soldiers in World War II and the Korean War, certain researchers became aware that some individuals have different responses and levels of stress to similar events which led to an interest in the area of coping and resilience factors in relation to individual outcomes of exposure to stress (Haggerty *et al.*, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1993; Levinson *et al.*, 1978, Rutter, 1979, 2006). Why some children and young people develop successfully, despite being exposed to the risk factors outlined

previously, has been the subject of research which has labelled these children and young people as 'resilient' or 'stress-resistant' (Garmezy, 1996; Haggerty *et al.*, 1996; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Lazarus, 1993). The initial phase of research in this field was often concerned with seeking to discover universal characteristics of resilience related to nature/nurture theories; i.e. negative early experiences lead to psychiatric illness - influenced by the emergence of Bowlby's (1984) attachment theory - together with genetic reasons for poor developmental outcomes (Barr, Boyce, & Zeltzer, 1996; Rutter, 2006; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Along with a rise in interest in behavioural psychology, research then began to introduce the concept of individual appraisal as a significant factor in resiliency;

psychological stress, therefore, is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 21).

Later, third phase, research began to be interested in the link between person and place and how both impact on each other. Importantly it also began to recognise that individual resilience varies according to gender, age and circumstance (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985) and that socio-economic and environmental, structural and cultural factors are involved (Clarke, Hahn, & Hoggett, 2008; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Nettles & Pleck, 1996).

### **Protective factors and mechanisms involved in resilience – internal and external factors**

A widely adopted definition of protective factors employed in the literature states that,

Protective factors refer to influences that modify, ameliorate, or alter a person's response to some environmental hazard that predisposes to a maladaptive outcome (Rutter, 1985: 600).

It is proposed that there are several variables associated with resilience, which include internal and external factors, such as particular family conditions, community support systems and interventions, and individual personal characteristics. The particular personal strengths and characteristics of an individual are considered internal assets whilst external protective factors are

those 'external strengths occurring within the individual's social context' (Howard & Johnson, 2000: 321). Some of the internal characteristics of resilient children are suggested to be personal qualities such as cognitive skills, an ability to reflect, social competence, sense of purpose and future, and mastery, autonomy and self-efficacy (Born, Chevalier, & Humblet, 1997; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). The presence of a caring adult and quality of childhood care together with family cohesion are family variables (Kraemer *et al.*, 2001; Rutter, 1999; Ungar, 2004), with external protective factors being the level of community support such as a positive school, other individuals or organisations that rewards competency and determination so providing motivation and support for the young person (Gilligan, 2004; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). In a similar way to the idea suggested that exposure to multiple risk factors is more damaging than experiencing a single risk factor (Garmezy & Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1979, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992) it is argued that 'the more protective factors that are present in a child's life, the more likely they are to display resilience' (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999: 310).

A cognitive-behavioural approach has been concerned primarily with those personal psychological characteristics which appear to offer an individual resilience, whereas other authors have taken a wider socio-economic approach based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999) together with developmental models which recognise the effects of different stages of child development on individual responses to stress (Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Obradovic, 2006). Depending on perspective and practice orientation, interventions such as EAL/T and TH claim to provide responses and processes which seek to address both internal and external factors, working within developmental models, life course approaches, and through building skill base and community factors (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010).

### **Developmental, life-span and ecological models**

A development model explores how vulnerability to stress and risk can vary depending on different life stages and how the interactions between age, gender and culture are important in an understanding of development and resilience (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Haggerty *et al.*, 1996; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). As all the participants in the current study were adolescents (apart from Lucy at

the time of the study but had been attending The Yard since her teens) I concentrate on looking at this stage of development on factors which may be of relevance, and in how participating in TH may assist in building resilience for this age and risk group.

Interest in adolescent development has a long history and experienced rapid growth in recent times influenced by research asserting that adolescent morbidity rates have increased in recent decades in contrast to a decline in morbidity rates for most other age groups (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995). Alongside this statistic is concern for adolescents for a host of other reasons amid alarmist claims about increased rates of depression, offending behaviour, unplanned pregnancy and substance abuse etc (Born, Chevalier, & Humblet, 1997; Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Haggerty *et al.*, 1996; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). The literature on adolescent development is of importance in the context of this study as the majority of the young people who attended The Yard experienced higher risks than their peers with the possible additional negative psychosocial consequences and outcomes (Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Jackson & Simon, 2005). It puts in context how much these young people have to contend with in addition to the normal process of adolescence, and of the importance of providing opportunities to participate in interventions concerned with building resilience such as EAL/T for these groups of excluded and at-risk young people.

### **Gender differences**

Much of the literature has concerned itself with gender differences in relation to risk and resilience and with developmental stages and emotional and behavioural problems. For example it is suggested that girls are more likely to experience ‘internalizing disorders’ and boys display ‘externalizing disorders’ and that both genders show increased ‘maladaptive coping strategies and externalizing problems’ as they reach adolescence (Hampel & Petermann, 2006: 409). Masten, Best and Garmezy propose that,

resilience is related to sex and to development. The vulnerabilities and advantages of one sex over the other may shift with developmentally related changes in cognition, emotion and the social environment. They also may vary with the cultural context (1990: 438).

Biological explanations include exploration of the link between hormonal changes and behaviours and risk (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995). However, interest in the perceived



increasingly aggressive and anti-social behaviour of boys reaching adolescence, largely accepted to be influenced by an increase in testosterone during puberty, can also be understood in cultural terms of Western norms and values. There are expectations and demands placed on boys to be 'masculine', of controlling emotions by not crying ('big boys don't cry') and being more assertive than girls for example (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Compas & Hammen, 1996; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Werner & Smith, 1992). Whilst psychoanalytic theory would look at the psychological impact of these conflicting messages (Erikson, 1995; Klein, 1975), Moffitt suggests that 'adolescent delinquency is common and prevalent for boys and may even be described as normative and adjustive in that it serves a developmental function by expressing autonomy' (1993: 274). Other authors have proposed that differences can be traced to pre-birth influences, with risk factors being greater for boys due to their higher rates of pregnancy and birth complications. A result of this is that these babies may be 'more irritable' with the possible consequence of difficult mother-baby attachments and relationships and the impact of this on later emotional and behavioural problems (Werner, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1992). Werner suggests that qualities which promote resilience are identifiable at an early age, with the resilient adults having been described in infancy as 'good natured' and 'affectionate' and 'having fewer eating and sleeping habits that were distressing to their parents than did the infants who later developed serious learning or behaviour problems' (1993: 504). There are obviously a multitude of proposals put forward as to why gender differences exist, but it was the case that most of the young people referred to The Yard by the foster care agency and the youth offending team were boys. For this study, however, it was an anomaly that the majority of participants were girls, with possible reasons for this discussed in more detail in the methods chapter in the section about the participants.

In their study with young offenders, Born, Chevalier and Humblet found clear differences between genders, after accounting for statistical difference, stating that 'girls are much more resilient to boys' in having favourable outcomes from incarceration (1997: 685). Unfortunately they do not enter into any discussion on the reasons for the gender differences, concentrating on a generic suggestion that the important factors in resilience for this study group were personal, individual factors such as self-image, attachment to positive others and feelings of guilt, influenced by family environment. Compas, Hinden and Gerhardt (1995) do engage with the literature on gender disparities, suggesting that there are biological factors at play in links between hormones, mood and behaviour and problems such as depression and aggression.

However, reviewing a study which found that girls whose mothers were ill experienced higher levels of stress and depression than their male counterparts, they conclude that environmental, social and cultural factors are also important, explaining this higher level of stress on the increased responsibilities and duties demanded on girls due to their gender (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995). In their influential life-span study on the Hawaiian Island of Kauai, Werner & Smith (1992) suggest that protective factors differ for male and female, with internal factors such as self-esteem and cognitive skills having a greater impact on positive outcomes for females, and outside influences of support being more important for males. The authors go on to propose that different variables take on different levels of importance during the various stages of development, suggesting that individual factors such as temperament and health are the most important factors in early childhood, in middle childhood ecological variables such as family constitution are crucial and in adolescence it is peer relationships and interpersonal factors such as self-esteem which have most impact on successful developmental outcomes (Werner & Smith, 1992; Werner, 1993).

### **Adolescence and risk**

In addition to interest in gender differences, the research literature notes that adolescence is a critical stage for all young people, regardless of sex, bringing with it hormonal changes together with increasing independence, the possible risk-taking activities associated with this, and the growing importance of relationships with peer groups (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Erikson, 1995; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Jackson, Born, & Jacob, 1997). For at-risk young people, adolescence can therefore bring with it increased hazards as they may not be equipped with the protective factors of their peers. High identification with a significant peer group is proposed to be one of the protective factors in adolescence and it is proposed that,

High identification leads to greater emotional and informative support from the group, whilst low identification is associated with a more marginal status. The latter group tends to have lower levels of self-esteem and cope less effectively (Jackson, Born, & Jacob, 1997: 611).

Many of the at-risk young people who attended The Yard had experienced multiple foster care placements, changes of school, and school exclusions, which, together with the other negative

experiences of their childhoods, had resulted in them often being unable to build successful relationships with family and peer groups. They were, therefore, perhaps at increased risk of being unable to develop the 'high identification' with peer groups which is suggested as being important. In addition to peer group identification much of the literature acknowledges that, in the absence of a secure attachment to a loving parent, the next best thing is for the young person to have a 'scaffolding' or network of other positive supportive relationships within the community (Gilligan, 2004). I will go on to explore how community support interventions including EAL/T and TH are relevant in the context of building resilience and protective factors for at-risk young people later in this chapter.

### **Neurobiology of stress and development theories**

Other authors take a neurobiological approach to risk and resilience, framed within a child development perspective and aligned to flight, fight or freeze theories (Bracha, Ralston, & Matsukawa, 2004; Cannon, 1929; Gray, 1988). This approach looks at the effect of stress on the neural system and how this can impact on later life responses to stressful events. At a very basic level, when the body anticipates threat, hormones, including adrenalin and cortisol, are released which trigger the individual to react (Seyle, 1950). The individual's decision to fight, flight or freeze from the perceived threat is influenced by a number of developmental and psychosocial factors, but, in the case of a vulnerable child, the freeze, or dissociation response, would often seem to be their main option (Bannister, 1998; Lyons-Ruth, 2003), although increased aggression in other environments can be a consequence (Lyons-Ruth, 2003; Price & Glad, 2003). In addition, it is argued that prolonged exposure to stressful and traumatic events during childhood can impact on emotional and cognitive development due to the negative consequences of long-term raised hormone levels on neural pathways (Gerhardt, 2004; Gunnar *et al.*, 2006; Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007).

Proponents of a neurobiological approach argue that it can explain differences in why some individuals respond to development and social learning based interventions where others fail to do so; 'psychosocial models often fall short of fully explicating why some individuals respond and others do not' (Gunner *et al.*, 2006: 653). A danger in relying solely on a neurobiological model, however, is that it cannot offer the wider perspective that a psychosocial approach can, of the larger environmental and structural factors involved. Furthermore, this model can place an emphasis on traditional parenting and attachment models which may be

influenced by cultural and socio-economic factors (Hollway, 2008). Another criticism of a neurobiological approach is of how effective a model based on studies carried out on rodents and primates can be when translated to human experience, as acknowledged by Gunnar *et al.*, ‘Species differences and variations in the nature of adverse early experiences studied in animals and humans preclude direct translation of the animal studies to the human case’ (2006: 672).

There has been recent renewal of interest in a possible link between abusive and violent parenting on the neurobiological pathways of abused children following high profile cases in the media. Cases such as ‘Baby P’ and other similar recent cases have been seized upon by the popular press (Foster, 2009; Garner, 2009). In addition key figures, such as Martin Narey, the director of Barnardo’s, have called for more at-risk babies to be removed from ‘broken families’ before the damage to these children is ‘too great to repair’ (McVeigh, 2009). These arguments draw on studies from neuroscience and biochemistry to claim that the limbic system and brain patterns of abused and neglected children have been formed in response to cruel and violent treatment and, consequently, they have not been able to develop traits such as empathy and kindness (Foster, 2009; Garner, 2009). In addition, learned behaviour theories suggest that children learn to inflict the violence that has been done to them onto others (Garner, 2009). Clearly these are emotive and political issues; a socio-economic response would argue that concentrating on neurobiology and blaming individual parents and children avoids the bigger issues of societal inequality and the consequences of prolonged poverty and hopelessness (Hoggett, 2008; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

### **Cognitive-behavioural approach**

A cognitive-behavioural approach to resilience and coping draws heavily on a long western philosophical tradition of, ‘the idea that how a person *construes* an event shapes the emotional and behavioural response’ to it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 24). The work by Lazarus (1966) introduced the concept of how the individual’s appraisal of a stressful situation was an important factor in how s/he responded to threat. An interpretivist perspective similarly follows the standpoint that how something is perceived by an individual is always subjective and ‘should be considered in terms of their significance to the individual’ (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 25). The cognitive-behavioural model (CBT) of therapy emerged alongside this perspective (Beck, 1976; Beck *et al.*, 1979; Ellis & Greiger, 1977) although it is not without its critics who argue that it is due to its emphasis on short-term or ‘quick fix’ treatment, that it is has become popular

politically due to it being cheaper to administer than longer term psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic approaches (Hoggett, 2008). Cognitive-behavioural approaches to resilience have subsequently concentrated on interventions that are concerned with assisting individuals to find internal resources to modify their behaviour in order to react in a more positive or productive way in the face of adverse external stimuli. It is suggested that certain characteristics may help provide resilience or protection from risk. These include self-efficacy and a sense of mastery, self esteem, learned resourcefulness/problem solving skills, constructive/positive thinking, social competence and a sense of purpose and future, although the contexts and environments in which they are located are recognised as inter-related factors (Born, Chevalier, & Humblet, 1997; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Lazarus, 1993; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985).

If a culture of helplessness and hopelessness with no sense of future is considered to be one risk factor to successful development, it is therefore argued that acquiring a sense of mastery and feeling of having some control over one's destiny can promote resilience (Bandura, 1982; Cicchetti & Rogosch 1997; Katz, 1997; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Many of the at-risk young people who attended The Yard experienced social exclusion and powerlessness of one form or another. This could be by being excluded from school, or as a consequence of moving between numerous foster placements and therefore being out of the school system. In addition, many displayed emotional and/or behavioural difficulties due to their traumatic pasts. Together these factors could result in difficulty in forming positive relationships with further exclusion a consequence. One result is that many of these young people get left behind in comparison with the developmental and educational milestones of their peers, with all the additional stigmas and effect on self-esteem and confidence this causes. Another is lack of opportunity, with the consequent limitation on horizons and sense of future: only 6% of care leavers achieve 5 or more GCSE's at grade C and above, compared to 53% of all children, and only 5% enter higher education (Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Jackson & Simon, 2005). A sense of success and achievement and developing a talent in something important for the individual is suggested to be important for successful child development (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995; Carns, Carns, & Holland, 2001; Ellis, Braff, & Hutchinson, 2001; Katz, 1997). It is therefore especially important for an at-risk young person who may have only felt failure, limited opportunities and negative experiences to have the opportunity to participate in activities which help develop their strengths

and lead to positive successes, a growth in self-confidence and self-esteem and mastery. This activity could then be considered a protective factor as,

Self-efficacy increases as a result of mastery experiences; in turn, feelings of self-efficacy increase the likelihood of instrumental behaviour. Resilient children may enter a situation more prepared for effective action by virtue of their self-confidence (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990: 431).

### **‘Acts of helpfulness’**

A further proposed element of self-efficacy is the concept of ‘required acts of helpfulness’ or ‘required helpfulness’ (Katz, 1997; Howard, Dryden, and Johnson, 1999; Werner, 1993). It is suggested that having an area of responsibility which involves caring for something or someone who is dependent on, and benefits in some way from, that care, *including animals*, can lead to a growth in self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gilligan, 1999; Myers, 2007; Werner, 1993). Acts of helpfulness can lead to the individual learning that they can effect positive change and have something valuable to offer (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Katz, 1997; Werner, 1993). In relation to the current study the themes of self-esteem, sense of mastery and self-efficacy would seem to be relevant, in terms of many of the young people who participated in TH reporting feelings of achievement from overcoming challenges, learning a new skill and increased confidence. These were also reported by the adults in the young people’s lives who were interviewed. Additionally there are the acts of ‘required helpfulness’ benefits gained from the caring and responsibility involved in looking after horses.

To date, most interventions aimed at promoting resilience for young people within a behavioural model have concentrated on providing services within the school and statutory health and social care sectors based on modification techniques. These interventions have looked at providing ‘preventative packages’ such as behaviour management and counselling services, policies to legislate parental responsibility for their children both in and out of school, life-skills programmes and other interventions aimed at changing behaviours and teaching skills which may promote resilience (Place *et al.*, 2002; Rutter, 1999; The Consortium on the School-based Promotion of Social Competence, 1996). However, this approach has been heavily criticised for failing to take into account cultural differences and values and from operating from a model which sees the children and families as deficient in some way;

students labelled by schools as vulnerable or at-risk are often those whose appearance, language, culture, values, home communities, and family structures do not match those of the dominant culture (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999: 308).

In addition it may be the case that what is considered a risk factor in one environment or cultural context such as aggressive or, alternately, very passive behaviour may be a necessary survival strategy in another (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; The Consortium on the School-based Promotion of Social Competence, 1996). Rutter warns against a tendency to attempt to draw universal conclusions about what constitutes resilience as, 'resilience does not constitute an individual trait or characteristic' arguing that the focus of research should be on protective processes rather than protective factors (1999: 135).

It was understood by The Yard that the young people referred were located within a larger socioeconomic system that labelled them deficient in certain ways. Whilst structural, ideological, criticisms could be levied at The Yard because TH is an intervention that operates within a psychotherapeutic and learning context, as opposed to seeking to challenge the socioeconomic and political system, it was hoped that by working within a 'dynamic state' model and concentrating on the young people's strengths within a person-centred approach, that young people could have the opportunity to learn ways to build resilience and obtain protective factors. In turn, it was hoped that this would enable them to make more positive life choices which would be helpful for them within their own personal circumstances. In addition The Yard sought to open up the 'positive opportunities' suggested by Rutter (1999) that can be provided by community interventions into which EAL/T and TH fall, and which I will now go on to describe.

### **Community protective factors and EAL/T**

Whilst it has been seen that there is a comprehensive body of research interested in exploring the particular personal characteristics, family relationships and social conditions that foster resilience in children and young people, there is less on what are sometimes defined as community factors (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). These include community-based interventions also referred to as therapeutic recreation programmes and adventure or challenge courses/therapy (Berman & Davies-Burman, 1995; Carns, Carns, & Holland; 2001; Ewert, McCormick, & Voight, 2001; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Voight, 1988). Despite the relative lack of evidence many authors argue that community support interventions are valid and important factors in promoting

resilience and can be the most effective, as other protective factors, such as family dynamics and personal characteristics, may be more difficult to influence and change (Gilligan, 1999, 2004; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). Rutter talks of the importance of alternative positive experiences for at-risk young people stating that research has shown ‘the substantial benefits that may come from turning point experiences in early adult life that provide a discontinuity with the past and *open up new opportunities*’ (1999: 136 author’s own emphasis). It will be seen in Kelly’s last day on p114 how at a time of powerlessness and displacement The Yard gave her the opportunity to re-author herself due to having new future possibilities opened up.

Traditional community-based interventions include participation in after-school centres and clubs, together with some of the alternative therapeutic interventions and outdoor adventure courses outlined above, largely initiated in the USA. As was seen in the previous chapter the recent growth in research exploring the link between health and the natural environment (Louv, 2008; Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Wells, 2000) has resulted in it being considered at policy level that outdoor play and experiences are important for both children and adults, with a subsequent growth in gardening, forest, and nature projects (Munoz, 2009; O’Brien & Murray, 2005; Sustainable Development Commission, 2008). It is claimed that effective community-based interventions can incorporate many of the protective factors raised in the literature as being necessary for successful development and building resilience. These include increasing self-esteem and the self-confidence gained from learning and mastering challenging new skills, together with improving communication and peer and social skills (Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Place *et al.*, 2002; Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). In addition, these interventions can act as a further protective mechanism by providing an alternative to high-risk peer groups and environments (Rutter, 1985, 1999) and the additional physical and mental health benefits of participating in outdoor activities that can be achieved (Carns, Carns, & Holland, 2001; Halliwell, 2005; MIND, 2007; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). Moote & Woodarski (1997) suggest that creative therapeutic interventions may be particularly appropriate and useful during adolescence as this can be a critical time for at-risk young people who may be drawn to unhealthy and risk-taking behaviours and activities.

Community interventions can also provide the opportunity for the at-risk young person to develop the successful and positive relationships necessary for successful development. It is suggested that it is important for children to have warm and non-critical relationships and to be



unconditionally accepted in order to develop the sense of self-worth which leads to self-esteem and a positive sense of self (Bowlby, 1984; Karen, 1998; Winnicott, 1965). For young people lacking a positive attachment to a parent it may be that, 'Other adults outside the family may also be very important, for instance teachers, neighbours and mentors' (Gilligan, 2004: 95). Gilligan goes on to add that it is important that these relationships are meaningful and that a 'therapeutic alliance' is formed (Gilligan, 2004). From a relationship of 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1951) it is hoped that the young person can gain the confidence and motivation to try new, perhaps challenging, activities, leading to new skills and competencies which can lead to a growth in self-esteem.

EAL/T, together with the TH practiced at The Yard, fit into the categories of therapeutic and recreational activities mentioned previously and, whilst the evidence base is still limited, initial findings support similar benefits and outcomes as those outlined above (Bowers & Macdonald, 2001; Burgon, 2003; Cawley, Cawley, & Retter, 1994; Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Kaiser *et al.*, 2006; Lentini & Knox, 2009; Vidrine, Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). In the current study the themes that emerged of increased self-confidence, challenge, empathy and self-efficacy are argued to help to provide participants with some of the protective factors necessary to increase resilience.

### **Criticisms of resilience theory**

It would appear that how an individual appraises and subsequently copes with a stressful situation depends on a whole host of individual, biological, cultural, environmental and socio-economic factors, with a corresponding wide range of research perspectives involved. As has emerged from the literature, it is generally accepted, across perspectives, that there is a relationship between childhood stresses and later life risk factors such as mental health problems and risky behaviour such as drug and alcohol abuse and offending. Young people suffering disadvantage, such as those attending The Yard, have been labelled 'at-risk' within the literature and statutory services. A criticism of this approach, stemming as it does from a medical/biological model, is that it sees the individual as the problem, with their behaviour as defective and in need of changing.

Behaviour is measured against a 'normative' model with the implied assumption that 'normal' behaviour is desirable (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Laing, 1968; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Ungar, 2004). Illich, talking of health in its widest sense, states that culturally we have created a 'vision of health as normality and of sickness as deviance from a theoretical norm'

(1975: 89). A cognitive-behavioural approach therefore concentrates on interventions to change the person rather than looking at the structural, political and socio-economic processes behind these behaviours, whereas it is argued that a more critical perspective is required which engages with the bigger issues of inequalities in society (Bourdieu, 1999; Dominelli, 1997; Fook, 2002a; Hoggett, 2008; Illich, 1975). It could be argued that stress and subsequent emotional behavioural difficulties are a 'normal' response to the lie of the 'American Dream' of Western ideology and 'the mistaken view that any and all could succeed were they to work hard' (Haggerty *et al.*, 1996: 13).

Hoggett (2008) following Bourdieu (1999) talks of 'social suffering', referring to the pain, anger and despair brought about by chronic poverty and hopelessness and how this results in these emotions becoming either internalised leading to depression, alcoholism, addictive behaviours etc, or externalised as violence against self or others. He also questions how the 'actual subjective experiences and lived lives of those concerned' are lost in the largely quantitative resilience research literature which concentrates on indicators of risk such as social class, gender, ethnicity etc, and therefore merely perpetuates positivist norms of devaluing individual experiences (Hoggett, 2008: 80). In order to counter some of the connotations of resilience being an internal personality trait and acknowledge that it is a dynamic state operating within larger contexts, Luther, Cicchetti and Becker caution against referring to 'resiliency' in favour of always employing the term 'resilient' in the literature (2000).

As previously acknowledged, the practice of The Yard, and EAL/T in general, is open to the criticisms above, of working within a deficient model and of being concerned with changing behaviour. Despite commitments to anti-oppressive and person-centred practice it is impossible to deny or avoid the power relations involved, especially highlighted when working with young vulnerable people, who are already doubly oppressed (Alderson, 2000; Christensen & James, 2000; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Robinson & Kellett, 2004). Rather than avoid these issues The Yard chose to work within a relational, person-centred model which sees the person as 'inherently good' (Maslow, 1968; Mears & Thorne, 2000; Rogers, 1951, 1980) and strove to create a 'safe space' where the young person could explore their issues at their own pace (Axline, 1971; Winnicott, 1965).

A psychosocial perspective would see that a combination of biological, sociological and

psychological factors are equally relevant in a study of stress and risk and resilience as summed up by Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck who state that,

the development of coping cannot be understood without considering the multiple physiological, emotional, behavioural, attentional, and interpersonal processes that give rise to it and the larger social ecological contexts within which it unfolds (2007: 137).

Framing the ‘at-risk’ young people who attended The Yard within the larger structural context of their lives, this thesis looks at how their experiences of participating in therapeutic horsemanship appeared to provide some of the aspects related to resilience and protective factors. These themes are presented throughout the empirical chapters, but especially in chapters 5 and 6 which explore themes related to self-confidence, self-esteem, opening of ‘positive opportunities’ development of empathy and attachment and trust. In the next section I now go on to give a brief overview of the literature concerned with attachment theory as relevant to the current study.

### **Attachment and Trust: Horses and Relationship**

According to Green and Goldwyn, attachment theory ‘is one of the most influential theories in relation to children’s social development’ (2002: 835). Certainly, within the ‘at-risk’ population of young people who attended The Yard, ‘attachment issues’ were often referred to in relation to their case histories and in their assessment forms, perhaps not unsurprisingly considering their fragmented, traumatic, and insecure backgrounds. In the field of EAL/T, attachment theory is suggested as a theoretical framework by numerous authors who argue that the horse can provide some of the elements necessary for building positive attachments and relationships where these were previously missing (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Gammage, 2008; Karol, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Meinersmann, Bradberry, & Bright Roberts, 2008; Moreau, 2001; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002).

#### **Attachment theory**

Attachment theory has as its foundation the premise that a healthy secure attachment to a ‘warm, sensitive, responsive and dependable’ parent or caregiver in childhood is necessary in order to grow into a healthy and successful adult (Karen, 1998: 6). Conversely, experiencing inconsistent

parenting, abuse and 'maternal deprivation', as experienced by many of the participants at The Yard, can lead to 'disorganised attachment' and pathology in later life (Boris & Zeanah, 1999; Bowlby, 1984; Crittenden, 1988; Howe, 2005; Hughes, 2004). In his later work Bowlby updated his theories to include his work on 'developmental pathways', suggesting that we are a product of both nature and nurture with infants being born with innate characteristics which are then either negatively or positively influenced by their environment (Bowlby, 1988). He proposed that,

Children who have parents who are sensitive and responsive are enabled to develop along a healthy pathway. Those who have insensitive, unresponsive, neglectful, or rejecting parents are likely to develop a deviant pathway which is in some degree incompatible with mental health... (Bowlby, 1988: 136).

In the late 1930s Bowlby was at odds with the prominent childhood theories of his time which proposed that a child's behaviour was either predominantly genetically programmed, or, conversely, that children were entirely a product of their environment. Practical approaches to child rearing were generally based on not showing too much affection and installing discipline (Karen, 1998). Within the psychoanalytic tradition of the time, dominated by Freudian and Kleinian theories, the emphasis was very much on the internal world of the infant (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby, together with his colleague Mary Ainsworth, added a further perspective; that what was most important was that children received both love and a 'secure base' in order to thrive (Bowlby, 1984, 1988).

Drawing on ethology, psychoanalysis and psychological behavioural theories, Bowlby's early work focused on the distressing effect of maternal separation of the child from his/her mother. He proposed that psychological attachment to his/her mother is a 'primary motivational system' in its own right as opposed to the Freudian and Kleinian theories of the time which postulated that attachment between mother and infant was based on survival instinct (Bowlby, 1984). The Strange Situation Experiment by Ainsworth sought to give an empirical base to Bowlby's theories, looking at the effects of secure and insecure attachments by noting the reactions and behaviours of year old babies on their mother's absence and return (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). The research identified three types of attachment; secure attachment, insecure attachment and nonattachment. Insecure attachment was subdivided into three further categories of anxious resistant or ambivalent attachment, anxious avoidant attachment and disorganised

attachment. In a nutshell, the research proposed that securely attached babies will show some distress at their mother's departure but will allow themselves to engage with another carer until their mother's return, at which they greet her with a desire for contact and will allow themselves to be comforted by her. In insecurely attached babies the behaviour varies from clingy behaviour to higher levels of distress on his/her mother's absence and return. Contradictory behaviour may also be displayed such as rejecting his/her mother and other dysfunctional behaviours ranging from detachment to stereotypical actions such as head banging and rocking (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

### **The holding environment and EAL/T**

A colleague of Bowlby, Winnicott introduced the concept of the 'holding environment' which has many parallels with attachment theory, suggesting that the defenceless infant needs to be given a secure holding base in which to be psychologically able to cope with developing a secure sense of self in the world (Winnicott, 1965). By not having their needs met or experiencing abusive, inconsistent care, Winnicott proposed that the child learns to develop coping or defence strategies in an attempt to manage their survival. This then can become the foundation for the later development of psychopathology (Winnicott 1965). Similarly, from an Object Relations perspective, the failure on the part of the environment to successfully attune to the needs of the infant can create the development of maladaptive behaviours and a 'protective false self' (Frame, 2006; Parish-Plass, 2008).

Winnicott's holding environment has three primary aspects which are holding, handling and object-presenting. Elements of all three are proposed as being relevant in EAL/T (Brooks, 2006; Frame, 2006; Karol, 2007). Only through meeting the necessary physical and psychological needs of the defenceless infant by 'good enough' mothering can the child find his or her 'true self' (Winnicott, 1965). It is understood in client-centred and psychodynamic therapy that it is through relationships that we can understand who we are, expressed by Winnicott as 'when I look, I am seen, therefore I exist' (1971: 134). Object presentation describes the manner in which the world is introduced to the child by its mother. Through being sensitive and attuned to the infant and encouraging him/her to discover things for him or herself within a supportive and loving relationship, the child is able to gain confidence and trust in him/herself and the environment, and consequently gain trust in their own capacity to have their needs met (Winnicott, 1971). Many of the young people who attended The Yard displayed a chronic lack of

self-esteem, confidence and difficulty in relationships, and it could be argued that these may be partly attributed to not having received these early positive experiences. It has been suggested that through EAL/T horses can become the symbolic mother in which the young person reworks earlier childhood experiences that may lead to finding what Winnicott (1965) terms one's 'true self' (Frame, 2006; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Some of the ways in which it is suggested that horses can help meet some of the three aspects of the holding environment are through the horse enabling the young person to be able to build a healthy attachment and relationship and trust with a living animal. Where previously physical touch with adults may have been unhealthy and/or conditional, through riding on and having physical contact with the horse, real and metaphorical aspects of being 'held' and being handled are met in a healthy way (Brooks, 2006; Gammage, 2008; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Yorke, Adams, & Cody, 2008). Frank & Frank make the point that most Western psychotherapies avoid bodily contact and touch due to fear of it being perceived as 'either erotic or aggressive' (1991: 130). A theory proposed is that the weight and size ratio between a child and horse is very similar to that of a baby and its mother and that this perhaps has significance for 'symbolic mother' and 'holding' theories (Winnicott, 1965) which include the importance of healthy touch (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002).

Talking about animals in general, it is suggested that they can 'satisfy needs for physical, emotional, and social contact without the fear of unwanted or threatening involvement with other human beings' (Becker, cited in Walsh, 2009: 472). Additionally, training and working with horses constantly includes elements of 'object presentation' as the horse, which is inherently fearful due to its instinctive prey status, learns not to be afraid of potentially frightening objects in its environment by taking cues from its handler that there is nothing to fear. It could be that by the young person taking on the role of the 'good enough mother' that s/he is giving some of these elements back to him or herself.

In contrast to the traditional psychoanalytic theories of his time which believed that psychological pathology was a consequence of regression to fixed stages of childhood development, Bowlby believed that development was more related to the child's experience of his/her environment. From this perspective the individual could be open to positive change at any stage of life. He believed that therapy could be usefully applied in order to provide similar conditions to the 'secure base' of the mother in order to explore and heal attachment issues. This concept of providing a sense of security to the patient was fundamental to Bowlby; 'unless a therapist can enable his patient to feel some measure of security, therapy cannot even begin'

(Bowlby, 1988: 140). In a similar way to Bowlby's belief that the individual is always potentially open to positive change, Core Process Psychotherapy has the primary belief that the 'true self' wishes to be fundamentally healthy. It is simply obscured by the 'protective false self' through defence mechanisms learnt through traumatic and abusive childhood experiences (Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Rogers, 1967). In order for the therapeutic process to be successful it is understood by client-centred therapists that building a trusting relationship is imperative. This includes the necessity for the therapist to trust in the child's inner capacity to develop and heal (Gammage, 2008). An established principle in psychotherapy is that the strength of attachment between client and therapist, characterized by empathy, acceptance, trust, warmth and collaboration, is the most powerful predictor of positive client outcome (Lambert & Bergin, 1994; Rogers, 1951; Winnicott, 1965; see also Fine, 2000; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). In chapter 7 it is proposed that in some of the encounters between the horses and the young people that the horses provided some of the conditions of the 'secure base', and other aspects argued to be so fundamental in creating a successful therapeutic 'space'.

### **Criticisms of attachment theory**

Bowlby's attachment theory has largely been embraced and accepted into mainstream paediatrics and child development, with his earlier work criticising the routinely established practice of separating babies from their mothers at birth in maternity wards having successfully resulted in this no longer being normal practice (Holmes, 1993). Nevertheless, Bowlby's theories have also been subject to much criticism, initially by Rutter (1972) who questioned the term 'maternal deprivation' as too simplistic to account for all the variables involved in dysfunctional development of children. Later criticism of attachment theory was made by feminist writers who claimed that this emphasis on attachment bonds to the mother risked placing the sole blame on mothers for any dysfunction, rather than the multitude of other influences at play, such as poverty and other socio-cultural factors (Birns, 1999). In addition, understanding the mother-child relationship and nuclear family structure as biologically 'natural' can be employed for political purposes as it suits a modern capitalist society very well for the father to be the main breadwinner and the mother to remain at home child-rearing, taking responsibility off the state and placing it on the family (Chodorow, 1978; Leupnitz, 1988). In terms of the relationship between attachment theory and child protection practice in social work it is suggested that attachment theory needs to

be seen in context of the mother's wider socioeconomic and life circumstances (Krane *et al.*, 2009). These authors argue that therapeutic engagement needs to be put in place to support the mother to overcome adverse circumstances and possible disorganised attachment patterns of her own (Krane *et al.*, 2009). Other writers have suggested that it is the quality of infant care that is most important, rather than just the mother-infant bond, and that this can be carried out just as well within an extended family network, such as practised in many other cultures (Neckoway, Brownlee, & Castellan, 2007). Cleary (1999) makes the point that Bowlby's theories are based on western, empiricist and therefore, male dominated, models of understanding. She argues that his theory 'limits our appreciation of the cultural and ancestral influences that organize psychological life' (Cleary, 1999: 41).

Whilst I acknowledge and have sympathy for these various criticisms and positions, in the context of The Yard's location in the UK where attachment theory emerged, I have employed attachment theory in its widest sense in terms of the young peoples' attachments to the horses as will be explored in chapter 6.

### **Attachment and trust in the context of horses and the therapeutic relationship**

A recurring theme in the course of the fieldwork and interviews with the participants was of the young people talking of how they could trust the horses, and of how important it was for the horses to trust them. As has been discussed previously, being able to trust is fundamental to the therapeutic relationship and in order to trust it is necessary to feel safe (Axline, 1971; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1951, 1980). Participants spoke of how the horses understood them, how they could trust the horses and also of how the horses needed to feel safe. Additionally horses seemed to enable some of the young people who found it difficult to show affection to humans, due to the dysfunctional ways in which they may have experienced affection and physical contact previously, to show affection and empathy towards the horses. They would often hug the horses and talk to them affectionately. A psychotherapeutic interpretation may suggest that beginning to be able to express affection and care towards another is a first step in being able to give it to oneself (Gammage, 2008). It is argued that horses can provide the opportunity to experience a trusting and unconditional relationship together with the healthy tactile element from another living being essential for healthy development (McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). As mentioned earlier, the fact that the body weight ratio between person and horse is suggested as being similar to the body weight ratio between a mother and infant has been



raised as perhaps being significant (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Additionally, the mesmerising rhythm of the horse's gait when being ridden has been cited as perhaps being a contributing factor in encouraging relaxation (Game, 2001) and of 'rhythmic harmonization', a feeling of connection, unity and freedom (Evans & Franklin, 2010). Something that was witnessed time and time again was of the young people relaxing and opening up when on the back of the horse, as will be demonstrated from extracts from interviews and fieldnotes in the following empirical chapters. Feeling safe and calm, with the young people often expressing this as the horses' need to feel calm and safe, was another recurring theme to emerge from the research and its links to nature therapy and the environment has been reviewed in the previous chapter. In the following section I now look at how the theme 'calm' has links to the mindfulness literature.

### **Mindfulness and links to Therapeutic Horsemanship**

Mindfulness in its simplest definition is the practice of being aware and attentive in the present moment (Biegel *et al.*, 2009; Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Interventions employing aspects of mindfulness meditation are claimed to help with a variety of psychological problems (Mason & Hargreaves, 2001) and argued to be especially useful with adolescents (Biegel *et al.*, 2009; Wagner, Rathus, & Miller, 2006). The Western health model of mindfulness now being adopted in some mainstream health services has evolved from ancient meditative traditions with their roots in Buddhism. In the Mental Health Foundation Mindfulness report a description incorporating some of the practices involved in achieving mindfulness states;

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment by using meditation, yoga and breathing techniques. It involves consciously bringing awareness to our thoughts and feelings, without making judgements about them. It is a method for observing what is happening right now, in our bodies, minds and the world around us (Halliwell, 2010: 16).

It is well documented that traditional psychotherapy and counselling practices may not be the most effective or accessible treatment options for many young people, such as the 'at-risk' population who attended The Yard as, 'some adolescents do not view psychotherapy as a beneficial treatment option' (Biegel *et al.*, 2009: 855). In their study with adolescent psychiatric outpatients, the same authors suggest that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques

may be a more appropriate method. Goodman (2005) makes the claim that many of the key concepts and practices of mindfulness are especially relevant to children. She states that ‘children do not communicate the way adults do. Many of their thoughts and feelings are expressed nonverbally, through play and body gestures’ and therefore it is important to employ a therapeutic intervention that is receptive to this (Goodman, 2005: 198). Wagner, Rathus and Miller suggest that mindfulness based exercises ‘that engage multiple sensory systems (e.g., listening, tasting, smelling) or that involve movement’ are especially effective with adolescents (2006: 186). Because mindfulness-based therapy is based on acceptance and ‘few preconceived notions’ together with ‘psychotherapeutic presence’ and the emphasis on being in the present moment, it offers a therapeutic medium which facilitates connecting with children and young people (Goodman, 2005; Wagner, Rathus, & Miller, 2006). In addition it is suggested that being outside in the natural environment facilitates a mindful state naturally as it sharpens awareness (Coleman, 2006). In chapter 8 I introduce a number of examples of how working and interacting with horses embodies many of these same qualities found in mindfulness practice and therapies, especially in relation to those that include movement and other sensory experiences.

Some mindfulness practices, such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) are beginning to show promising empirical results and consequently being introduced into mainstream health services (Baer, 2006; Biegel *et al.*, 2009; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Heppner *et al.*, 2008; Kabat-Zinn *et al.*, 1992; Kuyken *et al.*, 2008; Mason & Hargreaves, 2001; Moss, Waugh, & Barnes, 2008; Zylowska *et al.*, 2008). Whilst these practices are claiming to show ‘how ancient wisdom combined with modern science can improve mental health’ (Andrew McCulloch cited in Halliwell, 2010: 2) they possess a fundamental theoretical difference to our traditional goal driven, results-orientated, Western approaches to health of the mind and body, of trying to fix the problem. This ‘disease-management model’ (March, 2009) sees the problem as the ‘enemy’, a concept not useful in MBSR (which would seem to be the approach most aligned to EAL/T) as it sees that this traps people in patterns of ruminating on problems they are trying to escape. Mindfulness practices believe that trying to escape and/or shut off or fight negative or unwanted thoughts and feelings can actually cause more stress and tension in the body (Germer, 2005). Instead, MBSR techniques use exercises, stretches, mindful walking and yoga in order to encourage calmness. Body scan exercises, such as those employed in the ‘invisible riding’ techniques practiced at The

Yard, focus on bringing awareness to each part of the body in turn, but without judgement. Segal, Williams and Teasdale 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: 110).

This is also described as ‘meditation in motion’, an exercise where participants are directed to walk mindfully keeping a ‘soft gaze’ (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). These authors suggest that walking meditation, ‘can be especially useful to those who feel agitated and unable to settle. The physical sensation of walking, people comment, tends to enable them to feel more ‘grounded’’(2002: 181). Segal, Williams and Teasdale go on to suggest 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’ (2002: 181). In chapter 8 similarities will be drawn to the ‘invisible riding’ exercises practised at The Yard and some of the body-based exercises described in the mindfulness literature where participants who sometimes found it difficult to concentrate and ‘settle’, are directed to bring awareness to their bodies in a relaxed, open way without negative judgement. It will be shown how these exercises could help participants achieve a mindful, relaxed, and effective relationship with the horse. Another interpretation of mindfulness employs the term ‘participant observation’ to describe that it ‘is not detached witnessing. It is experiencing the mind and body *more* intimately’ (Germer, 2005: 9). Shaver *et al.*, (2007) state that one of the common goals of different meditation techniques is to achieve, ‘deep relaxation’ together with ‘alert attention’. By experiencing mindfulness on a regular basis they argue that many other benefits can be achieved, such as the *organismic trusting* and *openness to experience* they refer to as related to Rogerian theories of being essential to the ‘fully functioning person’ (Shaver *et al.*,2007).

A major difference in Mindfulness compared to other therapeutic approaches is that mindfulness is concerned with *being* rather than *doing*. It is not goal-orientated as such, with any benefit being a natural by-product of the practice. It is claimed that by embodying a being mode as opposed to a doing mode new ways of understanding can be gained; ‘being mode is characterized by a sense of freedom, freshness, and unfolding of experience in new ways’ (Segal,

Williams, & Teasdale, 2002: 74). One of the hopes of The Yard was that creating a relaxing, facilitating environment through horses and nature, together with the therapeutic orientation adopted, would lead to relaxation and openness to learning occurring naturally.

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: 269). It will be suggested through extracts in chapter 8 that the horse may act as the ‘stronger and wiser other’ and provide some of these characteristics. Another area within the mindfulness literature which has links with EAL/T is referred to as ‘authentic functioning’. Heppner and Kernis (2007) talk of how mindfulness leads to ‘authentic functioning’ and Brown, Ryan and Creswell state that, ‘mindfully informed action appears less likely to be regulated by ego-concerns, and thus is more likely to represent integrated, *authentic* functioning’ (2007: 218). It is suggested that authentic functioning is where the individual operates true to one’s core self, with an awareness and self-knowledge and with ‘relational orientation’ towards others that includes openness and connectivity (Heppner & Kernis, 2007). The same authors state that their research ‘has shown that mindfulness and authenticity are interrelated’ (Heppner & Kernis, 2007: 249) and that high authenticity is linked with many of the aspects reported as being important to healthy mental functioning such as self-strength, coping ability, low stress rates and positive relationships. They go on to claim that becoming more authentic and mindful can lead to lower rates of aggressive behaviour due to the individual possessing greater ‘secure’ self-esteem, as opposed to ‘fragile’ self-esteem (Heppner & Kernis, 2007; Heppner *et al.*, 2008). A reduction in aggressive behaviour in adolescents with a history of conduct disorder participating in a mindfulness programme was also reported by Zylowska *et al.*, (2008).

The emphasis that mindfulness places on the link between the mind and body has many parallels with EAL/T. In their mindfulness study on adults and adolescents with ADHD, Zylowska *et al.*, describe how the training or technique is experiential in practice and that the participants ‘learn to reduce arousal through breathing and relaxation exercises and to bring an openness and acceptance to their emotional experiences’ (2008: 739). Heppner *et al.*, suggest that ‘aggressive behaviour is one means by which people attempt to restore their damaged self images’ and that ‘social rejection or ostracism often leads to heightened aggressive behaviour’ (Heppner *et al.*, 2008: 487). An example is given on p179 of how a participant’s defence mechanism and further aggressive behaviour was triggered during a TH session through their

behaviour towards the horse. It may be that the comment by Segal, Williams and Teasdale is appropriate in this instance when they suggest that, ‘The MBSR approach allows participants to see how negative thoughts and feelings are often expressed through the body’ (2002: 60). I also go on to suggest that in this TH session there may also have been aspects of the participant experiencing the *experiential freedom* that the authors Shaver *et al.*, (2007) refer to. This is where a person is free to choose their course of action and take responsibility for their choices, together with *organismic trusting* – making decisions based on what feels right (Shaver *et al.*, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

This literature review chapter has sought to provide an overview of some of the psychosocial and therapeutic theories relevant to equine-assisted learning/therapy (EAL/T) and therapeutic horsemanship (TH) which arose from the data, framed within the population of ‘at-risk’ young people who attended The Yard. I have taken a ‘dynamic state’ perspective to understanding the position of these young people perceived ‘at-risk’, both in the immediate sense and from ‘negative life outcomes’, due to their psychosocial circumstances. Links to the literature on risk and resilience, attachment theory and the psychotherapeutic relationship are reviewed. Finally some of the mindfulness literature as relevant to EAL/T and TH is explored. In the next chapter I now go on to present the research methodology, methods and tools I employed to undertake the study.

## Chapter 4

### Research Methods

#### Introduction

The research site, 'The Yard' therapeutic horsemanship centre (TH), employed many of the techniques, philosophies and working practices aligned to the fields of creative, humanistic, gestalt therapies such as play and art therapies that have their roots in psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic traditions. It was important therefore to employ research methods that embraced and incorporated these principles. Being a small scale research project I chose a case study approach aligned with some of the methodologies and methods of reflexive qualitative inquiry research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Finlay & Gough, 2003; Fuller & Petch, 1995) and in particular a psychosocial approach (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) which is, 'guided in some sense by psychoanalytic methods' (Walkerdine, 2008: 343). As I was a practitioner-researcher on the project the site lent itself to the socio-anthropological tradition of employing ethnographic, participant observational, research methods to achieve 'thick descriptions' (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Laird, 1994). Morrow and Richards suggest that these methods may be an especially appropriate model to be adopted for research with (as opposed to 'on') children, as:

[A] social-anthropological approach that allows data to be co-produced by the researcher and researched, rather than being driven by problem-oriented adult questions, may be useful in child research (1996: 101)

In line with this approach my initial hope for the research project was to adopt a participative methodology and research design in line with The Yard's philosophy of employing a child-centred approach to practice. This would have involved the young people participating in the research project from the conception, research questions and design, through the data collection process right up to the analysis and dissemination (Christensen & James, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). However, this approach in the context of the study site with its particular features of working with very marginalised, excluded and transient young people, was found to be a rather naive and over-ambitious expectation, and perhaps raised as many pitfalls as benefits (Renold *et al.*, 2008). The approach was not fully realised and some of the difficulties encountered are covered in more depth throughout this chapter. Questions of ethics were at the

forefront throughout the research project and not just concerned with the consent process (Farrell, 2005; Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Shaw, 2003, 2008). I explore some of the ethical dilemmas and difficulties which were encountered later in this chapter.

## **Research Design & Methodology**

Rejecting a rigid commitment to a single methodology, I embrace suggestions that an inclusive and collaborative framework is desirable, with the concept of 'bricolage' in its employment within research being useful (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Humphries, 1997; Kincheloe, 2001). The French term bricolage has been adopted to signify an interdisciplinary approach to research (Kincheloe, 2001). Indeed this has been argued as being an essential position for social work researchers to take as, 'an inclusive approach to the many different methods is crucial to social work' (Fook, 2002b: 79). A psychosocial research position incorporates elements of this approach, having been described as 'more an attitude, or position towards the subject(s) than just another methodology' (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009: 2). Broadly speaking psychosocial research is interested in both the conscious and unconscious elements that are present in the researched and researcher during the research experience. It employs methods aligned to various psychotherapeutic approaches such as loose, open ended questions, reframing or rephrasing questions using the participants own frames of reference, and looking at issues of projection (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway, 2009).

I am also aligned to interpretivist and phenomenological approaches which are focused upon how people understand and interpret their social environments (May, 2001; Moustakas, 1990). Being a practitioner on the study site I was in the fortunate position of having an in-depth understanding of EAL/T and TH practices and knowledge of the site and participants. It is suggested that 'you can only adequately describe work in a particular occupational setting if you are a competent member' (Travers, 2001: 80). However, the opposite criticism is also levied; of the problems inherent in 'making strange' a social situation in which the researcher is closely familiar. By being so close to a subject or site there is the danger that knowledge becomes 'deadened' and understanding is taken for granted (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). In line with my epistemological values and the philosophical approach and practice of The Yard, a reflexive, heuristic research model located within the psychosocial approach outlined above was chosen (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Finlay & Gough, 2003; Moustakas, 1990). It is suggested that heuristic research is naturally aligned to a client-centred therapeutic approach as both are

concerned with ‘investigation into the nature and meaning of human experience’ within a non-directive, and, primarily optimistic, Rogerian view of human nature (O’Hara, 1986: 174). These approaches lend themselves to seeking ways of exploring, experiencing and describing the multi-layered facets of human experience, with the researcher acknowledged as being an active participant in the research process (Fuller & Petch, 1995; Hertz, 1997; Moustakas, 1990; Riessman, 1994). Within these wide cross-disciplinary qualitative research positions I have located myself, I employ an ethnographic, case study design employing participant observation with detailed fieldnotes and a combination of semi-structured and, latterly, more unstructured, open, field interviews (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; May, 2001).

### **Qualitative research**

Historically, research within the social sciences was based upon a commitment to empiricist principles which believes that knowledge about the social world can be reached through employing objective research methods to uncover people’s meanings and experiences. Early social philosophers and researchers such as Emile Durkheim and Comte (1974 [1830]) believed that the study of society could follow the same principles as those of the natural sciences. Therefore the aim was to produce ‘neutral’ explanations about behaviour through rigorous testing and remaining ‘objective’ in the research process. This could be achieved through (the social scientist) being ‘in the same mind as the physicist, chemist or physiologist when he probes into a still unexplored region of the scientific domain’ (Durkheim, 1964 [1897]: xiv).

An alternative to this positivist epistemology emerged with the work of Weber, who has been influential in the theoretical background to the interpretive approach to research in the social sciences. Weber argued that in order to ‘increase our knowledge of the social world, we must seek to understand it from the points of view of the people we are studying, rather than explaining human action by means of cause and effect’ (Weber, 1949: 14). This approach led to a more qualitative method of social research emerging which was concerned with ‘describing’ cultures and societies and looking at the way people construct and interpret their worlds (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). McLeod’s definition of what qualitative research seeks to achieve is, ‘the primary aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed’ (2001: 2). Qualitative research is considered an approach well suited for conducting research with small populations, such as the current study. Within recent years the



field of qualitative research has expanded considerably to include critical, feminist and post-modern approaches, which question established principles and ways of seeing the world. As Denzin and Lincoln put it:

Over the past decade, the field of qualitative research has mushroomed in the social sciences...Qualitative research has become an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of epistemological viewpoints, research strategies, and specific techniques for understanding people in their natural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002: x).

Whilst there are many different viewpoints within qualitative research traditions, the general perspective held is that it is interested in exploring and looking at how people interpret their lives and experiences through research with smaller scale projects. This is opposed to the quantitative, positivist, approach that is concerned with the testing of a hypothesis in order to arrive at 'objective' facts about human behaviour in a world that exists independently of our interpretation of it. There is a large body within the qualitative, interpretive, social science field who would argue that, 'facts do not exist independently of the medium through which they are interpreted' (May, 2001: 28). Consequently, a critical social work researcher is mindful that;

The critical qualitative social work researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of these media processes and the circuits of culture. Rather, the social work researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied (Denzin, 2002: 29).

A critical qualitative inquiry approach would therefore argue that social research is political and has political obligations. When it works with those on the margins of society it can take on the role of advocate or even ideology critique (Becker, 1967; Denzin, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Denzin and Lincoln argue further that, 'this project presumes a moral ethic. It demands that interpretive work provide the foundations for social criticism and social action' (2002: ix). Whilst the research project based at The Yard was not an action research project as such, my value base and subsequent methodology chosen were embedded in political and philosophical principles. A commitment to involving the participants in the research as far as possible, and of The Yard valuing child-centred and non-directive practice, was political to the extent that its principles were based on values of co-operation, non-competitiveness, equality and

of the empowerment of individuals. All of which have political dimensions as they challenge the dominant Western, individualistic, hierarchical, capitalist values of our society.

A criticism sometimes levied at the small-scale, in-depth, qualitative research study is that it lacks the ability to provide any meaningful conclusions and apply generalizations of findings. In the field of social work an emphasis on 'evidence-based practice' relying on objective, empirical, medically-based research design has been favoured, although not without criticism (Webb, 2001). However, Payne and Williams (2005) argue that what they call 'moderatum generalizations' are possible and, indeed, inherent in qualitative research. The authors suggest that this can be achieved in part by greater reflection on the research process and 'expressing their more modest claims in clearer terms' (Payne & Williams, 2005: 311).

### **Ethnography**

My research study was a practitioner-researcher ethnography. Ethnography in its simplest definition is the study of the way of life of people, races and cultures and has its roots in traditional anthropology (McCleod, 2001; Silverman, 2005). Atkinson and Hammersley (1998) suggest that it has now become a philosophical paradigm as much as a particular method of research. Similarly to anthropology, ethnography involves the in-depth investigation of a small number of cases or a single case in order to explore the nature of a particular social phenomenon. It requires the researcher to spend a large amount of time immersed in the 'field' (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; McLeod, 2001; Rossman & Rallis, 1998; Silverman, 2005; Travers, 2001). Whilst there are many varying approaches and positions within the ethnographic tradition, from the traditionalist, 'Old Guard' to a more contemporary 'Avant Garde' (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003) ethnography has generally attracted researchers with a humanistic, interpretive approach to research as opposed to more 'positivist' and 'scientific' positions. Nevertheless, these same authors go on to warn against an attempt to categorize ethnography, arguing that, 'ethnographic research has always contained within it a variety of perspectives' (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003: 198). Despite having a long tradition in the social sciences McLeod writes that 'Ethnographic methods have seldom been employed in research in counselling and psychotherapy' (2001: 65). Together with other authors in the therapy field he argues that this is in part due to both practical difficulties and ethical issues of client confidentiality, but also due to the fact that psychotherapy research has been dominated by the methods of inquiry used within the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, based on a medical model approach, and the

evidence-based culture which has emerged in social care (Daniel-McKeigue, 2004; Lowenthal, 2007; McLeod, 2001; Webb, 2001). It was hoped that my research study would provide a small contribution towards the knowledge base of ethnographic study within the broader therapeutic field.

Ethnography has been suggested to be a useful qualitative method to employ for research with children as it enables the researcher to become immersed in their lives and accepted by them (Eder & Corsano, 1999; Emond, 2005). It was therefore an appropriate method in the current study as I hoped to learn about what was important to the young people and how they experienced their time with the horses through their own words, descriptions and interpretations. An interpretive interactionist approach within the ethnographic framework calls further for descriptions which Geertz (1973) calls 'thick descriptions'. Thick descriptions seek to provide observations which go beyond the surface and capture the emotions, voices, feelings and actions of the social situation under observation (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973). Silverman suggests that it is important to think about 'what we can see as well as what we hear', and of, 'expanding fieldnotes beyond immediate observations' (2005: 175). The methods of data collection employed in an ethnographic approach can include any of the following: fieldnotes, transcripts of taped conversations and any other documents or relevant artefacts such as official or personal documents, photographs or video recordings (McLeod, 2001).

In this study I wrote up my fieldnotes after the children and young people had left as it was clearly inappropriate to be writing research notes within the context of a TH session, for which I was employed. This had its drawbacks in that sometimes I would forget things and it was difficult to remember the exact words in an exchange. To help counteract this I would draw on my co-practitioners for clarification, and it had the benefit of not breaking the flow of the 'real' exchanges between myself and the participants which may have been 'false' if there was a notebook between us which could possibly change the dynamic (May, 2001). Where participants attended for a length of time I could revisit certain questions that were raised for me when looking over my fieldnotes after a session for clarification of points I was unsure about, in line with a participative research approach. I give examples of this on p107 and p159.

### **Employing a reflexive stance to the research**

My epistemological position is rooted in structural, critical, and feminist principles within a broad psychosocial framework. In addition I am aware of the relevance of my position in the research process, and so embrace a reflexive methodology of research with young people

(Davies, 1998). A reflexive approach to research incorporates phenomenological principles of understanding: 'what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am' (Moustakas, 1994: 59). *Why* I see something a certain way is influenced by my past experiences and this has influence on the research process. Finlay and Gough suggest that reflexive research 'requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers' social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process' (2003: iv). The authors Gubrien and Holstein go further and state that 'every act of 'seeing' or 'saying' is unavoidably conditioned by cultural, institutional, and interactional contingencies' (1997: vii). Why I chose to do this research, my background, values, perspectives and biases, these all impacted upon how I did the research, what methods I adopted and how I understood the participants' experiences and interpreted the data. Romanyshyn believes that 'A topic chooses the researcher as much as, and perhaps even more than, he or she chooses it' (2007: 112). There were certainly elements of this in the case of this research, with my journey to therapeutic horsemanship having evolved as an organic process eventually leading to the research project, and was not an intentional, planned, career strategy in the traditional sense.

Employing a reflexive approach locates the researcher as central to the research process through all stages of the research from its conception, through the fieldwork and in the analysis and dissemination. A contemporary qualitative research perspective generally acknowledges the researchers presence and influence in research, recognizing that 'people respond differently depending on how they perceive the person asking the questions' (Denscombe, 2003: 169). In addition, a reflexive approach takes a holistic perspective to the process understanding further that it 'permeates every aspect of the research process' and challenges us to become more aware of our own positions and interests (Hertz, 1977: viii). Reflexive researchers understand how 'knowledge is made' and that bringing a reflexive approach to research 'requires us to consider how power is exercised in the knowledge-making processes in which we engage'. Furthermore, 'locating ourselves within these operations of power is seen as an intensely moral action' (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004: 11). Lastly, a reflexive approach to research has alignment to a reflexive social work position, which, it is argued, is necessary for 'emancipatory practice', with its connection to participatory research (Butler, Ford, & Tregaskis, 2007; Finlay & Gough, 2003; Fook, 1996).

Later in this chapter I will discuss some of the implications and difficulties that were raised from taking a reflexive approach to the research, and how this is inseparable from the

analysis, in terms of some of the ethical questions that arose when writing about the research participants.

### **Case studies**

Whilst the other methods I have chosen in this research project are underpinned by theoretical concerns of a political and ideological nature, it is argued that a case study design holds no ideological ground and can be employed equally by quantitative or qualitative researchers: 'Case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied' (Stake, 1998: 86). Case studies may be one single person or a multitude of 'cases', although 'ultimately we may be more interested in a phenomenon or a population of cases than in the particular case' (Stake, 1998: 87).

Silverman suggests that there are three types of case study:

- The intrinsic case study where the case itself is the object of interest and no attempt is made to generalize beyond it or to build any theories.
- The instrumental case study in which the case is examined in order to provide insight into a particular issue.
- The collective case study which is where a number of (preferably) random cases are studied in order to investigate a general phenomenon.

(Silverman, 2005: 127).

Because the population I studied was small, with only seven young people, a case study is the most suitable design as 'the case study, is in many ways, ideally suited to the needs and resources of the small-scale researcher' (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 1996: 66). In addition, as I am interested in providing insight into TH, I chose an instrumental case study with The Yard as the case, rather than the individual participants as in psychotherapy research.

Whilst I employ the term 'case study' to describe the research design of my project I do so with some reluctance, recognizing my discomfort in describing the participants or setting as a 'case' or 'cases' with the connotations this has to medical and scientific research methodologies (Daniel-McKeigue, 2006). This raises issues of knowledge and power suggested by feminists

who argue that conforming with dominant ways of representation reinforces oppression by dominant groups, through conceptualizing, analyzing and explaining marginalized groups' experiences using the dominant group's theoretical and value frameworks (Burman, 2003; D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Humphries, 1997). By choosing to situate The Yard as the case, as opposed to the young people as 'cases', I have attempted to limit some of these accusations although realising that it is impossible to fully overcome all the issues of power imbalances inherent in the research process, and which I explore in some more depth later in this chapter. I now go on describe the research setting, The Yard, the participants and the horses involved in the project.

## **The Yard: The Research Setting and Participants**

### **The Research Setting**

The research site for the PhD study was a therapeutic horsemanship (TH) programme located in the UK that I established whilst working as a social worker for a private foster care company. Foster care companies recruit, assess and train foster carers with whom they then place young people taken into care. These young people are referred to them from local authority (LA) social services departments. The majority of these young people have been removed from their families and taken into LA care due to physical/emotional/sexual abuse and/or neglect. As a result many often display emotional and/or behavioural problems, mental health issues and have labels of conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In 2009 there were 60,900 young people in care in the UK (DCSF, 2009) and these young people suffer disadvantage in many areas, not least in educational achievement as outlined on p47 (Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Jackson & Simon, 2005).

The LA has a duty to assess the needs of these young people and provide them with appropriate services. In many cases this can include therapeutic interventions such as counselling and psychotherapy and/or alternative educational provision. However, many of these young people find it difficult to engage with traditional methods of statutory mental health and educational provision and so alternative ways of reaching and engaging these hard to reach, excluded young people are sometimes employed to try and provide another approach. Outward Bound, adventure courses located in the natural rural environment providing activities such as rock climbing, water sports, rope courses and other outdoor approaches, including 'school green

gyms' and 'forest schools' are some of the interventions employed (BTCV, 2009; Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). Another emerging therapeutic approach to working with these young people is the expanding field of equine-assisted learning/therapy (EAL/T) which incorporates equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), equine-assisted activities (EAA) and the area of this research project, therapeutic horsemanship (TH). Whilst there are both subtle and larger differences in the various approaches, the common feature is that trained professionals employ horses to provide a therapeutic experience in order to bring about positive benefits for people experiencing difficulty of some kind.

The foster care company for whom I initially established the TH programme held a core belief of the value of the rural environment as being beneficial for young people in care (although the disadvantages in rural social work are also noted, see Pugh, 2000). Many of the young people who were referred to the foster care agency were assessed and in receipt of some form of additional intervention but, in many cases, the young people found it difficult to engage with these traditional services. As I have a background, interest and training in the field of EAL/T and, in addition, own horses, when I suggested incorporating TH into their range of service provision, it was therefore a relatively easy, albeit very pioneering, transition for the company to embrace the concept and agree to my establishing a pilot TH programme to offer to some of these young people. Following guidelines set down by the two main emerging organisations seeking to regulate and professionalise the field of EAL/T in the USA, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) and the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA), it was policy for two members to facilitate a session. This consisted of a lead practitioner with a professional care qualification (social worker, teacher, counsellor, therapist), and a horse specialist with relevant experience and/or qualifications. In addition, EAGALA and EFMHA stress the importance of both practitioners to have dual experience and training in both horse management and child and social care issues in order to provide a safe, therapeutic and meaningful environment. The Yard followed this procedure, organising appropriate training as required.

### **The location and setting of The Yard**

The TH programme was located in a peaceful rural location and consisted of a large open barn for the horses, a feed storage barn and a small office/educational area. There were nine horses over the course of the study involved with between four and six horses in the herd at any one

time. The area employed for the TH programme, referred to as 'The Yard' for the purpose of this study, was leased from the owner of the premises and was a self-contained area positioned in a private area on a larger equestrian facility. The whole farm sat on the side of a peaceful river valley leading into a small market town approximately 3 miles away, and comprised of approximately 40 acres surrounded by quiet country lanes, tracks and bridleways ideal for riding and walking.

The yard for the TH programme was an area of compacted hardcore standing containing a largish wooden barn of approx 14 foot in depth by 26ft in length. It was an open barn with a gate which could be left open so that the horses were free to wander in and out at will, or shut in order to contain one or two of them, for example at feeding time or if one was ill or injured. For training and activity purposes there was a round pen and sand riding arena of 20x40m (also called a 'school' or ménage') situated a short distance from The Yard located next to the main barn and stables of the larger farm. Surrounding and sheltering the yard on its north eastern end was a small wood consisting of oak and hazel trees in which a large number of birds lived. Jay, woodpecker, a very inquisitive and territorial robin who had made The Yard his home, and many other small garden birds were constant companions. In the spring and summer months cuckoo and swallows joined the menagerie and a buzzard was often heard with its eerie call before it was seen, gliding high above the fields then swooping like a stone to pluck an unlucky field mouse, or, on occasion a young rabbit, in its talons. In a few TH sessions a young person was privileged with the opportunity to see a resident fox trotting silently across the fields, stopping from time to time to check on its surroundings. On those rare and magical moments we sat down quietly on the hill whilst the young person watched intently, time standing still for a moment, until the fox disappeared from sight into the undergrowth. Very occasionally wild deer were seen, having left the safety of the large woods across the valley in order to search for food; these were rare and savoured moments and remembered for a long time afterwards. One young person asked me several months after the time we had seen a lone deer standing perfectly still, watching us from the safety of its camouflage against the hedge, 'do you remember seeing the deer?'

### *The Bench*

Back in the yard a rustic wooden picnic table and bench had been placed next to the shed cum office from which a lot of the TH sessional activity took place. From here was a wonderful view across the valley and down to the small river at the valley bottom and the woods on the hills



beyond. On a clear day the estuary river mouth to the south could be seen. Many TH sessions were spent merely sitting and relaxing at the bench, which had been chewed upon by the horses and so seen better days. Drinking tea, eating lunch, and watching and commenting on the horses and wildlife was a popular pastime with many of the young people, who would often seem to relax once they realised that there was no pressure on them to do any particular tasks. As the type of horsemanship practised on the TH programme was aligned to 'natural horsemanship' the horses were free to range in and out of the barn, yard and fields and so often wandered over to us at the bench out of natural curiosity or in search of a snack or neck scratch. Having this set up served a number of purposes; it was both a philosophical and practical arrangement.

### **Natural Horsemanship**

During recent years a 'new' method and philosophy to training and horse management has developed (Birke, 2007, 2008; Latimer & Birke, 2009; Rashid, 2004; Roberts, 2000; Widdicombe, 2008) although this method, whilst 'new' in the sense of it becoming more mainstream and having a huge marketing base in the past 10 years or so, is in fact based on principles practised by a number of horse trainers for centuries (Dorrance & Desmond, 2001; Rees, 1984). Natural horsemanship is based upon principles of partnership, kindness and a more 'natural' approach to keeping and training horses, as opposed to the traditional and often violent methods of domination through fear. Instead of being housed individually in separate stables, which is alien to horses who have very strong social bonds, horses kept under a natural horsemanship approach live in groups in fields where they can create a more similar herd structure to that of the wild horse. To offer protection from the weather free range style barns or field shelters are sometimes supplied which the horses can use at liberty. This was the set-up employed at The Yard in the research project.

Employing a natural horsemanship approach has many advantages to the traditional method on a number of levels. On a practical level the time involved in the daily horse management chores can be reduced in many areas, leaving more time for interacting with the horse itself. The time consuming task of mucking out (cleaning) individual stables is reduced if they are housed in barns which can be deep-bedded and then cleared out with a tractor at less regular intervals, in the same way that overwintered cows are housed. At The Yard the horses' barn merely had an earth floor and was left with no bedding which leaves an easier, and naturally

draining, surface for collecting the horse manure than a concrete base. If a horse needed to be contained in the barn due to illness etc, a bed of wood shaving was laid. Another benefit of keeping the horse free range is a reduction in the time involved in ‘turning out’ and ‘bringing in’ the horse from the stable morning and evening, in addition to the other chores involved such as changing rugs over from outdoor to indoor rugs each time.

However, the greatest benefits I have experienced have been to the horses’ general well-being and mental and physical health. Prior to employing a natural horsemanship approach I kept my horses under largely traditional methods due to land constraints and found that they would often get injured and ill and had developed behavioural problems from being kept shut in stables for long periods of time. Since embracing a natural horsemanship approach the same horses became easier to manage and had less health problems. Another beneficial side effect is that the system is financially cheaper.

#### **A good fit: natural horsemanship and philosophy and practice of The Yard**

It was considered that natural horsemanship was a good fit with the therapeutic horsemanship practiced at The Yard for a number of philosophical as well as practical reasons; it was found that the approach offered a number of advantages for providing a therapeutic and educational environment. As mentioned previously, the horses were free to wander around and display natural behaviours and because they lived in established herds they had formed bonds and established their ‘pecking’ order - although this is a contested term (Rees, 2009). This meant that the dangerous behaviours that can be displayed when horses are constantly moved around or introduced to each other, such as kicking, biting and more general unpredictable behaviours were avoided. Additionally, due to them living ‘free range’, they were more relaxed as they did not have the repressed energy which is a consequence of being kept locked in a small space for hours at a time. A natural horsemanship approach understands that being stabled is wholly unnatural for an animal evolved to be constantly moving and eating and can result in unhealthy and dangerous behaviours towards themselves, each other, and humans.

Because of all these factors The Yard was therefore found to be a safe environment in which to introduce young people into the horses’ space and allow them the opportunity to observe and interact with horses at close quarters in their ‘natural’ environment. This seemed to provide a number of benefits, experiences and learning opportunities. The majority of young people participating in TH had experienced abuse, neglect and other deprivation or negative

experiences of some sort, resulting in an understandable difficulty in trusting adults. In order to survive and protect themselves they had therefore had to develop survival and coping strategies (Gammage, 2008). This could manifest in emotional/behaviour problems which could be difficult for themselves and others to manage. It was hoped that by utilising a natural horsemanship approach at The Yard, together with humanistic therapeutic principles of 'unconditional, positive regard' (Rogers, 1951, 1992) and aligned to Gestalt approaches, which take a holistic approach to the mind-body link and incorporate body exercises in therapy (Clarkson, 1999; Mackewn, 1997; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1972), that a positive learning and therapeutic environment could be created on a number of levels. Firstly, The Yard strived to model an environment of trust, partnership and respect towards horses as sentient, emotional beings, which it hoped would provide a positive model for the young people. Secondly, because horses are large, powerful and command respect, but are also curious and playful, and the young people are in *their* space, the young people were immediately engaged and motivated, and also in a different and, sometimes, perhaps slightly, more insecure position than they were used to in their normal environments. The combination of these factors served to engage the young people with the TH practitioners in a way that they may not have in a different, more conventional, environment. In addition, there were found to be similarities in the relationship between horse and young person to the qualities suggested to be important in the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist, which were partly attributed to the style of horse management and approach adopted at The Yard (Chardonens, 2009; Rogers, 1951; Yorke Adams, & Coady, 2008). This is explored in more depth in chapter 7.

### **The participants: the young people**

It was initially hoped that eight young people would participate in the research. Unfortunately it proved impossible to gain signed consent from one of the participants due to his sudden change of foster placements to another part of the country with no warning. Finally, therefore, seven young people who attended The Yard participated in the study. Pseudonyms' were employed for the sake of confidentiality. In terms of gender differences there were five girls and two boys. This was in contrast to the general trend of the gender divide of participants who attended The Yard; it having normally been the case that more boys than girls were referred. Possible reasons for this may be due to the fact that initially The Yard received referrals solely from the foster care agency and more boys are in the care system than girls, with 57% being boys compared to 43% girls

during 2008-2009 (DCSF, 2009). However, at the time of the study The Yard had started to take private referrals and referrals from a number of other agencies and this may have started to change the gender differences.

The longest participants, Minimax and Lucy, came intermittently over the whole 2 year period of the study. The shortest, Kelly, came for just under 6 months before she discovered, during a TH session through a phone call from her social worker, that her residential placement was to be brought to an abrupt end, and she was moved to a new foster placement in another area. This provides an example of the disjointed and chaotic nature of many of these young people's lives in care, and of some of the difficulties involved in maintaining a meaningful therapeutic experience between the participants, horses and practitioners. Generally the young people came for a number of months, generally fortnightly or when their timetables allowed. Their ages ranged between 11 to 16 years old, apart from Lucy who had her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday during the time of the research study. The participants could be understood to be in the 'at-risk' category due to their various psychosocial circumstances. Their referral forms stated various difficulties, ranging from emotional-behavioural and 'anger management' issues, to low self-esteem and difficulties in forming relationships. In line with the child-centred ethos of The Yard, I note my discomfort with the range of labels with which many of these young people found themselves and of the connotations of this (Jones, 2003).

The young people were generally referred from a broad range of sources including statutory agencies such as social services, YOT, a pupil referral unit and a specialist children's home, although two were introduced to The Yard by individual parents. Two of the young people were referred from the foster care agency which initially funded The Yard. A further two young people were referred from a therapeutic residential facility. One young person, Lucy, had been attending The Yard on an informal basis for a number of years due to her love of horses. Her mother told me that she had suffered bullying and exclusion at her previous school. Lucy told me she had a diagnosis of non-verbal learning disability (NVLD) and was assessed as being on the autistic spectrum. She also told me about her physical eye condition which was partially the reason for her being able to 'see in the dark better than in daylight' and to generally be able to relate better with animals than people. Lucy continues to attend helping with the horses on a voluntary basis at the time of writing. Emma was referred jointly by her social worker and adoptive mother just before The Yard had to stop operating sessions in an official capacity due to loss of funding, but then attended privately on a voluntary basis. A number of the participants had

a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) due to difficulties at school, and one saw an educational psychologist. The participant Wayne was referred by a local YOT as part of their mentoring project. He attended together with his mentor, Peter, who also took part in an interview for the research. Another young person who was to be included in the study unfortunately left The Yard before he had signed a consent form. This was disappointing and frustrating as I had gained consent from both his foster carer and social worker and he had given his verbal consent. Unfortunately, despite persistent and prolonged attempts to contact him afterwards, this proved impossible due to his having moved placements, together with a change of foster carer, which was a common feature in the disjointed lives of these excluded young people.

Whilst it would have been ideal within a participatory framework for the participants to have all given their own self-descriptions, the reality was that I only achieved this with two of the young people, Emma and Lucy, and so it was not deemed appropriate to include only their accounts. Reasons for not managing to achieve self-descriptions from the other five participants range from time-pressures in sessions, together with reluctance from the young people to partake in this exercise and was also due to the disjointed and transitory nature of their lives, in that they moved on with little or no notice to The Yard. As I describe in the consent procedure on p82, gaining the young person's trust and finding the appropriate time to approach them and their gatekeepers to discuss the research was a time-consuming and delicate process and was fraught with difficulty and ethical dilemmas at times. Some of the young people were not entirely comfortable talking about themselves and so I did not pursue this exercise with them, leaving it up to them to let me know if they changed their minds. However, at the other end of the spectrum Lucy was very articulate and willing to provide me with a detailed self-description.

### **The participants: the adults**

In order to give a further perspective and depth to the study a number of the adults involved in The Yard were invited to contribute to the research. This was either through formal semi-structured interviews or questionnaires, or both, in addition to informal ethnographic 'field' interviews. The two therapists, Sally and Deana, who practiced at The Yard, gave in depth interviews. Additionally Peter, who was Wayne's mentor from the youth offending team, participated in an interview as did Minimax's carer, Angie, and Emma's adoptive mother Linda.

Further contributions in the form of questionnaires came from other foster carers and the manager from Freya and Kelly's residential home.

### **The horses**

Nine horses in total were resident at The Yard during the course of the research study, although some left and others joined during this time. There were between four and six horses at any one time in the herd. They ranged from an elderly mare, Duchess, who was put down during the course of the fieldwork, to two young, semi-wild, horses. In the middle were the constant herd members consisting of the cob x mare, Ruby, and Jason, an Iberian x gelding. Their temperaments ranged from very placid and steady to more unpredictable and feisty, which provided rich ground for discussion of their various characters with the participants.

### **Therapeutic horsemanship sessions**

Depending on the individual needs of the young person, TH sessions could offer either a straightforward horsemanship approach or a more therapeutic focus facilitated by The Yard's play psychotherapist and counsellor. Alternatively, sessions could incorporate an educational emphasis, such as including quizzes or small projects based around equine subjects. Whilst both time and length of sessions could be flexible (although more often than not were dictated by finances) they were generally set at 2 hours. The normal procedure was for a 1hr assessment session to be followed by a block of 6 sessions which was then reviewed. They could then be ongoing or another block of 6 purchased. In reality it was often the case that the child's circumstances dictated the length of time that they attended, with one young person coming for half-day sessions weekly for 6 months, another three attending on and off for over a year and Lucy and Minimax coming intermittently over the whole 2 yr study period. In some cases young people were referred to attend for the initial 6 sessions but only attended once or twice due to their foster placements breaking down and they moved out of the area.

Children and young people were transported to The Yard either by taxi, their carers or, occasionally, their social worker, who then returned to collect them at the end of the session. Generally only one child participated in a session at a time. This was due to both practical reasons together with the practice orientation of The Yard. The children and young people participating were usually in sole foster placements and often referred due to experiencing difficulties and/or disruption with their education. Practically, trying to organize a number of

children who may be excluded from school at different times, had different school patterns and lived in different geographical locations would obviously be extremely time consuming and impractical. The second reason was from a practice perspective. Many of the young people referred had difficulties in their relationships with peers and one of the goals of the TH sessions could be to initially work 1-1 with the young person with the aim of working towards group sessions at a later time. This was the case with Minimax and the aim was achieved. The exception to this general pattern of sole sessions was the holiday project. This was where foster carers could purchase TH sessions as a holiday activity at a reduced fee subsidized by the foster care company. Because there was not the inhibiting factor of school timetables, small groups of two and three young people could therefore more easily be accommodated on the holiday projects. Two of the young people, Minimax and Cinderella, who attended the holiday project participated in the research, although both were also referred through the formal referral process.

Activities in a TH session ranged from initially spending time with the horses, observing and discussing horse behaviour in the herd, to building up to learning how to work with and handle horses on the ground. During the research study insurance cover was extended to include riding. Therefore if the young person wished to they could participate in an 'invisible riding' session. This is where a young person rode the horse bareback (no saddle) in the round pen (a contained training area) and practised riding with no saddle or reins using the power of intention and body language alone. It was seen to be a very empowering experience for a young person to learn that they could connect with a horse in this very subtle way. Other, ground based, exercises practised were 'join-up' where the young person worked with a horse loose in the round pen, learning how their body language influenced the horse. Through this exercise the young person learnt how to build up a relationship with the horse in order for him/her to follow them around with no lead rope. See p108 for a description of this. For some of the young people who had concentration difficulties and labelled with conditions such as ADHD, aspergers/autistic spectrum and behavioural difficulties, horse-based fun activities such as horse based treasure and scavenger hunts and the popular obstacle course were introduced into sessions. These could be completed either leading or riding a horse, depending on ability, confidence and length of time the young person had been attending. Art activities based around the horse were also popular, either painting old horseshoes which the young people took away with them as a memento, or drawing or painting their favourite horse. An American-Indian tradition I had learnt on an EAL/T training course of decorating the horses with hopes and dreams written onto small notes then

plaited into the horses manes and tails was another activity. Sometimes art sessions would take off in their own direction and art and play therapy techniques could then be incorporated if this was appropriate and practised by a qualified therapist as part of a flexible approach to sessions.

### **The consent process, some ethical issues and power imbalances**

Gaining consent from the young people to participate in the research was a long and convoluted process. In many cases three or four gatekeepers were involved prior to me even seeking to discuss the research with the young people themselves. This could include the foster carer, foster carer's social worker, the child's social worker and then the child's parent if they were on a voluntary care order. Even this process was ethically problematic. How 'participative' was the research if I had already previously contacted the young people's gatekeepers before speaking to them personally? There were additional concerns about issues of 'informed consent' which applied to these young people as they were classed as vulnerable, both by being under the age of 16 and because of their status of being in care or considered 'at-risk' in some way.

The question of gaining consent from children and young people in the area of research is particularly complex and confusing with no formal legal policy or standardised ethical guidelines (Alderson, 2000; Neill, 2005; Williamson *et al.*, 2005). The 1989 Children Act makes no reference to research with children but does state that children under the age of 16 can consent to medical treatment if it is shown that they fully understand the process. It has generally become accepted good practice for parental (or legal guardian) consent to be sought for children and young people for medical treatment and this has been replicated in the BASW (2002) Code for Social Workers (Greig & Taylor, 1999; Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). Within the area of social research researchers have relied on their own research ethics committee's guidelines drawn from the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964. This drew up a standard of international ethics for research including obtaining informed consent from both the child's legal guardian and the child (Greig & Taylor, 1999). There is no official status within social work but Butler's Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research (Butler, 2002) lays down guidelines for obtaining informed consent from research participants and, additionally, their right to decline and withdraw from the research, although the code does not refer specifically to children. The National Children's Bureau has attempted to address this gap, producing a guide to research with young people (2003) which I referred to. Despite these protocols and procedures, Peled and Leichtentritt argue that, 'as a general trend, ethical considerations are marginal' in most of the studies



submitted to the social work journals they examined (2002:145). For this research project ethical considerations were paramount and an ongoing process throughout the study. Initially consent was obtained from the university ethics committee and a child protection policy was in place alongside the other policies and procedures of The Yard. I designed separate information sheets and consent forms for the young people and adults and these were given out in advance in order that the young person could read them together with their carer, parent or social worker in their own time. It was made clear that the young person was free to withdraw from the research at any time with no bearing on their attendance to The Yard (see appendixes A to D for examples of consent and information forms, and appendix E for child protection policy).

Some authors situated within a sociology of childhood framework argue that children have a greater understanding of the research process and of giving informed consent than the dominant view of children would have us believe (Cree, Kay, & Tisdall, 2002; Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). Others suggest that it is useful to take the reflexive approach to research with young people that I chose (Davies, 1998). In the case of this research process I could only hope that by following a child-centred approach that I was able to identify an appropriate time to approach the topic of my research with the young person, and that my social work and counselling training, together with intuition, would allow me to make an informed decision as to their understanding of the process. To attempt to make the process more robust I would, where possible, speak to the young person both individually and together with his/her foster carer or other appropriate adult. This was in order give as much opportunity as possible for the young person to feel able to voice his or her opinion as to whether they wanted to participate and fully understood the process. I did find that the young people would sometimes communicate to me in similar ways to those presented by Davies who states that, 'if the adult researcher oversteps the bounds of what a child believes to be appropriate the child will resist through silence, humour, conflict, or by shutting the gates to their world' (1998: 330). Examples of this are provided by Wayne on p96 and p189.

It was the case with one of the young people who I wished to ask to participate in the research that his social worker would not give me permission to speak to him about it. She stated that he had enough bureaucracy in his life already and further argued 'what would he get out of it anyway?'

## **Pseudonyms**

For the sake of confidentiality and in line with a participative approach, all the young people were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms. However, only 4 of the participants did so as the others unfortunately stopped attending The Yard before having decided their own pseudonym names. I sought to ask the young people's opinions and collaboration on research design, such as questionnaires and interview techniques. This was successful with a number of the participants, such as Lucy who was very articulate and keen to engage with all aspects of the research, but was felt to be intrusive and inappropriate with others, such as Minimax and Wayne who seemed to find being asked questions tiresome and this was respected. Dilemmas such as this posed challenges for me during the entire research process; the blurring of lines between practice and research sometimes seemed muddy. How much the research imposed upon practice and vice versa were questions constantly asked of myself. At times I identified with the sentiments expressed by Rowan who writes about the contradictions and difficulties inherent in the practitioner-researcher role, 'the lot of the practitioner-researcher is generally an unhappy one' (Rowan, 1993: ix). On the other hand there were advantages to being a practitioner-researcher in terms of having already built up relationships with a number of the young people prior to starting the research project so having already 'built rapport' and gained the status of 'insider' (Gubrium & Holstein 1997; Silverman 2005), although I also recognised the ethical dimensions of this in that the young people may have felt more under pressure to agreeing to participate in the research because they already had a relationship with me, than if I was an unknown researcher.

In all of these areas are the unavoidable issues of power imbalances inherent in the child-adult relationship (Robinson & Kellet, 2004). Clearly this is further magnified with young people in the care system who have such little control over their own lives. Mayall writes that, 'we cannot pretend that we do not have power over children' (2000: 52). A fully participative research model would demand that participants are involved in all aspects of the research process from the identification of research questions and research design to analysis and presentation (Alderson, 2001; Emond, 2005; Morrow, 2005; O'Kane, 2000; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). However, this approach also brings with it new challenges and obstacles of a theoretical, ethical and practical nature, based around how far it is possible to involve children and young people throughout the research process and, in particular, in the analysis and dissemination of research. These were questions and practical dilemmas which arose in the course of this research project,

some of which are discussed in the next section where I provide an overview of the tools and instruments I utilised in the data collection procedure of the research.

## **Data Collection Procedures and Instruments**

### **A ‘practice near’, practitioner-researcher, model**

The method I utilised for this research project was as practitioner-researcher within an ethnographic approach. A practitioner-researcher approach has many parallels with participant observation, which, in turn, has its origins in social anthropology. Participant observation became a method incorporated into the social sciences through the Chicago School of social research ‘who encouraged students to study, by observation, the constantly changing social phenomena of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s (May, 2001: 147). According to Hammersley and Atkinson, participant observation in the context of ethnographic research,

involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly, in people’s lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (1995: 1).

Participant observation requires the researcher joining in the activity or lives of the research participants, getting to know them and their world and on their terms. This can mean having to learn new social norms, languages and signs in order to become accepted in this world (Corrigan, 1979; Okely, 1983). The researcher can be a ‘complete participant’, ‘complete observer’ or a ‘participant as observer’ (May, 2001: 155). In the complete participant role the researcher becomes fully immersed with the group or culture that is being researched, perhaps covertly. Laud Humphrey practised this approach, with the obvious ethical implications it raises, in his study on the practices of homosexual men in ‘tearooms’ (May, 2001). However, according to Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006) even when the researcher is overt with their intentions as in the ‘participant as observer role’, the aim is still to be accepted by the research participants in order to be able to obtain a real understanding of the process. They argue that it is necessary for the researcher to achieve ‘Verstehen- an empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of people in their natural settings’ and gain ‘insider status’ so that the research participants will not see questions as prying and obtrusive (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006: 172).

From this perspective it would appear that the intention of the participant observer role is to obtain covert status through overt means, and this raises further questions of an ethical nature when working with vulnerable populations. Clarke and Hoggett write about what they describe as a rarely discussed topic in methodological literature, that of the 'discomfort and guilt that may accompany the collection of data, the feeling of being a 'spy' or 'voyeur'' (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009: 4). As a practitioner at The Yard I had gained the 'insider status' described by Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006). Throughout the research project many questions were raised for me concerning my role of practitioner-researcher and the ethics of 'practice-near' research, where the young people may have easily forgotten my role of researcher in the course of being a practitioner in a TH session. To attempt to counteract this I would frequently refer to my research and phrase questions to include reference to it, such as 'I wonder if you have anything you could add to xxxx that you think may be useful or relevant to my research'. However, many insights and conversations around the horses would evolve naturally and spontaneously in the course of a TH session leaving me without the opportunity to raise my research, and indeed, this would have lost the spontaneity altogether. My position therefore would swing between practitioner and researcher at different times, and was, of course, always subject to issues of power imbalance with the young people due to my position as adult, as practitioner and, in addition, as researcher. Compounding these problems were the further dimensions of issues of power and control inherent in the field of psychotherapy to which The Yard was aligned. Whilst The Yard sought to practice a non-directive, child centred model which attempted to overcome some of these issues by allowing the child to dictate the direction and pace of the content of TH sessions (within certain safety parameters) nevertheless it is argued that 'counselling and psychotherapy exist at the intersection of liberation and social control' (McLeod, 2001: 18). McLeod suggests this is on two levels; firstly, due to the intensity of the client-therapist relationship there is the potential for manipulation and control, and, secondly, external state and commercial forces put pressure on the therapy field to become agents of social control, a charge also levied at social work (Day, 1981). In the case of The Yard it could be argued that by practising exercises with horses which could enable young people to become more aware of the effects of their own behaviour that this was behaviour modification on some level, with the connotations to social control and manipulation this perhaps raises.

Whilst there are no easy resolutions to these tensions, a counter-argument to criticisms levied at practitioner-researcher methods is that 'positioning research close to practice creates

opportunities for greater complexity of experience to be understood by practitioners, across a wide number of fields' (Hingley-Jones, 2009: 413). Hingley-Jones (2009) goes on to argue that learning about the inner worlds and emotional experiences of service-users can lead to a greater understanding of the possible structural disadvantages facing them in their lives. The hope would be that this understanding would then translate into positive action.

### **Fieldnotes**

Detailed fieldnotes written up by hand or word processed as soon as practically possible after TH sessions comprised the largest and possibly most valuable data collection method in my research, amounting to hundreds of thousands of words. Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003) suggest that fieldnotes and journals 'are the building blocks of qualitative research, a place for the accumulation of data and reflections' (2003: 60). My fieldnotes evolved from when I started, from almost clinical, rather objective, short notes to long reflexive accounts of the research process based on detailed 'thick descriptions' of the TH session that had taken place. TH sessions involved many layers of communication, sensory exploration and different experiences, not least because horses were the major component and communicate in a different way to humans! Rossman and Rallis write that you 'need to turn what you see and hear (or, perhaps, smell and taste) into data' (1998: 137). The experiential nature of TH sessions involved times when the participants would hug and hold the horses, smelling deeply into their necks. How to describe the earthy, musky, yet sweet and individual smell of a horse from a participants' perspective proved to be a challenge, one young person, Minimax, suggesting that the mare Duchess 'smells like horse perfume'. The therapist Deana described the experiential nature of being with the horses as 'You're just with the horse. Smelling, feeling, riding', illustrating the multifaceted layers involved in the experience for her. I attempted to develop what Hollway (2009) calls 'experience-near' fieldnotes which seek to 'document the emotional dynamics of research encounters' in order to convey the 'alive quality of the event even long after it had happened' (Hollway, 2009: 465).

Before having the opportunity to write up my own personal fieldnotes and reflexive journal after a TH session, we had, as the first priority, to write up the 'sessional form'. This was written by myself and the other practitioner and was a record of the session. It was then sent on to the young person's social worker or other relevant referrer. In line with a participatory child-centred approach we would attempt to include and involve the young person in this process,

asking what they would like recorded, what had been important for them in that session, what they felt they had learnt etc. Sometimes this was successful but at other times the young person would not want to engage in this process and often we would merely run out of time, especially if the young person was engrossed in an activity with a horse and it felt inappropriate to cut this short. As these sessional notes formed an important part of the session and were co-produced they were also an important part of the data collected.

## **Interviews**

Alongside observation and fieldnotes I conducted interviews of various forms with many of the participants. Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996) define the interview as a method involving questioning and discussing issues with people: 'it can be a useful technique for collecting data which would be unlikely to be accessible using techniques such as observation or questionnaires' (1996: 153). Interviewing within the social sciences can take a number of different forms. Denscombe (2003) lists these as structured, semi-structured, unstructured, and focus groups and group interviews.

For both epistemological and methodological reasons, for this research project I chose to employ what Spradley (1979) terms 'informal ethnographic interviews', and Patton (1990) coins 'conversational interviews', where the researcher asks questions in the course of the participant observation (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 1996; Silverman, 2005). In addition, I also conducted a number of more structured interviews, although utilising a semi-structured questioning style in line with the value base of the study which sought to explore and allow the voices, feelings and opinions of the participants to be heard, within 'thick descriptions'. I completed these semi-structured interviews with five adults and three of the young people who participated in the research. The interviews were recorded on audio tape (except for one with Cinderella which was a shorter unplanned interview before a TH session where advantage was taken of some additional time, and so was hand-written) with permission from the research participants and lasted between ½ hr and 2hrs in length. Clarke (2002) describes the method of psychosocial interviewing as unstructured in nature and it being important to avoid using 'why' questions. He suggests instead asking loose, very open-ended questions, in order to prevent 'putting words in people's mouths' (2002: 177). A further technique of psychosocial interviewing is closely aligned to principles adopted from psychotherapy and counselling techniques, that of using participants' ordering and phrasing, and re-phrasing questions in the participants own words. As noted by Hollway and

Jefferson (2000) this takes discipline and practice. An important feature of the psychosocial interview is that it is interested in any projection and unconscious processes that may be present in the interview and of 'Why do people tell certain parts of certain stories? Why are they telling them?' (Clarke, 2002: 177). It was found to be the case that many of the young people would identify with certain horses and would seem to project parts of their characteristics, personalities, behaviours, and, sometimes, issues they were perhaps exploring through the horses. A psychosocial approach to interviewing allowed for an exploration and analysis of these processes after the interview and to return to the participants where possible for clarification.

Interviewing the women in my previous riding therapy study (Burgon, 2003) I found myself employing humanistic questioning styles of social work, techniques of being 'client centred' and containing Rogerian principles of 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1951, 1992). An important feature of this method is that it aims to develop some form of social rapport with participants, secondly it 'assists in reducing unequal power relations in the research' and hopes to encourage a shared exchange of information in contrast to the more structured extraction of data obtained by survey type, quantitative interview methods (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006: 162). Whilst this method was found to work well it did raise ethical implications in that it perhaps encouraged the women to divulge personal, in depth, information that they may not have chosen to share if a different interview style had been employed (Burgon, 2003). This point raised a number of ethical and reflexive issues concerned with employing these qualitative methods of research with the young people in the current study and was at the forefront of my mind as a practitioner-researcher. However, as the practice of TH was so intertwined with the research and the issue of the young people disclosing sensitive information was one for which there was a robust child protection policy already in place, it was not felt that the research would have any further influence on this difficult area. Writing about the conduct of research within the practice of play therapy, Daniel-McKeigue suggests that as long as 'the core values of therapy remain constant and the codes of ethics are adhered to, then the introduction of a research dynamic need not necessarily unduly affect the therapy' (2004: 54).

## **Questionnaires**

The third data collection technique employed was a short questionnaire which was given to both the young people and adults - see appendixes G and H for examples of the questionnaires. Whilst questionnaires are more usually associated with quantitative research methods (D'Cruz & Jones,

2004), I felt that they were appropriate to incorporate in this study due, in part, to them being a possible useful medium for the young people to participate in the research. The questionnaires were adapted and evolved from feedback questionnaires I had already devised for the TH programme as part of the evaluation process of The Yard. I attempted to involve the young people in designing these questionnaires and it was found to be one of the areas that some of them felt most able to participate, Lucy and Cinderella in particular being very imaginative in thinking up possible questions. However, this also had its drawbacks as some of the questions they suggested were not ones I considered useful or appropriate for the research and this caused me dilemmas. How could I on the one hand, ask for their input, but then, on the other, only want input which suited me? An example of a question Lucy suggested for the questionnaire was 'how old is Duchess (a horse at The Yard)?'. This clearly had no relevance to the research but was obviously considered important to Lucy. In the end I resolved this by designing a new quiz for the TH programme which incorporated some of these questions.

The questionnaires were given to the young people and adults to complete in their own time and either handed back to me at our next meeting or mailed back through the post at a later date. This was to avoid me directly engaging or intervening with the participants as they completed the questionnaire (May, 2001). The questionnaires were as brief as possible as I was aware that the majority of the young people who participated in TH disliked writing and completing forms. In one case a foster carer wrote the answers to the questions on the young person's behalf as he said he didn't want to do the writing but was happy to share his experiences. I deliberately used questions which were as open-ended as possible, such as 'how does being around the horses make you feel?'. This was in order to encourage responses which were, in return, as open-ended as possible, although I recognise that the question does imply that the horses did make the participants feel something. Interestingly this question elicited a similar reply from many of the participants, both child and adult, which was to incorporate the word 'calm' in the answer in some way.

### **Data analysis procedures**

Formal initial analysis and transformation of the data began by transcribing the interviews. I transcribed four of the interviews myself, but, due to the time constraints from my dyslexia, the other three were transcribed by a professional transcriber. Despite this I found that I still needed to listen to the tapes and go over them myself in order to get fully immersed in the data and revisit the interview to gain the full meaning from the text. A thematic open coding analysis



procedure was then employed where I gathered together all my data and organised it by initially looking for similar words, themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke 2006; Coffey & Atkinson 1996). As these emerged I colour coded them manually line by line, choosing not to use a computer programme such as NVivo or ATLAS due to my personal preference of working with paper. Although this was a time-consuming undertaking it did mean that I became completely immersed in the data. This process eventually uncovered a number of categories which were then organised into two main thematic blocks of social well-being and psychological processes, although there was clearly overlap between the two. In line with a participative approach the results were shared with a number of the participants in order to verify my interpretation of their experiences, and to seek further clarification on certain questions that had been raised for me whilst sifting through the data. Unfortunately this was only possible with four of the young people due to the nature of the TH programme which, due to political and financial reasons, lost its funding during the final year of the study. Also, more often than not, because the young people moved foster placements with little prior notice, as shown on p154 with Kelly. However, I was able to send drafts of my initial notes from the interviews to a number of the adult participants for their feedback, which was then incorporated into the analysis.

### **Checking analysis with participants**

In addition to the informal conversational or field interviews where I asked participants questions during the course of a TH session, three of the young people took part in more formal interviews, two of which were taped and then transcribed in detail. The other interview, with Cinderella, was conducted more informally, based around the questionnaire, and the answers written down. It was found especially useful in this context to be able to go back and ask the participants for clarification of parts of the discussions once I had had the opportunity to listen to the tapes and read the transcripts, as, sometimes, more questions were raised from this.

### **Coding the data**

Through organising the emerging codes and categories into the two main thematic blocks of social well-being and psychological processes it became clear that certain experiences and themes cropped up regularly. Some of these were immediately clear, for example, the word 'calm' appeared time after time in the informal field interviews, formal interviews and questionnaires with both the young people and adults. Others were slower to emerge, such as

themes around the experience of being in nature which were more experiential and not spoken about so directly by the young people. Examples of these early themes and coding are given in the following table.

**Table of Themes**

Main themes	Sub-themes
Nurture, Attachment, Trust	Being needed, caring, empathy, being understood, understanding another, responsibility, feeling safe, calm, horse as 'safe', trust, attachment
Social Well-Being, Resilience	Confidence, self-esteem, empowerment, risk, challenge, achieving, overcoming obstacles, motivation, learning new skills
Identification with Horse	Projection, transference, metaphor, analogy
'Safe' space, Calm	Facilitating therapeutic space, relaxed, informal, non-judgemental, horse doesn't 'label'
Environment, Nature, Spiritual	Outdoors, environment, exercise, freedom, space, calm

From this early categorization of emerging themes, relevant theoretical frameworks began to emerge. For example as themes of self-confidence, overcoming obstacles, challenge and self-esteem became evident through repeated examples from the data, links to the risk and resilience literature became apparent (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985, 1999). In terms of themes that emerged which were linked to the psychotherapeutic literature, such as identification and analogy, attachment and trust, there were clear links to a psychosocial approach where psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytical interpretation is employed in the analysis of the data (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

**Some ethical considerations raised with the analysis and presentation of the data in this 'participatory' psychosocial research project**

The analysis and presentation of research within a reflexive and participatory framework raises difficult issues of power and knowledge, in that children obviously do not hold the same knowledge and experience base as adults (Christensen & James, 2000; Farrell, 2005; Fraser *et al.*, 2004). Although a sociology of childhood framework of the 'social child' or 'participatory child' would argue that the child's experiences and understanding are as equally valid but different from

adults, this does not negate the fact that, ultimately, the researcher holds more power and is in control of how the research is presented, regardless of how far the children have been involved in it up to that point (Robinson & Kellet, 2004). If ‘meaning has to be shared to be real’ (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2005: 100) how can researchers apply an academic analysis within a participatory framework that is meaningful to all concerned?

Alongside other participatory researchers I identified with the suggestion that the analysis and dissemination process can cause one of the most difficult aspects of the research process as ‘children as a powerless group are not able to challenge the ways in which research findings about them are presented’ (Morrow, 2005: 154). These authors demand that in order for research to be truly participative and collaborative children and young people need to be fully involved in the analysis and presentation of the research (Alderson, 2001; Eder & Corsaro, 1999; Jones, 2004). The extent to which this is possible is obviously dependent on a number of factors related to the extent of the researcher’s commitment to a wholly participative methodology which fully involves the participants in the analysis and dissemination, and also purely practical, external, factors such as whether the participants are available and contactable at this stage of the research. This was a factor that I was aware could be an issue in this study due to the transient nature of the care system in which the children and young people participating in the TH project are located, and my fears were realized in many cases. In addition I identified with Hoskins and Stoltz (2005) who talk of the difficulties they wrestled with in their research analysis within a constructivist and constructionist psychological framework whilst undertaking research with adolescent girls. The authors speak of the inherent contradictions involved in attempting a collaborative researcher-participant relationship whilst at the same time wishing to apply a social constructionist and psychoanalytic analysis, which was outside the knowledge-base of the participants, writing, ‘our struggle lies in finding a balance between a respectful, collaborative alliance with participants, and drawing on our own body of academic knowledge’ (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2005: 97). Issues of power inequalities around knowledge arise. Whilst a participative model of research embodies principles of empowerment, collaboration and equality, by then employing theoretical, academic methods of analysis which can exclude and possibly, alienate, offend and pathologise participants, the very values of the research method are compromised (Grover, 2004; O’Kane, 2000). As stated by Hoskins and Stoltz, ‘we risk impinging upon the very principles that attracted us to this kind of research in the first place’ (2005: 99).

Clarke and Hoggett (2009) suggest that ethics are at the heart of psychosocial research during all the various aspects, including presentation of the data and of, 'the need to present what is really important to the respondent' (2009: 20). They go on to add that 'we need to think very carefully about how we present our data, as we have an ethical obligation of care for the subject and avoidance of any harm' (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009: 22). I wrestled with many aspects around how to represent participants' experiences, of what to include and what to leave out and how I described and wrote about the young people. I empathized with Josselson who writes,

My guilt, I think, comes from knowing that I have taken myself out of relationship with my participants (with whom, during the interview, I was in intimate relationship) to be in relationship with my readers. I have, in a sense, been talking about them behind their backs and doing so publicly (cited in McLeod, 2001: 198).

I never fully overcame these various dilemmas and could only reconcile them in a small way in the hope that by attempting to record and present the young people's experiences in a respectful and ethical manner, recognizing my own role in the representation and interpretation of the data, that the research could ultimately contribute to a greater understanding in both my own practice and to the broader knowledge base of EAL/T.

### **Further problems of the practitioner-researcher position and power issues involved in taking a reflexive and participatory approach in research with children**

A reflexive approach to research and analysis understands that the researcher is *part of* the social reality that is under observation. There is no point in attempting to be a detached observer as the process of the research is interactional. My position as researcher, practitioner and white female, together with my background and influences, will impact upon the research process to create a experience unique to those particular circumstances (Hertz, 1997). In this research project, I was a practitioner and therefore extremely close to the subject matter and site. A criticism levied of being a researcher-practitioner could be that it doesn't account for 'the problem of 'making strange' the familiarity of social worlds from within one's own culture' (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003: 25). The problem this perspective identifies is that the insider finds it difficult to 'see' what s/he already 'knows' inside out. This is something that did arise in discussion with other non-practitioners in the analysis of my fieldnotes where I had assumed some equine

knowledge and issues related to child development and TH practice, for example, as obvious so had not seen the need to elaborate on certain aspects.

There are also real issues of unequal power relations. Above the fundamental inequalities between children, young people and adults, 'our structural framework ensures that children and young adults, are marginalized both socially and politically' (Pugsley, 2002: 21), there was the additional fact that I was a practitioner on the research site and the children and young people who attended TH therefore saw me as a 'teacher'. Clearly, therefore, in this study I was, 'not only perceived by the pupils as being socially more powerful, I *was* more powerful' (Pugsley, 2002: 21). I had access to a 'captive' research group and could choose who to invite to participate and how to 'interpret and represent the data I collected' (Pugsley, 2002: 21). In order to attempt to address some of these issues and in line with my alliance to a participative, reflexive, critical qualitative inquiry approach (Davies, 1998; Denzin, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002) I hoped to conduct research that was participative and reciprocal and therefore empowering in principle. However, I am also aware of the limitations and contradictions inherent in the concept of 'empowerment'. Humphries suggests that 'emancipation cannot be conferred on one group by another' (1997: 5), and that researchers, being part of an establishment of hierarchical relations, are 'inevitably implicated in power, so that our efforts to liberate perpetuate the very relations of dominance' (Humphries, 1997: 6).

These are issues that raise additional questions and concerns when working with young, vulnerable people. Whilst this study is concerned with attempting to record the experiences of young people participating at The Yard, it could be argued that by attempting to create a climate of participatory research, encouraging the children and young people to express their experiences and give them 'voice', this may have had the implication of raising expectations of having their hopes, wishes and views taken into account outside of The Yard. This is often contrary to their real life experience within the 'looked after' system of social work (Holland, 2001). Despite the advances in child care legislation and guidance set out to improve young people's position in the care system, these have been slow to be put into practice (Holland, 2001) and a sociology of childhood understanding remains theoretical and academic on the most part (Christensen & James, 2000; Farrell, 2005; Greene & Hogan, 2005). There are also the implications of issues of disclosure. As has been discussed previously a humanistic, client-centred, empathic environment between participant and researcher-practitioner may hold the possibility of the child or young person feeling 'safe' enough to disclose certain past or perhaps present, traumatic or abusive



events. Whilst I was a qualified social worker and had received training and supervision in this area, with a child disclosure policy in place at The Yard, issues of 'blurred boundaries' could arise. Perhaps the child or young person could feel 'safer' and more 'empowered' in an environment where they were being encouraged to participate and share their feelings and experiences about the research project. Could this result in them not seeing me as practitioner and therefore 'authority' figure in the same way, but as researcher so further removed from their world of foster carers, social workers, therapists, youth offending teams and the like? Could this then have the effect of my being seen as more 'aligned' to them in some way and so therefore 'safer' to talk to and possibly 'disclose' to? What could this mean in terms of implications for the research project?

In reality many of my fears were unfounded; in fact the opposite was sometimes found to be the case. By taking on the dual role of practitioner-researcher with the added layer of bureaucracy this entailed in terms of explaining the research, signing consent forms etc, this sometimes seemed to have the opposite effect of distancing the young people. One young person, Wayne, repeatedly replied the one word answer of 'yerp' in a funny accent whilst I attempted to explain the research and consent process to him, and seemed disinterested and distracted. At one point the horse-practitioner Donna working with me that day interrupted to ask Wayne 'is that from the film Hot Fuzz?' to which he replied 'yerp' and they both burst out laughing to my and his YOT mentor, Peter's, confusion, highlighting the gap in our knowledge of popular films!. However, this interruption seemed to provide a break to the discussion around the somewhat dry and serious nature of the research consent process, and, following this, Wayne seemed to engage more fully by asking a few questions and telling me he was happy to participate, although adding, as did Minimax, 'as long as I don't have to do any writing!'.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined my research position and methods employed, together with a reflexive account of some of the ethical problems and dilemmas I encountered through the process. Alongside my epistemological and ontological positions, together with the characteristics of the research site, I chose a practitioner-researcher reflexive ethnography employing some aspects of a participative approach within a case study. Data collection methods included detailed reflexive fieldnotes, together with other data collated from the field including field and informal conversational interviews. In addition I conducted a number of more formal

semi-structured interviews with both the young people participating and some of the adults involved in their care together with two of the TH and EAL/T practitioners who conducted TH sessions at The Yard. Finally, I employed a short questionnaire which had design input from a number of the young people participating in the research. In the next chapters I go on to present the data through the main themes identified as illustrated in the table on p92 in this chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

# **Development of Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy, and the opening up of ‘Positive Experiences’ and ‘Positive Opportunities’ through Therapeutic Horsemanship**

### **Introduction**

As I have outlined previously the majority of the young people who were referred to The Yard could be understood as being ‘at-risk’ in terms of their various psychosocial disadvantages. Much literature supports the suggestion that exposure to certain risk factors in childhood can result in poor developmental outcomes in later life (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Hughes, 2004; Rutter, 1985). Many of the young people participating in the research study were in foster care because of being removed from their parental homes due to neglect and/or abuse issues.

However, why some individuals appear to overcome adversity and remain resilient despite experiencing these childhood risks, and what traits or factors were common to these individuals has also been the focus of much research (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1999, 2006; Werner, 1993). The definition of resilience suggested by Masten, Best and Garmezy is given as, ‘the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances’ (1990: 426). Many of the themes to emerge from this study had links to the literature on risk and resilience; themes such as self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and mastery, ‘acts of helpfulness’ (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999), empathy, and the opening of ‘positive opportunities’ (Rutter, 1999). The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether therapeutic horsemanship (TH) would appear to provide some of the ‘protective factors’ considered important in overcoming adversity, in terms of the young people’s experiences with horses and their understandings, together with insights and perspectives from some of the adults who contributed to the study.

A large body of literature suggests that exposure to early stressful and traumatic events can result in emotional and behavioural symptoms in children and young people, such as hyperactivity, mood swings, low self-esteem, depression and other social and emotional difficulties (Bannister, 1998; Egeland *et al.*, 2002; Gunnar *et al.*, 2006; Hughes, 2004; Levine, 1997; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Other authors propose that physical illnesses and



conditions arising from a decreased immune system such as digestive and skin disorders can also be a result of childhood stresses (Levine, 2005). It was certainly the case that many of the young people who attended The Yard displayed a variety of these emotional and behavioural and physical conditions. Labels of ADHD, depression, self-harm, violent and aggressive behaviour, and conditions such as eczema and asthma were often noted on their referral forms. In addition, many of the participants would seem to suffer from various aches and pains. Kelly for example would often complain of headaches and want to just sit quietly in the shade, and Emma would sometimes not be able to ride due to the eczema on her legs being too inflamed and painful. In this chapter I look at how the young people appeared to demonstrate that they experienced gains in self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy through being with the horses. Links to how the horses seemed to provide motivation to learn, to regulate their behaviour and emotions, and, in turn, enable some of the participants to engage in further educational and other 'positive opportunities' are also explored.

### **'Negative life outcomes'**

The young people who were referred to The Yard from the foster care agency had been taken into care due to concerns for their health and well-being; it was understood that they were 'at-risk'. As has been explored in more detail in chapter 3, it is argued that exposure to certain risk factors can result in 'negative life outcomes' in later life. Some of the equine-assisted learning and therapy (EAL/T) research, together with the literature concerned with outdoor and adventure activities introduced in chapter 2, proposes that therapeutic interventions such as EAL/T and TH can be useful in providing at-risk young people with some of the resilience and protective factors necessary to avoid these possible negative life outcomes (Ewert, 1987; Hayden, 2005; Smith-Osbourne & Selby, 2010; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005).

It has been seen in the literature review chapter 3 that research into risk and resilience has tended to concentrate on looking at resilience within certain parameters. These have varied from a wider structural perspective of the effects of socioeconomic status for example (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992) neurobiological (Gunner & Quevedo, 2007) or development and behavioural understandings (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Lazarus, 1993; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Werner, 1993). However, whilst I understand that all these bring important contributions to the knowledge base, Ungar (2004) suggests that the most important

factor is how young people self-define their own health and that resilience and risk factors change over the life course. By employing a child-centred and flexible, experiential, approach, The Yard aimed to provide an environment where young people could gain some of the resources necessary to enable them to lead more successful and positive lives in ways which were meaningful and personal for them as individuals, and so a 'dynamic state' model is the most appropriate within this context (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Place *et al.*, 2002).

### **Horses and Mastery, Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence**

Within the risk and resilience literature the development of self-confidence and self-esteem is considered to be of major importance, and necessary for both mental health and in raising self-efficacy in at-risk young people. Definitions of self-esteem and self-confidence are neatly summed up by Sempik, Aldridge & Becker who write,

Self-esteem refers to a general feeling of self-worth or self-value, while self-confidence is the feeling that an individual is likely to succeed in a task and has few hesitations or reservations about attempting it (Sempik, Aldridge, & Becker, 2005: 90).

Having a sense of power and control over one's actions and future is known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) and is clearly linked to having a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. The participants referred to The Yard who were in care largely had little control or involvement in decision making about their lives and futures. This, together with their traumatic experiences, often resulted in their referral forms stating that they possessed very little self-esteem and we certainly witnessed low self-efficacy in terms of their low beliefs in what they could achieve with the horses. If a culture of helplessness and hopelessness with no sense of future is considered one risk factor to successful development and life outcome, then acquiring a sense of mastery and feeling of having some control over one's destiny could perhaps promote resilience (Bandura, 1982; Cicchetti & Rogosch 1997; Katz, 1997; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Where individuals experience social exclusion on some level, such as many of the at-risk young people referred to The Yard who were excluded from school, were in between numerous foster placements, and possessed emotional and/or behavioural difficulties which resulted in them having difficulty in forming positive relationships, the effects are multifaceted. One result is that many of these young people get left behind the developmental and educational milestones of their peers, with the additional stigmas and effect on self-esteem and confidence this causes. When

they first arrived at The Yard we found that many of the young people demonstrated very little confidence around the horses, often being quiet and withdrawn and finding it difficult to engage and communicate. However, it seemed that as they got to know and, correspondingly, trust and feel safe with the horses (as explored in more depth in Chapters 6 and 7) they started to gain confidence. The following examples with Minimax illustrate how he grew in confidence as he got to know the mare Ruby and learn how to care for, manage, and ultimately ride her.

Minimax arrived with his foster carer, Angie, who brought him down into the yard. It was a hot sunny day and the horses were taking advantage of the shade in the barn, standing quietly swishing the flies off each other with their tails with an occasional snort or shuffle of hooves. We took Minimax into the barn to meet them, introducing him to them one by one – Minimax, however, remained rather quiet and withdrawn at first, initially standing behind Angie.

(Fieldnotes).

Minimax still rather quiet again today after Angie left him at the yard.

(Fieldnotes).

We found that this remained the pattern with Minimax the first few times he attended. However, once he had become more competent around the horses, which for him appeared to be very much linked to developing a bond with the mare Ruby, this seemed to correspond with him gaining confidence in his communication with us too. He started to become able to ask questions and, importantly, ask for help and assistance with tasks he found difficult, something he had struggled with initially.

Minimax's last session of the summer holidays and he asked if he could go for a hack on the lanes, wanting to ride Ruby again. He has grown enormously in competence and, correspondently, confidence, in the time he has been coming and today managed to halter, groom and pick out Ruby's hooves without assistance for the first time. He had especially struggled with putting on head collars previously, finding the dexterity and organisation required for this very challenging.

(Fieldnotes).

Through becoming more competent and managing to master difficult tasks with the feelings of accomplishment gained from this, it may be that Minimax was feeling a sense of mastery and related growth in self-esteem. The literature on risk and resilience discusses at length the importance of having a sense of control over one's actions and environment, which so many of the young people who attended The Yard lacked. Writing about the benefits of AAT Kogan *et al.*, suggest that;

An increased sense of control over the environment, stimulated by activities that provide success and praise for appropriate behaviour, can decrease immature acts and learned helplessness (Kogan *et al.*, 1999: 119).

In the next section I discuss how his gains in confidence, mastery and competence with the horses enabled Minimax to transfer his skills to another young person attending The Yard.

#### **'Acts of helpfulness'**

Gaining confidence in his abilities and accomplishments seemed to correspond with 'acts of helpfulness' for Minimax. By developing some feelings of self-esteem through becoming more accomplished with the horses, Minimax began to become more helpful and open towards others. This, in turn, then appeared to give him even more confidence. One of the things both Minimax's foster carer, Angie, and his social worker said he especially struggled with when he first started coming to The Yard was the school environment and establishing and maintaining relationships with peers. This was perhaps unsurprising considering the exclusion, inconsistency of relationships and separation and loss he had experienced having been taken into foster care and separated from his brothers. A vicious circle can be established where a combination of emotional and behavioural problems, together with large gaps out of education due to exclusion and the care process, can result in young people getting behind academically. Behavioural problems can then be exacerbated as the young person feels academically inferior which impinges on already low self-esteem. As outlined on p47 Jackson and McParlin report shockingly low academic achievements of children in care with only 5% of care leavers entering higher education (Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Jackson & Simon, 2005). Angie told us that Minimax would get extremely upset with any reference to his mother or brothers resulting in him getting

into fights and being excluded from school on a regular basis. However, after he had been attending The Yard for a number of months he managed to communicate successfully to another young person on their first session how to look after the horses and take care of them, clearly being proud of his knowledge and ability. His foster carer commented on how this had contributed greatly to him experiencing a feeling of competence and confidence in his own abilities.

Minimax was very welcoming towards the new boy and didn't appear arrogant or know-it-all, or jealous and possessive at all today, which he has done previously with other young people. He seemed very generous towards this boy and accommodating, showing him how to do the tasks involved in looking after the horses and telling him a little bit about them all, 'he's a grumps sometimes, you got to get to know him first' pointing at Jason and, introducing the boy to Leo, 'he's old and needs more looking after...and sometimes he gets ill from eating too much grass'.

(Fieldnotes).

A 'target' for Minimax attending TH was for him to be able to move from a 1-1 situation to being able to participate in sessions with one or two other young people. From this short extract it can be seen how demonstrating his knowledge to the new boy helped Minimax achieve this and, in turn, also grow in confidence. Furthermore, this experience gave him an opportunity to display an 'act of helpfulness' towards another young person. As Minimax normally found it difficult to engage with his peers, and could be very jealous and possessive of his things, and of people, his foster carer, Angie, explained that this was a huge achievement for him. When I interviewed Angie, and asked her what she felt Minimax had gained most from therapeutic horsemanship she replied;

Confidence, confidence, knowledge, confidence that he could do it, boosts his self esteem, 'cos he could do it, I can do that, I can show someone how to do that, I know how to do that, I know how to put this on.

(Angie, Foster Carer).

This was something that the counsellor, Sally, mentioned when I put the same question to her:

Confidence. I think showing others what he has learnt about horses has made him feel good about himself, made him feel that he can do something and he can do it really well. And the fact that he can demonstrate it to other people, you know, it's a big confidence and self-esteem boost, really. And that makes him more relaxed and more cheerful, so that has, you know, a knock-on effect, really.  
(Sally, Counsellor).

The resilience literature refers to 'acts of helpfulness' (Katz, 1997) or 'required helpfulness' (Werner, 1993) as where helping others can lead to positive benefits for an individual. It is suggested that having an area of responsibility which involves caring for something or someone who is dependent on, and benefits in some way from that care, including animals, can lead to a growth in self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kogan *et al.*, 1999; Myers, 2007; Werner, 1993). Acts of helpfulness can lead to the individual learning that they can effect positive change and have something valuable to offer (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999; Katz, 1997; Werner, 1993). In their randomised trial with people with a chronic disease the authors Schwartz and Sendor (1999) found that those helping others gained higher psychosocial gains than those receiving the help, concluding that 'helping others helps oneself'. Reported benefits from the helping role included improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, depression and self-awareness (Schwartz & Sendor, 1999).

It could perhaps be seen in the example provided with Minimax that some of these benefits might be gained from the caring and responsibility involved in looking after horses, and these in turn transferred to other areas of psychosocial benefit.

#### **'Get to know her first': confidence and relationship**

With Kelly it seemed that overcoming her fears was also linked to building up a relationship with a special horse first, and was the catalyst for her gaining confidence. Although she told us that she had previously attended a riding school and was an experienced rider, initially Kelly was very withdrawn and uncommunicative as the following sessional notes demonstrate;

Initially Kelly was quiet and rather withdrawn as we introduced her to the yard and horses. It was a warm, sunny day and so we sat at the table and chairs in the yard with the horses loose milling around and eating from their haynets. After we had sat and watched

and discussed the horses for a while I asked Kelly if there was a horse that she was particularly drawn to and wanted to work with and groom. Initially Kelly's response was 'I don't know', which I was to discover was often her default answer to questions when she was unconfident.

(Fieldnotes).

Deana was keen for Kelly to ride if she wanted to as Deana had told her that she wanted to do this in their individual therapy sessions previously to attending The Yard. However, when I asked Kelly if she would like to try 'invisible riding' bareback on Ruby, Kelly answered that she was unsure about this telling us, 'I'm not sure... I haven't ever ridden without a saddle before'. When I assured her that she could have a saddle if she preferred, Kelly still declined and said 'um... I think I'd like to get to know Ruby a bit better first'.

(Fieldnotes).

Kelly obviously felt that it was important for her to 'get to know Ruby' better in order to trust her enough to perhaps try riding her without a saddle. As Kelly attended more sessions and did indeed get to know Ruby more she started to develop the self-confidence to try new activities with the suggested benefits to self-esteem. It is argued that self-confidence and self-esteem can be developed from succeeding in activities which are motivating and challenging (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995; Carns, Carns, & Holland, 2001; Ellis, Braff, & Hutchinson; 2001; Katz, 1997; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). In a TH session a few months later Kelly gained the confidence to ride Ruby out on the lanes. In this session the difference between Kelly on the ground and once up riding on the horse was quite remarkable as is described in the sessional notes by her therapist Deana.

Kelly seemed quite quiet when she arrived. She groomed Ruby during which time she spoke very little. It wasn't until Kelly was sitting on Ruby, going out for a walk in the lanes, that she really began to chat. She relaxed, smiling, even laughing at times. Hannah and Kelly chatted about Ruby, what Kelly likes about Ruby in particular. She said she feels she has a special connection with her and that Ruby has an understanding of how she (Kelly) is feeling. It really was quite remarkable the difference between Kelly on the

ground, to Kelly on the horse. We (researcher and therapist in de-brief) spoke about it together after Kelly had gone, wondering whether it is something to do with being higher, not needing to make eye contact, in addition to the confidence gained from riding. (Deana, Therapist: therapy sessional notes).

In their study with young people in care, the authors Ross *et al.*, (2009) also talk of how the young people would open up and engage during car journeys and guided walks. They suggest that these 'mobile methods' can sometimes seem to give young people the space to explore sensitive topics at their own pace. In terms of the car they refer to how the seating arrangements direct gaze forward instead of directly front on, as does being on top of a horse, as Deana mentions above (Ross *et al.*, 2009). Sibley has called the car a 'protective capsule' (Sibley, 1995). It was found that many of the young people would seem to open up and become more communicative once up on the horse; this appeared to be especially so with both Emma and Lucy in addition to Kelly. Overcoming her fear of riding Ruby appeared to give Kelly self-confidence which helped her to relax and, in turn, communicate more openly with the adults at The Yard. Being able to communicate and have 'social competence' is argued to be one of the internal characteristics of resilient children according to some authors (Born, Chevalier, & Humblet, 1997; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Howard & Johnson, 2000).

#### **'Queen of the world': empowerment, identification and opportunity**

In addition to themes of opening up, which are explored in more depth in chapter 7, by engaging in activities with the horses which were considered challenging the participants recorded feelings of achievement and empowerment. For Minimax this was expressed by his exclaiming after a particularly successful session, 'I've had two times of feeling really strong now!'. The participant Lucy told me that it was the riding which was an important element for her, because it made her higher up. Talking about how riding the horse Duchess made her feel, Lucy told me,

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

Many of the young people who attended The Yard could be seen to be at-risk of suffering



increased hazards during adolescence. Having suffered exclusion, separation from family and place, and other negative experiences which could result in them demonstrating difficult and defensive behaviours, there was danger of them being unable to form meaningful friendships and relationships, as demonstrated by Minimax. It may be that through participating in TH and the consequent benefits of building up relationships with the horses and others, together with gains in confidence, contributed to them gaining feelings of 'identification' with something. It is suggested that during the difficult time of adolescence a significant 'protective factor' is having 'high identification' with peer groups (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Erikson, 1995; Hampel & Petermann, 2006).

Jackson, Born & Jacob make the claim that;

High identification leads to greater emotional and informative support from the group, whilst low identification is associated with a more marginal status. The latter group tends to have lower levels of self-esteem and cope less effectively (Jackson, Born, & Jacob, 1997: 611).

In addition to peer group identification, some of the literature acknowledges that, in the absence of a secure attachment to a loving parent the next best thing is for the young person to have a 'scaffolding' or network of other positive supportive relationships within the community (Gilligan, 2004). It may be that the horse contributed to some of these aspects through providing a relationship which the young people perceived as supportive and unconditional, which together with identification with a 'mainstream, leisure' activity (Gilligan, 1999), could help the participants gain skills and confidence, higher self-esteem, feel useful and 'helpful' and ultimately form relationships with others.

Interestingly when I discussed the issue of exclusion during her childhood in more depth with Lucy, she told me that she didn't feel that she was particularly excluded from activities at school telling me, 'I didn't want to do the same things as the 'cool' girls anyway'. This presented me with some difficulty, as Lucy had previously told me that she had been bullied, as had her mother, who told me that this was one of the reasons she had moved to a different area in order for Lucy to attend a different school where she hoped she would fit in better and be happier. However, Lucy did go on to tell me that she felt more excluded from things as she got older and

was looking for a part-time job and work experience placements. She explained that she felt that, 'my (unidentifiable word) voice makes me sound like a little girl' when she rang up for jobs and that this put her at a disadvantage in the job market. It went on to be the case that three of the participants, Lucy, Emma and Wayne, chose college courses and work experience placements that were horse and animal based. This could suggest that through 'identifying' with the horses, who perhaps provided some of the protective factors suggested as supplied by acceptance and identification with peer groups (Jackson, Born, & Jacob, 1997), that they were able to overcome some of the negative aspects of their childhood experiences and engage in what Rutter (1999) terms 'positive opportunities' and which I go on to explore in more depth later in this chapter.

### **Overcoming fears: risk, challenge and confidence**

Some authors argue that engaging in activities which carry an element of risk is necessary in order to grow and develop self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2008; Rosenthal, 1975; Voight, 1988). Voight suggests that 'Confronting fear and overcoming it with the help of a partner or an entire group of people can be used to develop self-confidence, self-esteem, group-cohesiveness and decision-making' (Voight, 1988: 59).

Overcoming a fear or lack of confidence in order to participate in an activity with Hector in the round pen resulted in Freya experiencing a huge change in her whole body language, attitude and way of communicating, as demonstrated in the following extract from fieldnotes:

*Freya and Hector: 'he followed me like my shadow'*

There has been quite a long gap since Freya last attended TH so I ask her if there is anything she would particularly like to do with the horses today. Freya seems unsure shrugging her shoulders and saying 'don't know', which she often does in response to questions. While we are standing by the shed talking the new horse Hector walks purposely over to us and heads straight to Freya, standing close to her and placing his muzzle in her hands. I comment that Deana and I had been in the yard all morning sitting at the bench having a meeting and Hector hadn't come over once! Freya seems pleased with this and we witness a small smile. We suggest that as Hector seems to want to be with her that she may like taking him up to the round pen to do some leading and perhaps try join-up with him. Again Freya is non-committal and shrugs her shoulders, saying 'well maybe later...I'm not sure'. When Freya first attended The Yard she displayed rather

a lack of awareness around the horses and was happy to ride on her first session, to our surprise. I wonder if it is a combination of the bigger size of Hector (he is a large, weight carrying cob) and her having gained a bit more awareness of the potential danger of the horses from almost being trampled on previously, that is making her a little hesitant today. Once we have finished grooming the horses we ask Freya if she would like to lead Hector up the track to the round pen but she replies saying 'I don't think I will lead him up, I will let her (Deana) do it'. We reassure her that is absolutely fine and it is sensible to get to know him better first.

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

experience and of how Hector ‘followed me like my shadow’.

(Fieldnotes and sessional notes).

From the example above with Freya it was clear that her whole attitude and body language changed remarkably from the beginning of the session when she arrived, withdrawn, unconfident and uncommunicative, to after she had succeeded in a slightly challenging and engaging task with the horse Hector. It appeared that the connection with Hector initially facilitated a change in Freya’s mood and this led to her wanting to start to participate in the session. Once she had felt the sense of achievement from overcoming her initial fear and experienced the connection of Hector following her of his own accord, this seemed to give Freya a huge boost of confidence which then enabled her to start to believe in her own self-efficacy, witnessed when she was able to control Hector’s behaviour on the way back down to the yard. This new sense of achievement extended into Freya being more animated and initiating conversation about her experiences to the staff member who came to collect her; a very different Freya than the one who had arrived at The Yard only 2 hrs previously.

### **‘Positive Experiences’, Transferable Skills, and the opening up of ‘Positive Opportunities’**

An aim of EAL/T and TH is to equip young people with skills which encourage a sense of self-esteem, in addition to the self-confidence gained from overcoming fears and challenges by participating in activities with the horses. The hope is that these traits can then be internalised and taken into their everyday lives. This was demonstrated by the participant Lucy who spoke of how the confidence she gained from being with horses could be applied in other areas of her life. She explained that an understanding of horse behaviour and how she needed to behave around horses resulted in her being able to feel more confident. The following extract is from an interview with Lucy:

Lucy: Um, when I’m angry, they make me feel a lot calmer because you have to be calm around them.

HB: Hmm, yes.

Lucy: Otherwise they pick up on you.

HB: Absolutely.

- Lucy: And then you won't get such an enjoyable ride. So if you go in with a cross mind and stamp around, then they're not exactly going to be very helpful to you, are they?
- HB: No.
- Lucy: If you, if you play the opposite of what you actually feel, with me I start feeling the opposite way.
- HB: Ah, I see, so you start acting it, then you start feeling it?
- Lucy: Yes. It really helps with confidence and things.
- HB: Right. So if you sort of act confident...
- Lucy: I get confident.

From learning about horse behaviour it would seem that Lucy had learnt how to affect her own behaviour in a similar way that cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) emphasises how thoughts can affect actions (Beck *et al.*, 1979; Lazarus, 1993). CBT and solution focused brief therapy (SFBT) work by;

teaching individuals to become more aware of thoughts and feelings and to relate to them in a wider, decentred perspective as 'mental events' rather than as aspects of the self or as necessarily accurate reflections of reality (Teasdale *et al.*, 2000: 616).

The literature on risk and resilience writes about how developing successful coping strategies and overcoming challenges can strengthen the ability to cope in the face of future difficulties (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Place *et al.*, 2002). It appeared that Lucy had gained a sense of self-efficacy from learning how to control her behaviour and actions around the horses, which she could then apply to other areas of her life that she found challenging.

A similar example of how learning about horses helped a participant gain a wider perspective of relating horse behaviour to his own actions is given by Minimax on p157. In learning about how it was necessary to control Ruby and not allow her to stop and eat grass from the lane verges due to possible danger from cars, Minimax was able to apply this to areas of his own life. We discussed the reasons why it was important for the horses to listen to us and that, although they might not always understand the reasons, we were responsible for their welfare.

Minimax seemed to understand this and made the analogy to when he would dawdle on his way to school and, although he didn't go as far as telling us that he thought school was good for him (!), he did tell Ruby 'it's for your own good', whilst preventing her from eating the grass. Because Minimax appeared to be developmentally a little younger than his age and it was unclear how much he was consciously able to apply some of these metaphors to himself, it may be the case that he was unconsciously able to do this in the same way that Jones suggests that unconscious connections are perhaps as, or more, powerful for clients (Jones, 1996). Regardless of whether the processes are conscious or unconsciousness, it may be that learning how to relate experiences learnt through gaining an awareness of horse behaviour and applying these to their own experiences, the young people can gain some of the 'protective factors' such as self-efficacy and a sense of mastery, described in the resilience literature (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Katz, 1997; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Place *et al.*, 2002).

### **Opening up of 'positive opportunities'**

A number of authors mention the importance for 'at-risk' young people to have exposure to what Rutter terms 'positive opportunities' in order to open up their horizons (Gilligan, 1999; Rutter, 1999). As many 'at-risk' young people have limited opportunities and disadvantaged and impoverished backgrounds, set against other negative experiences, it may be even more vitally important to provide these young people with opportunities in the community which may help furnish them with 'protective factors'. In their study looking at the importance of the family, school and community Howard and Johnson (2000) found that the young people themselves mentioned the importance of community groups such as the Scouts, and of the skills they learnt there. In the current study it was found that by the young people being motivated and wanting to be with the horses, they, in turn, developed new skills and an interest which could lead to further future opportunities in their lives.

Wayne told us about how overcoming his fears with the horses at The Yard had enabled him to participate in a group outing which he not had the confidence to do previously, as illustrated from the following extract from fieldnotes:

Wayne proudly tells us that he went riding at another stable and had a canter. He is clearly really pleased and proud about having achieved this. I ask if he had gone out riding with

the school before but he says he always chose other things, or refused to do anything, previously.

(Fieldnotes).

Drawing on Rutter, Giller and Hagell's (1998) suggestion that protective mechanisms are linked to developing resilience, Ungar, Dumond and McDonald (2005) connect these to outdoor adventure programmes for at-risk young people. These authors suggest that participating in challenging, outdoor experiences offer similar protective mechanisms, such as to 'promote self-esteem and self-efficacy through experiences coping successfully with stress', and provide opportunities where 'hopefulness may replace feelings of helplessness' (Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005: 325).

Hayden (2005) found that a major theme in her research with 'at-risk' young people participating in equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) was that of 'positive experiences'. She argues that through the young people having positive experiences with horses this leads them to having greater motivation, participation and 'treatment compliance' (Hayden, 2005:105). In turn this can lead to the opening of the 'positive opportunities' that Rutter (1999) speaks of. By having gained the confidence to join in on a trip to a new riding stable, which previously he did not have the confidence to do; Wayne was able to have his first canter. This is something which most riders will describe as very exhilarating. Certainly cantering and galloping at speed for the first time gives a huge sense of achievement and heightened confidence in riding ability (if it is achieved without mishap of course!). Another aspect of the 'opening up of positive opportunities' is that of having horizons opened by having learnt and mastered new skills. By gaining confidence and learning a new skill, horizons may be opened where previously they were limited. The participants Emma, Lucy, Kelly, and Wayne all either expressed interest or became actively involved in further activities or studies with horses and/or other animals outside of The Yard. In addition, the foster carer Angie explained how another boy she had on a temporary foster placement and who had attended The Yard during the study period had gone on to help out at a local stables near his new foster home telling me;

He couldn't wait to get out to you, 'when are we getting there, when are we getting there', he *loved* it (he) did. In fact where he went after he left us he went somewhere where he

was going up to the stables nearby every week, it was helping out and it really did him a lot of good...

(Angie, Foster Carer).

During one particularly challenging TH session the participant Kelly was informed by her SW that she was to be moving foster placements the following day with no prior notice. This was an extremely upsetting experience for Kelly and was an example of the additional trauma and anxiety many young people in care are subject to. A further extract of this TH session is provided on p154 but in the short section below I provide an example of how it was hoped that through Kelly having the opportunity to discuss potential 'positive opportunities' during this particular TH session, that she was provided with some possibilities of a positive future.

*Kelly's last session: 'I didn't know you could do that'.*

Kelly arrived at The Yard looking quite down. She was quiet and withdrawn. After the RSW had left she explained that she felt quite sick and had had very little to eat so didn't think she was up to doing much. However, when we gave her the option she didn't want us to call the staff to pick her up, but being mindful that it was sunny, Deana suggested that we take a chair into the barn and she could just sit and rest with the horses in the shade whilst we groomed the horses. We quietly groomed the horses in the cool barn, the birds were singing and it was very peaceful. We didn't put any pressure on Kelly to speak but gradually she began to join in, although she looked preoccupied and clearly didn't want to speak about what was on her mind. However, it didn't take much persuasion from us for Kelly to agree to go out for a ride. Around the horses Kelly seems to be able to shake off any heaviness that she arrives with. As soon as Kelly was on Ruby's back she noticeably relaxed and opened up to us. She spoke of her deep love of horses, her past experiences with them in relation to her childhood and early friendships and her hopes for the future, how one day she would love to have a horse of her own. Donna (horse-handler) told her of her own experience of being a working pupil at a stables, learning horse care and riding, living with other young people in a shared house, sharing their passion of horses, lessons, mucking out stables etc. Kelly said she would love to do this herself when she leaves school next year, telling us 'I didn't know you could do that'.  
(Fieldnotes and therapy sessional notes),



A further example of how experiences with the horses enabled the opening up of 'positive opportunities' was provided by another participant who ceased attending The Yard during the research study. We were later informed by this young person's social worker that he had been accepted at a local agricultural college to undertake an entry level qualification in equine studies. If it is taken that educational achievement is a good thing, this would certainly seem to be a remarkable achievement for many of the young people who attended The Yard, who often possessed limited academic ability and even less educational motivation.

### **Challenge, motivation and learning**

One of the themes to emerge from the data was how some of the young people saw the horses as a challenge. This was expressed in different ways, such as Wayne saying he liked Jason 'because he is big!'. The participant Lucy, talking about riding horses, explained to me that, 'I prefer horses who are more forward going'. In equestrian terms 'forward going' means a horse that can be quite lively and requires a more experienced rider. When I asked Lucy why this was she replied 'I think it's because I like horses who are a bit more of a challenge'.

To successfully work with and manage horses who are 'challenging' it is necessary to learn about horse psychology and be able to control and manage one's own behaviour and body language in order to communicate with the horse in a way it can understand. Taking instruction and learning in the formal school environment had proved difficult for some of the participants who attended The Yard, a number attending pupil referral units and others having a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, it seemed that the challenge of wanting to be successful with the horses provided a degree of motivation to learn and to be able to overcome difficulties in taking instruction for some of the participants, especially Wayne, Minimax, Cinderella, and Emma.

Emma's mother, Linda, explained this in terms of Emma's behaviour and how she had, had to learn to modify her behaviour in order to work successfully with horses. In the following interview extract Linda tells me;

I suppose in a way she has to understand some respect with horses because they're big. And you know, she just can't push them around and boss them around like she can sometimes with people of her own age, you know. She likes to think she's strong and she can control things with strength and bullying people and things like that. And I think

probably with a horse, because the horse is big enough and it can, you know, if she was to [...] fight with the horse, the horse will win. I think there's an element of that. They're a challenge for her, you know. She has to be a bit more creative in how she wins whatever battles she has going on in her mind. Um, and so I think probably it's been a learning experience for her. They've the strength so they take her out of her [comfort zone] you know. Sometimes you've got to think differently and that has probably made her think sometimes.

(Linda, Emma's adoptive mother).

During the time she attended The Yard, Emma started weekly work experience at both a local equestrian college and a riding for the disabled (RDA) centre as part of her school curriculum. This was because it was recognised that this was the most effective way for Emma to gain educational and socially beneficial opportunities. Emma told me that one of the things she liked about horses and was part of the reason she was especially drawn to Jason, who could be quite a difficult horse, was because they were 'a challenge'.

For Emma, it seemed that horses opened up possibilities and horizons; Linda telling me how it was only through horses that she would participate in any school work. Emma had a SEN due to her disruptive behaviour at school and saw an educational psychologist. She was very open about her behaviour telling me, 'I do things like throw my food if I don't like it and stuff like that'. I asked Emma what made her feel the need to do these things but she replied 'I don't know, I just can't help myself'. Later though she did seem to offer some insight into this behaviour while we were talking about the similarities between Jason (the horse) and herself. This time she told me, 'I get like *totally* bored in school... that's why I'm really naughty to the teachers and wind them up..'. In an interview with Linda when I asked her to expand on how she felt that horses had been a learning experience for Emma she replied;

I think what has helped her, about horses, is that she understands that if she wants to learn more about horses that she has got to stop, sort of putting up this mental fight, um, about getting information, you know. That she has got to accept that some people do have more information. And I think she has learnt that now and that has been a huge step for her, and I think it's only because she is so motivated by horses that she's been able to do that.

(Linda, Emma's adoptive mother).

Reasons why horses are especially motivating despite the challenges they possess due, not least to their large size, have been proposed to be multi-faceted. Authors talk about the challenges of working with horses due to their power, size and inherent wildness, but also their vulnerability, curiosity and willingness to co-operate and be with humans (Karol, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002).

The therapist Deana explained that, for her, the combination of the size and power of the horse together with its willingness to co-operate with humans created an almost magical experience;

I think the thing about the horse is her size or his size, and there's something really special for me around that kind of that bulk, the volume. And the power. But also my experience is that there's gentleness to them...you know the horse's (being) phenomenally powerful and strong, but actually she's also very vulnerable. Um, and I think there's something incredible when you're working with a child or even just yourself where the horse kind of willingly co-operates with you. And I think, um, a lot of people are quite afraid of horses um, and because of past experience or just because they're so big and strong. And so when a horse co-operates with you willingly, um, there's something really magical I think, must be happening.

(Deana, Therapist).

### **Emotion regulation through experiences with horses**

Motivation to be with the horses seemed to enable some participants to regulate their behaviour and emotions, known as 'emotion regulation' in the literature. There is a large body of literature that looks at the many variables involved in emotion regulation, such as temperament differences attributed to early childhood influences, neurobiological reasons and environmental factors (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002; Thompson, 1994). It is claimed that both too high and too low EI (the temperament based index of emotionality) leads to risk factors such as behaviour labelled as antisocial, disruptive and problematic, the optimum being moderate regulation of emotion (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). Emotion regulation has been defined as the 'extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional

reactions...to accomplish one's goals' (Thompson, 1994: 27). In the bestselling book 'Emotional Intelligence', which draws on similar concepts, Daniel Goleman makes the claim that characteristics of emotional intelligence such as possessing self-awareness, impulse control, empathy and social competence are more important than IQ (Goleman, 1996).

Southam-Gerow and Kendall (2002) suggest that 'emotion understanding', such as recognising emotions in others and understanding and behaving appropriately towards others emotions, are linked to cognitive development. They propose that delayed or limited emotion understanding may therefore put young people at-risk of psychopathological disorders as they have limited social functioning and coping skills. The same authors talk about how therapeutic interventions can be useful in helping at-risk youth develop coping strategies and learn that 'emotions, even extreme ones, are not permanent, are enduring, and are not harmful in and of themselves' (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002: 209). Southam-Gerow & Kendall (2002) go on to suggest that treatments that expose the child to fearful situations, within a supportive environment, can help overcome anxieties, giving a case example of working with a 10yr old boy with separation issues and fears of being in public spaces. Using techniques, similar to those employed in mindfulness therapies and TH and EAL/T, the boy was encouraged to pay attention to his body feelings and natural environment with the authors reporting that 'his inner world calmed down and he felt less anxious' (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002: 209).

In chapter 8 I explore themes around how contact with the horses seemed to enable the young people to feel calmer, and look at links to TH and mindfulness in terms of how being with horses facilitates similar body experiences as those taught in mindfulness practices. It seems that there are parallels with the emotion regulation literature and some of the themes that emerged from the study. By learning about horse psychology and being motivated to adapt and change their behaviour in order to work effectively with the horses, the young people were then able to regulate their emotions, which could lead to increased self-awareness as suggested as being important for successful development. Further examples of this are demonstrated by Cinderella in both the examples of her session when she found difficulty catching and haltering Duchess (p179/180) and with being able to control her emotions in order to help Leo when he was suffering (p130). Lucy too demonstrated how she gained awareness of how her behaviour and emotions could affect the horse and how she learnt how to adapt this and, furthermore, translate it to helping her with other areas of her life.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored themes of how through participating in what were perceived as challenging activities with horses, the young people were able to gain benefits which are considered 'protective factors' in the literature on risk and resilience. It is claimed that young people understood as being 'at-risk', such as the young people who were referred to The Yard, can be at greater risk of negative life outcomes, but that certain 'protective factors' can help provide resilience to overcome this. Some of these protective factors are suggested to be self-confidence and possessing self-esteem which in turn furnish a greater sense of self-efficacy, of being able to have some sense of control over your actions, environment and future. In addition it is claimed that being able to regulate emotions and behaviour and to feel empathy to others is important in terms of forming and building successful relationships and opening 'positive opportunities'. It would appear through the descriptions provided in this chapter, that participating in TH can help young people gain a sense of achievement and accomplishment through having successful experiences with the horses which can build self-confidence and self-esteem, increase mastery experiences, develop empathy and ultimately open up positive opportunities. In the next chapter I go on to explore related themes; of how building up relationships, trust, and attachments to the horses, appeared to be linked to facilitating the young people's ability to participate in activities which then enabled them to gain some of the additional benefits such as the development of empathy that is suggested as being important to resilience and healthy development.

## Chapter 6

# Developing Attachments, Empathy and Trust through Relationships with Horses

### Introduction

A major theme to emerge during the course of the research and data analysis was of how the young people developed very meaningful relationships and attachments to the horses. The participants showed their attachments to the horses in different ways, as did the horses to the young people; it definitely appeared to be a two way relationship in many cases. A number of authors speak of how many horses seem to have an innate sensitivity to young people and adults experiencing emotional distress in some way appearing to demonstrate extraordinary tolerance and understanding (Isaacson, 2009; Kohanov, 2001, 2005; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Meinersmann, Bradberry, & Bright Roberts, 2008; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). In many cases it seemed that the participants were able to display empathy to the horses, an emotion which is reported to be intrinsically linked to parental attachment styles (De Paul & Guibert, 2008) and therefore often lacking in young people who have suffered dysfunctional attachment patterns and abusive childhoods, such as many of the young people who were referred to The Yard. It is suggested that the development of empathy is imperative to 'the healthy emotional and social functioning of youths' (Thompson & Gullone, 2008: 123). Conversely a lack of empathy is reported to be linked to antisocial and aggressive behaviour and less success in later life due to difficulty in forming positive relationships (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009; Thompson & Gullone, 2008). Waal (2009) argues that empathy and co-operation have been crucial for human survival and are more important than selfishness and competition in terms of evolution. Horses live in co-operative social structures and it was interesting that many of the young people who attended The Yard seemed to identify and empathise with the horses and the different situations and challenges they faced more so than they were reported to do with other people. Some of the participants seemed to choose horses that they felt needed them on some level, such as the participant Cinderella who became very attached to the old pony Leo who suffered from health problems and required additional care and attention. How this appeared to be linked to themes of empathy is explored further on in this chapter.

These attachments to the horses seemed to work on a number of levels and to have different meanings for different young people. For some of the young people it appeared to be a way in which they could express affection and nurturing. For others there seemed to be identification with the horse's temperament, characteristics and background which corresponded with their attachments to them. Additional insights related to these themes are examined in more depth in the next chapter on the horse and the therapeutic relationship. A number of participants spoke of the horses as confidants; of how the horses understood them and of how they could trust them and 'tell them your secrets'. This idea, of animal as confidant, is something that has been noted by a number of authors in the animal-assisted therapy (AAT) literature (Fine, 2000; Levinson, 1969; Melson, 2001; Myers, 2007; Turner, 2005).

The theme of being able to express affection and nurturing had an unexpected gender element as it was perhaps especially noticeable with some of the teenage boys, with their carers often expressing surprise at their openness in displaying affection for the horses. Some of the carers and social workers commented on how these boys found it difficult to display affection and show their feelings with people but would seem to be able to do this with the horses on some level. Both Minimax and Wayne would frequently spend time hugging and stroking the mare Ruby and talking to her quietly, in soft gentle tones. They would often disengage from what we were doing in a TH session and almost go into a trance, in their own world with the horse, and we would respect this time, of what would appear to be a very healing experience for them. The value of touch and physical contact and their relationships with horses by participants recovering from trauma has been discussed by Yorke, Adams and Coady (2008). They suggest that 'the importance to healing of closeness, touch and physical contact between horse and rider' is an important element, one that is fraught with difficulty in the therapist-client relationship and which horses can perhaps provide without these ethical complexities (Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008: 25).

### **Animals and attachments**

Whilst the literature on the relationships between horses and children and possible links to attachment theory and empathy is still in its infancy, there is a more robust literature surrounding the field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as introduced in the literature review in chapter 2. Numerous authors speak of the therapeutic importance of animals in helping both adults and young people experience healthy attachments to another living being (Beck & Katcher, 1996;

Beck & Madresh, 2008; Corson & Corson, 1980; Hart, 2000; Levinson, 1972; Melson, 1990, 2001; Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987; Parish-Plass, 2008; Rew, 2000; Siegel, 1993; Walsh, 2009; Wells, 2009). Melson proposes that animals provide much opportunity for children to experience healthy attachments and to explore transitional experiences through animals and play, mentioning Freudian and Jungian theories of animal symbolism and suggesting that animals are useful because 'children readily access animals as material in the development of a sense of self' (Melson, 2001: 20). She goes on to express the view that animals provide a healing role for children by providing companionship, emotional support and opportunity to experience love and affection in addition to their role as 'social lubricant', initially suggested by Levinson (1969). In her research with children and their pets Melson suggests that, for some children, animals are more important to them than the people in their lives and that, 'for many children...pets are more likely to be part of growing up than are siblings or fathers' (Melson, 2001: 34). Tedeschi, Fitchett and Molitor support the view that animals are important for young people as they 'can provide opportunities for attachment and nurturing of others' (2005: 65). The authors suggest that animals can be especially valuable for at-risk young people as they 'can uniquely fill a combination of emotional needs, sometimes substituting for an absence of human attachment' (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molitor 2005: 65). In her AAT work with children with insecure attachments Parish-Plass (2008) makes reference to Object Relations Theory and how children can project issues onto animals in order to work through trauma. In addition, she suggests that AAT provides opportunity for change of the internal working model that Bowlby refers to (Parish-Plass, 2008).

This acknowledged value of the attachment between a young person and a pet can be equally applied to a horse. Karol, an equine-assisted psychotherapist, speaks of how one of her clients, a young girl, described the therapy horse she was working with as her best friend (Karol, 2007). In their study looking at the therapeutic value of horse-human bonding with six participants recovering from trauma, the authors Yorke, Adams and Coady (2008) concluded that,

The results of this study suggest that the relationships participants had with their horses contributed significantly to their healing from trauma (Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008: 25).



These authors go on to suggest that the horses provide a parallel to the qualities required in a successful psychotherapeutic relationship, qualities such as rapport, respect, warmth and acceptance (Yorke Adams, & Coady, 2008). The theme of how horses can perhaps provide a bridge to helping build up a successful healing relationship between patient and therapist are explored in more depth in chapter 7 on the horse and the therapeutic relationship. In this chapter I concentrate on looking at how the young people expressed their attachments to the horses and of associated observations arising through these relationships.

### **Nurture, ‘Holding’, Touch and Empathy**

The foster care company that initially funded the TH programme had specifically sought to recruit foster carers who lived in rural areas and had animals and/or a rural lifestyle, believing in the benefits of this for children in foster care. In an interview, Angie, Minimax’s carer, told me how she had her own retired horse and of how Minimax had got very attached to this old mare. She went on to tell me how Minimax would want to see the horse every day before school and was very affectionate towards her.

....and he hates it if he can’t see (the horse) before he goes to school, wants to see (the horse), he goes in and cuddles her you see, and she’s so big and strong, I suppose that he feels safe with her, I dunno, all the other horses love her because she’s the boss.

(Angie, Foster Carer).

Over the months that Minimax attended The Yard he built up a strong relationship and attachment with Ruby, who was also a mare (female horse). When he arrived he would always go straight to her and give her a long hug as recorded in my following fieldnotes. Within foster care the area of tactile contact is fraught with difficulty due to the danger of allegations of inappropriate behaviour against the foster carer (Pemberton, 2010). With children who have previously received inappropriate and abusive physical relationships this is obviously a difficult area to manage as these children can display very dysfunctional and distorted behaviours around physical touch (Hughes, 2004). Hugging the horses was clearly very important for Minimax and was perhaps fulfilling a basic need for tactile contact (Frank & Frank, 1991; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008) that had previously been missing for him. The importance of touch and tactile contact with another living being has been demonstrated by the rather distressing, and

controversial, experiments by Harlow on baby monkeys. His studies found that 'the infant monkeys preferred to cuddle with the softer, cloth surrogate mothers, regardless of the opportunity of receiving milk' (Levinson, 1980: 109).

The following extracts from fieldnotes with Minimax describe how he expressed his affection for the horse Ruby;

Once back in the yard Minimax headed straight to Ruby and put his arms around her neck, giving her a hug. He stayed hugging her for some time whilst we carried on with yard tasks around him until he eventually joined us in grooming the horses.

(Fieldnotes).

Three months since Minimax last at the yard and he seems very happy to be back, immediately leaving Angie and going straight over to Ruby to give her a big hug, asking 'have you missed me Ruby!'. He stands with her, his arms around her neck and his face buried into her long black mane for a good 5 minutes whilst we chat to Angie and catch up on how Minimax has been.

(Fieldnotes).

Wayne too would spend much of his time at the beginning and end of sessions hugging Ruby and gently stroking her face and neck in quiet contemplation. In one session where he finally got to ride on her we suggested some exercises for him to do on her back. These are essentially stretching and balancing exercises and often employed in vaulting lessons in order to encourage better balance and riding ability. Many of the young people enjoyed doing these and Wayne was no exception. On this particular session we asked Wayne if he now trusted Ruby enough to feel confident to allow himself to lie backwards along her back. This is both a good stretching and balancing exercise, but also one of trust in the horse and oneself. After an initial moment of hesitation Wayne willingly agreed and lay back along Ruby's back so that his head was almost touching her tail. The mare stood quietly and still as a rock whilst he did this, and Wayne remained in silence connected to the horse for a good few minutes. We too remained in silence, listening to the birds singing and the far away mooing of a cow until eventually Wayne chose to rise to a sitting position again. Following this session the therapist Deana commented that this

seemed to mirror a sort of 'holding' for Wayne on some level and his YOT mentor Peter told us how Wayne appeared much calmer and more relaxed after this session.

The clinical child psychologist Susan Brooks (2006) also suggests that this tactile element may be providing an arena for the child to be 'held' in this psychoanalytical sense as well as a physical one. She writes;

Children who have been under-nurtured have a second chance to experience being wanted through touching and hugging large animals who can 'hold' them. Many of us have had a big grandmother who, when she pulled us to her and enveloped us in her big hug, allowed us to feel love and security. Animals, in many ways, can provide such a 'hug'; they can certainly give under-nurtured children a second chance to feel a sense of security and love (Brooks, 2006: 202).

In addition the author Scott (1980) writes about how touch is important in relation to attachment theory in terms of attaching to the therapist. It may be that for some of the young people who were demonstrating some sort of attachments to the horses that the horses were providing some of the aspects of healthy attachment that had been missing in their own early childhoods;

tactile stimulation is a very important part of the attachment process. According to one line of clinical theory, the patient must become attached to the therapist if there is to be a successful outcome. This is especially important in the treatment of autism, where there is a derangement of the attachment process itself (Scott, 1980: 139).

It is suggested that as well as the tactile opportunities offered by animals there are other nurturing qualities in caring for an animal which have an additional gender dimension. The authors Levinson (1980) and Melson (2001) make the claim that caring for a pet can provide an acceptable outlet for boys to express and experience nurturing. They suggest that there are limited opportunities for boys to develop and display these important nurturing tendencies in Western societies. Melson describes this as,

Caring for pets is the only outlet for nurturing others that is ubiquitously available for most boys in their homes and does not reflect a suspected diminution of masculine

behaviour. This makes pet care a potential training ground for learning how to nurture another being who has different needs from one's own (Melson, 2001: 58).

It appeared that through Wayne and Minimax building up a trusting relationship with the mare Ruby and experiencing healthy tactile experiences with her they were able to display affection and nurturing behaviours towards her. There may be connections to what some of the authors above suggest in terms of providing an acceptable outlet to experience some of the psychological elements which may have been missing from their childhoods, or are not considered acceptable masculine traits for boys to display in our society.

### **Horses helping to meet unmet needs and the development of empathy**

Attachment theory talks of the concept of 'felt security', an internalized secure base, which, through normal healthy childhood development, arises through the experience of being loved and receiving care sensitive to the physical and emotional needs of the individual child (Bowlby, 1988; Howe & Fearnley, 1999). Through receiving 'good enough' parenting (Winnicott, 1965) and unconditional love the child can learn to love others and, in turn, go on to have healthy adult relationships. Conversely, where children instead experience neglect, abuse and inconsistent care the ability to form healthy, trusting relationships is seriously compromised (Crittenden, 1988; Howe, 2005; Hughes, 2004). Destructive and difficult behaviours that are a consequence of living in survival mode can be a result and were often reported on referral forms of the young people who attended The Yard. Whilst attachment theory is based on relationships between humans, some authors have suggested that the concept may be applied to the human-animal relationship (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Levinson, 1972; Melson, 1990; 2001, Parish-Plass, 2008; Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005; Walsh, 2009). This literature claims that for children and young people who have experienced unhealthy childhood backgrounds, contact and forming relationships with animals can facilitate steps to forming healthy relationships with people (although see Crawford, Worsham, & Swinehart (2006) for a critique of whether human-animal attachments parallel traditional attachment theories).

The author Melson (2003) proposes that possessing empathy is a precursor to nurturance. Another study claims that there is a positive link between childhood pet-keeping and higher levels of empathy to both animals and people (Paul & Serpell, 1993). From a psychotherapeutic perspective it may be that by giving love and affection to the horses the young people who

attended The Yard were, on some level, experiencing some of the nurturing and love and affection that had been missing in their childhoods. It is argued that attachment to a 'warm, sensitive, responsive and dependable' adult is required for healthy childhood development (Karen, 1998: 6). Where this has been missing some authors suggest that building positive relationships and attachments with horses may fulfil some of these needs (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Gammage, 2008; Karol, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997). Because horses are dependent on humans for their care and wellbeing, in the same way as a child is dependent on its parents or other caregivers, it may be that caring for the horses was a way of the young people helping another living being with the suggested associated benefits. Schwartz and Sendor (1999) claim that 'helping others helps oneself' and that participants who gave support to their peers showed pronounced improvements in confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, depression and role functioning. Additionally there would appear to be parallels with the importance of empathy in healthy development and social and emotional functioning in later life (Thompson & Gullone, 2008). It is proposed that 'empathy is the single most desirable quality in nurturing parenting' (Bavolek, cited in De Paul & Guibert, 2008: 1064). Accordingly it is argued that being able to respond empathically towards their child is considered a main protective factor in successful parenting and child development, and, conversely, child neglect issues are a consequence if empathetic parenting is lacking (De Paul & Guibert, 2008). Lexman and Reeves describe empathy as; 'Empathy is an ability to put yourself in another person's shoes – and to act in a way that is sensitive to other people's perspectives' (2009: 17). These authors make reference to studies that support the belief that empathy develops alongside healthy attachment patterns with a positive carer in early childhood. They go on to make connections to the neurobiological literature which suggests that empathy is 'hardwired' through synapse connections formed as a result of responsive positive, empathic care. Other authors suggest that the opposite happens from neglectful and abusive early childhood experience and that these children do not therefore develop empathy, with anti-social behaviours a result (Gerhardt, 2004). Empathy is one of the characteristics vitally important in determining success in later life, due to its importance in relation to forming successful working and personal relationships, according to a study by the think tank Demos (Lexman & Reeves, 2009) and has links to the risk and resilience literature covered in Chapter 3.

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

adult caregivers, that by building a relationship with an animal the beginnings of the development of empathy may be facilitated. Whilst research looking at the development of empathy in these groups is limited, a number of authors make the suggestion that animals can help children in general develop empathy, 'interactivity' and 'moral development' (Levinson, 1980; Melson, 2001, 2003; Myers, 2007; Porseky, 1990). How the horses often appeared to give the young people the opportunity to give them love and affection was expressed through the way they behaved with them, often hugging and telling them they loved them. When I asked Cinderella about her relationship with Leo (her favourite pony) and how she thought he liked her to behave with him, she replied, 'just giving him love...and....and they like it if you talk to them in a soft, low-toned voice'. Talking to the participant Emma about some of the things that she liked about being with the horses, she told me 'they need you to look after them so it makes you feel needed'. For Emma the fact that she felt the horses depended on her seemed to give her a sense of responsibility and feeling of being needed. In her study with homeless youth the author Rew (2000) found that many of the young people spoke of how attached they were to their dogs who gave them companionship and how, in turn, they felt responsible for their welfare. This also gave them a reason to engage in healthier behaviours as 'having a dog makes me feel like I gotta stay healthier so the dog's okay' (Rew, 2000: 129).

The relationship that Cinderella developed with the pony Leo appeared to contain some elements of empathy. From her very first session Cinderella was immediately attracted to Leo, an older pony who sometimes suffered from a painful foot condition called laminitis, and was very concerned about his health, wanting to spend much of her time in TH sessions grooming and caring for him. For Cinderella the relationship that she built up with Leo seemed to be based on her wanting to give him love and attention, aspects that, according to her referral form and social worker, had been lacking from her childhood and subsequent fragmented life in care. We had been informed that Cinderella had experienced numerous foster placements which frequently broke down. This was to be the case whilst she attended The Yard, moving foster placement with very little notice to another county during the summer that she came for sessions. In a questionnaire about their experiences of TH some of the participants completed for the research, Cinderella wrote this about Leo;

I love Leo the best because he's an old boy who needs loads of TLC. He loves being groomed and cuddled feeding and general attention and stuff and I feel I can give him

love. Today when we measured the hard feeds out into the buckets for the horses I gave him a bit extra coz' he's special!

(Cinderella, questionnaire response).

This theme of feeling that the horses needed them, and of being able to provide nurture to them in some way was mirrored by another participant Lucy who switched her affections from the more independent mare, Ruby, to Timmy, a new pony to join The Yard. Timmy was a rather anxious pony who got very agitated at new situations and was especially terrified of donkeys! One day out hacking in the lanes on Timmy and Ruby we came across a field containing two donkeys which caused Timmy to display great fear, trying to run away and prancing and snorting himself into an anxious sweat. However, with my encouragement Lucy was able to remain calm and composed and help Timmy overcome his fear and pass the donkeys. Later when I asked her about her feelings towards the two horses following this incident Lucy replied;

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

(Lucy, Participant).

This incident also provides an illustration of how wanting to work effectively with the horses enabled some of the participants to modify their behaviour. In the case with Lucy and Timmy, Lucy had to overcome her own initial anxiety and fear of Timmy's potentially dangerous behaviour (running off down the road) in order to remain calm and confident and provide a role model to Timmy. A further example of this is provided in the following extract with Cinderella and her relationship with Leo.

### **Modifying behaviour through empathy**

It seems significant that Cinderella chose Leo, who was the most fragile and defenceless pony in the herd, as her favourite pony at The Yard. Cinderella tended to be rather loud and dominant in her manner, both in her voice and body language, and had difficulties in respecting personal space boundaries. Her referral form stated that 'Cinderella can display aggressive and defiant behaviour' and we experienced a testing of boundaries on her first session when she tried to light

a cigarette despite being only 15 yrs old and a clearly displayed No Smoking sign! However, it seemed that her love of horses enabled her to overcome this defensive behaviour and by choosing Leo, who needed lots of gentle and calm care and attention due to his age and health condition, Cinderella had to monitor and change her behaviour to look after him. The following extract from sessional and fieldnotes is of a difficult session where Cinderella had to overcome her initial wish to run away when we found Leo lying down in the field after he had suffered an acute attack of laminitis (painful foot condition) and needed veterinary attention.

*Leo, Cinderella and the vet*

Quite difficult session today! Had both Cinderella and another girl together today as this girl has recently moved into (foster) placement with Cinderella. Cinderella not happy about this and the two refused to do anything together so we made the decision to split the two up this week, with me spending the session with Cinderella and Leo and Donna with the other girl and Ruby (although still within the boundaries of The Yard).

Cinderella arrived and went straight to field to see Leo as she didn't want to be anywhere near the other girl. However, before I reached them she came running back crying and saying that he couldn't move. It was obvious that he had got an acute attack of laminitis. I called the vet but Cinderella found this really difficult and said she couldn't bear to stay with Leo whilst he was treated and had an injection. She then threatened to run off. But when I asked her what she thought Leo would prefer and what would be best for him, she reluctantly agreed to stay. She was then really brave and caring, holding him while the vet gave him his injection, even though she obviously found this really hard and held her face away. Cinderella then helped me collect wood-shavings and make a big deep bed in the barn for him so he would be comfortable. Once we got him in to the barn Leo lay down and she lay down on the shavings with him, cradling his head in her arms. She asked us to take some photos of the two of them together on her mobile phone which we did.

(Fieldnotes and sessional notes).

From a psychotherapeutic interpretation a number of theories may be applicable in this encounter. Cinderella certainly showed tremendous strength of character to overcome her initial, and usual, reaction to difficult situations, which according to her referral form and from our



experience, was to either run away or become defensive and possibly aggressive. If, through her early life experiences, Cinderella had not had her needs met together within a secure holding environment, she could have remained in a state of anxiety possibly lasting until adulthood. Winnicott believed that the defenceless infant needs to be given a secure holding base in which to be psychologically able to develop a secure sense of self in the world (Winnicott, 1965). Having a healthy attachment to a loving, attuned, caregiver within the early years has become accepted as fundamental in understanding human development (Bowlby, 1988; Howe & Fearnley, 1999; Hughes, 2004). If Cinderella had not developed secure attachments, had learnt that her needs were not met, and, possibly worse, experienced abusive, inconsistent care, it is likely that she would have needed to develop coping strategies of becoming defended (Winnicott, 1984) to protect herself in an attempt to ‘ward off the sense of helplessness, deflation and dependency’ (Almaas, 1988: 375). It could be argued that Cinderella had had to learn to survive by relying only on herself (Hughes, 2004).

The Yard drew on philosophical therapeutic concepts drawn from many traditions including core process, person-centred and Buddhist psychotherapy which have as a primary belief that the ‘true self’ wishes to be fundamentally healthy and is simply obscured by the ‘protective false self’ (Mearns & Thorne, 2000; Rogers, 1951; Sills, 2009; Winnicott 1965). In the encounter between Cinderella and Leo outlined above, something in her relationship with Leo had enabled Cinderella to change her normal behaviour in this instance. Perhaps by beginning to develop an attachment to Leo (who could be interpreted as being a projection of herself) and, in turn feelings of care and empathy towards him (and herself), she was able to obscure her ‘protective false self’, temporarily at least, and allow her ‘true self’, which fundamentally wants to heal, to emerge. The hope from a psychotherapeutic analysis would be that this experience would enable Cinderella to learn that she was ‘able to relate to others (and herself) in a more positive and loving manner’ (Gammage, 2008: 5).

Nearly a year later after Cinderella had moved foster placements and stopped coming for TH sessions she found my work mobile telephone number in a leaflet about the TH programme and sent me the following text:

Hey Hannah it's (Cinderella) the one whose favourite horse is Leo how is he doing hope he's alright.

(Cinderella, text message).

This communication served to reinforce the attachment, and ability to empathise, that Cinderella had formed to Leo, remembering him many months later. Melson suggests that an important aspect of attachment is ‘the motivation of the attached person to maintain closeness and continue the relationship’ (Melson, 1990: 93). She also goes on to suggest that, in the case of children’s attachments to pets, a child may feel close to a pet without necessarily spending much time with it. It would appear to be the emotional tie which is an important element and perhaps involved in developing a healthy internal working model. Bretherton (1985) suggests that children form an internal working model of every attachment relationship and that these are developmentally significant as they enable the child to access ideas and feelings about relationships even when the attachment object is physically absent. This internal working model can then be applied to other, similar relationships (Bretherton, 1985).

De Paul and Guibert cite studies which claim that ‘a person is more likely to experience ‘empathy’ when the observer experiences a psychological sense of merging with the observed’ (2008: 1067). In chapter 7 on the horse and the therapeutic relationship, it is shown how many of the participants at The Yard seemed to strongly identify with certain horses. It may be that elements of this ‘merging’ may be relevant in the development of empathy. In the case of Cinderella, a young person who had experienced dysfunctional attachment models in her childhood, it could be that by having experienced a healthy attachment and relationship with the pony Leo, demonstrated by thinking about him and wanting to know how he was some time into the future, she was enabled to form the beginning of an element of a healthy internal working model of attachment, together with the ability to form empathic responses towards another living being.

### **Relationship, Safety and Trust**

In the current study the ways in which the participants built relationships with the horses were expressed in different ways and could be subtle and slow to develop, as in the case of Minimax and Ruby and Emma and Jason, or instantaneous as with Cinderella and Leo. The extract below provides an example of what appeared to be the beginnings of a relationship building between Minimax and the horse Ruby, and of how Minimax interpreted Ruby’s actions towards him. This section from fieldnotes was following a session where Minimax had been working with Ruby in the round pen leading her around a small obstacle course consisting of poles and cones. It was an

interesting phenomenon, that we witnessed time and time again, that many of the young people would choose horses who mirrored 'issues' or behaviours that they identified with. We wondered if aspects of projection were also at play in the encounters, and this is explored in more depth in chapter 7.

*Minimax and Ruby: identification and connection?*

Minimax completed the task successfully although he could be rushed in his actions without thinking through the route first. This resulted in him getting his foot slightly trodden on by Ruby. However, this was also around the same time that Ruby was displaying some anxiety from being separated from her fieldmate Leo (they are very attached to each other and show distress when separated) and Minimax may have been affected by this as he became a little tearful.

We are aware from his referral form and from speaking to his foster carer, Angie, that Minimax experiences huge emotional loss and subsequent behaviour problems due to being separated from his brother who was in the process of being adopted. Being mindful of this we suggested to Minimax that we return Ruby to the yard to be reunited with Leo and put his foot in a cold bucket of water to prevent swelling. Sitting on the bench with his foot in the cold water Minimax remained a little quiet and tearful. We were aware that Ruby had only slightly trodden on Minimax's toes and there was obviously no damage to his foot but that Minimax was obviously expressing a need to be tearful for other reasons and we allowed him to do this with no pressure. During this time a remarkable thing occurred. Ruby left Leo and the other horses and purposefully walked over to us putting her head in the bucket of water to take a drink, splashing the water onto Minimax's leg with her nose in the process and making us all laugh! This immediately cheered Minimax up, especially when we pointed out that Ruby could have much more easily gone and drunk from the (nearer) water tank but had chosen to come over and take a drink from his bucket. He asked 'do you think she's saying sorry for treading on my toe?'. We replied that it did seem as though Ruby was initiating a connection with him in some way, even though we were not sure if horses understand sorry.

(Fieldnotes).

At the risk of criticisms of anthropomorphism, it certainly appeared that this action from Ruby was outside her normal behaviour as the water tank she normally drank from was nearer to her and the other horses, and she had purposefully left the other horses to come back over to Minimax to put her head in the bucket he was cooling his foot in. I wondered whether other unconscious, unknown, factors were at play in this encounter and of the possible projections going on with Minimax choosing to work with a horse who experienced and displayed very similar 'separation issues' to himself. Minimax chose to work with a horse who appeared to mirror his own feelings and this may have been why he identified with her. Indeed, at a later date Minimax went on to tell me how he felt Ruby 'understood him' because of their similar pasts. There are many examples of these unexplained actions and encounters between horses and people and numerous authors speak of how they have experienced and witnessed profound healing from encounters with horses (Baker, 2004; Isaacson, 2009; Kohanov, 2001, 2005; Richards, 2006; Soren, 2001). Whilst these are clearly unknowable and unanswerable questions it would seem that the fact that Minimax felt that Ruby was making a connection with him in some way, which he interpreted as an apology for her hurting him, was therapeutic and comforting to him in a way which was meaningful for him.

Like some of these other authors above have noted, one of the therapists at The Yard, Deana, talked of how she noticed that it would appear that some of the horses would behave differently, and sometimes in a maternal, caring, way, according to the participants' needs. She explained that;

For I know I'm sure, I mean, you know, I've seen Ruby when she... she's almost been like a different pony with different people. You know, sometimes she can be quite mischievous and adventurous and another time if she's working with someone who is more nervous would be gentler and calmer and...and... more motherly, actually.

(Deana, Therapist).

This sense that the horses appeared to be willing partners in the therapeutic process and that these relationships and connections seemed to operate for both the participants and the horses, was also noted by the foster carer, Angie, who said that she believed that 'the horses seem to sense that a child is troubled'. Sally, a counsellor and EAL/T therapist who worked at The Yard in addition to another centre, told me about how her horse would behave differently with her clients than with experienced horse people,

But somehow when she's working with these youngsters she knows something. I don't know what it is she knows, but she does. She knows enough to stand ground-tied with people all around her, clients all around her, feet being kicked up, being groomed at the same time, you know, other animals are about, and she doesn't move.

(Sally, Counsellor).

Some of the participants expressed this by speaking of how they felt the horses understood them, and of how they both identified with each other, as the following section about Minimax and Ruby illustrates.

#### **'She understands me': trust and attachment**

In a questionnaire about his experiences with the horses Minimax expressed his attachment to Ruby as, 'I love Ruby because she's quiet and understands me'. In an informal interview with Minimax whilst sitting at the bench in the yard in the sun with the horses milling about, I asked him if he could tell me what he meant by this, and if he could explain his relationship with Ruby to me in more depth. Minimax answered that he believed that horses, 'have to learn to trust you'. When he first started to form a relationship with Ruby Minimax had been very interested in where Ruby had lived previously to coming to The Yard and what her life and treatment may have been like. He went on to explain to me,

I think Ruby trusted me straight away 'coz she knew I had the same past as her... I think she could just sort of tell.

(Minimax, participant).

An example of how this trust was reciprocal was made evident to us on one session with Minimax when we went into the fields to collect the horses and Ruby was lying down, relaxing. My extract from fieldnotes that day reads;

When we went out into the field to bring in Ruby and Jason, Ruby was lying down resting in the sun. Minimax went straight over and sat down on the grass next to her. He seemed very relaxed with her, as did Ruby with Minimax, seeming quite happy to remain lying

down which is often unusual for horses as they are obviously extremely vulnerable lying down and will only remain so with someone they trust and feel secure with.

(Fieldnotes).

Another participant Kelly spoke of how she felt that the mare Ruby ‘understands me’ and that the reason she felt drawn to wanting to work with this particular horse was because, ‘she is calm and it’s like I feel a sort of connection with her’. Kelly’s therapist Deana, who led these TH sessions with Kelly, had told me how closed Kelly had been in the previous six months prior to her attending The Yard. It was certainly noticeable how quiet and unresponsive Kelly had been during her first few sessions, it being very difficult to engage with her. However, over the next few sessions Kelly did begin to open up and this appeared to coincide with her beginning to form a relationship with Ruby. In conversation whilst out riding Ruby in the lanes one day Kelly began to relax and talk more about her feelings towards the mare. She told me how she felt that horses, ‘(they) can just sense your moods, sort of like... it’s like they can just tell how you’re feeling’.

#### **‘They won’t tell your secrets’: horses as confidants**

Another way in which the participants appeared to find their relationships with the horses valuable was as confidants who they could talk to and tell them secrets. This is an area which has been noted in AAT, beginning with the psychologist Levinson who introduced pets into his psychotherapeutic work with children as he believed that they could offer opportunities as confidant for the young people, amongst many other benefits (Levinson, 1969). Chardonens points to studies which claim that children ‘talk more easily with their animals than with their therapists’ and about how the animal can be considered as a catalyst for social interactions (Chardonens, 2009: 323).

The therapist Deana, talking about one of the participants, Freya, with whom she worked both at The Yard and her residential placement, explained that that when she first met Freya;

She was very defensive and, um, but we had had several conversations around dogs and horses and she, um, I got the impression from her that she liked animals more than she liked human beings.

(Deana, Therapist).

Bowers and MacDonald (2001) suggest that animals can meet some of the needs of children who lack a secure attachment base. They claim that children who have experienced abuse and trauma are more likely to turn to animals when they are stressed, as animals can offer some of the unconditional love and caring missing from these children's lives. In their study on equine-facilitated psychotherapy with 'at-risk adolescents', Bowers and MacDonald propose how the horse can be especially effective in developing alternate secure attachments due to its unique characteristics. They propose that the hands-on interaction between horse and child fosters opportunities for the child to learn to trust another living being as they learn how the horse begins to trust them once they are able to modify their behaviour to interact with it in a positive way (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001).

Many of the participants at The Yard talked of how they felt it was also important for the horses to trust them. How the young people understood this is demonstrated during one early session with Cinderella who was experiencing difficulty catching the mare Duchess in the field (see p179/180 for a more detailed description of this TH session). This was due to Cinderella's body language being rather dominating and threatening to Duchess, who merely walked away out of reach from Cinderella when she tried to approach her. After initially giving up and throwing the headcollar on the ground in anger, Cinderella finally calmed down and sat down in the field to work out what to do next. I took this opportunity to ask her what different approaches may help Duchess feel more secure and encourage her to want to be caught. Expecting her to suggest returning to the yard to fetch food to entice her with, I was surprised when instead she answered, 'well, probably getting to know me a bit more first, you know, so she knows she can trust me'.

Some authors offer the suggestion that the repetitive rhythmic pattern of horse riding offers a connection to the horse that is healing in some way (Game, 2001), others that it can open up receptors in the brain which are linked with calmness and learning (Isaacson, 2009; Moorhead, 2010). Evans and Franklin talk of how the rhythm of riding, specifically dressage, 'links emotions and motions' to produce the ultimate 'moments of floating harmony which take them outside a ground-bound existence' (Evans & Franklin, 2010: 176). Further ongoing research is looking at how being with horses can lower heart rates similarly to the way stroking dogs has been claimed to lower blood pressure (Friedmann *et al.*, 1983; Gehrke, 2006; Mistral, 2007). Although some of these theories have yet to be empirically proven I found with astonishing regularity that participants would start to talk and open up whilst out hacking (riding in the countryside). On one occasion when out riding with Emma she began telling me about the other

animals she had at home which included a cockerel Charlie and a new puppy. She likened them to family members saying that, 'Timmy (pony) is like the big brother, (the cockerel) is like middle brother and (the puppy) is like the little sister'. I asked her if she meant that the animals were like family members to her and she replied, 'no, animals are *better* than family because they don't tell anyone your secrets'.

This element, of animals being better than people because they will keep secrets, was replicated by Cinderella. In an informal interview during one session she also talks of how the horses 'won't tell anyone your secrets' and wrote on a questionnaire;

...you can just talk to the horses and they won't answer back. They won't tell you're secrets and when you see their ears twitch you know they're listening.

(Cinderella, Participant).

It would appear that the participants felt safe enough with animals and horses to open up to and tell them their secrets. Safety and trust in the therapeutic relationship is argued to be fundamental to enable change to happen,

Creating this trust is the main initial task of psychotherapy. Indeed, this is the crucial task of psychotherapy, because once it is established, the patient can then pursue what he needs to, knowing he is not alone with it (Sedgewick, 2001: 95).

By trusting and feeling safe with the horses it could be argued that this could be a starting point to developing a trusting relationship with others in the therapeutic environment. Participants expressed this theme in different ways. Lucy explained how she felt safe with one of the horses, Duchess, despite her large size, partly because of her older age. The element of the horse having a motherly instinct also appeared to be an important factor to Lucy who felt that Duchess wanted to protect her in some way:

Yeah, but it don't seem to matter (that she was so large) because she was such a nice ride, a nice horse to ride. Felt right to ride. Also, she was older again, so you felt really safe, that was the other thing. It was that kind of feeling that she'd been around the block and



she knew what was there, and because she had had a foal, her motherly instinct was quite strong, so she wanted to kind of protect you from the danger... to me... of going around the block.

(Lucy, Participant).

Davies, Winter and Cicchetti (2006) writing about emotional security theory in the context of children who have experienced intra-family domestic violence, claim that 'within the hierarchy of human goals, protection, safety and security are among the most salient and important' (Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006: 709). It may be that the horses offered the participants a sense of safety and security which had been missing from their lives previously.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored how many of the young people appeared to develop strong and meaningful relationships and attachments to the horses. In turn themes of nurture, trust, and safety, and of being able to empathise with the horses were described. The ability to empathise is considered to have importance in terms of being able to build positive and successful relationships and is related to attachment and risk and resilience theories. Through developing attachments to the horses it has been suggested that young people who experienced 'disorganised' attachments and abusive, neglectful and dysfunctional childhoods, may be able to recreate and receive some of the nurturing and unconditional elements missing from their lives through meaningful relationships with the horses. I have also suggested how horses provide an alternative healthy tactile relationship, argued to be an important element in childhood developmental experience, and that they provided opportunities for the young people to identify with their individual experiences and characters.

In the following chapter on the horse and the therapeutic relationship I expand on how some of these themes, of developing a feeling of safety and trust with the horses, can perhaps transfer to establishing a therapeutic relationship between the young person and the adult practitioners and therapists. I also explore themes of projection and identification and other related psychotherapeutic processes.

## Chapter 7

# The Horse, the Therapeutic Relationship and other Psychotherapeutic Insights

### Introduction

This chapter looks at a number of themes related to the psychotherapeutic literature. Firstly I explore how the relationships the young people developed with the horses could be seen to have some parallels with the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist. I also look at how building up relationships with the horses seemed to correspond with the young people building up relationships with people: the horse appeared to be a facilitator to the young people being able to connect to others. Because the adults views were more strongly represented in this area I have drawn more heavily on data from the adults who contributed to the study in this chapter than in the previous chapters. Another theme to emerge which is linked to how the young people related to the horses was of how they identified with them on different levels. Psychotherapeutic themes of identification, analogy, introjections and projection are perhaps relevant and I explore these in relation to the participants' interactions with the horses in addition to the therapists' views.

A central tenet within client or person-centred and humanistic therapies is the quality of the therapeutic relationship. Jung stated that 'a close rapport is needed' (Jung, 1983: 166) whilst within Rogerian therapy it is referred to as 'congruence' (Rogers, 1967, 1992). The therapist Carl Rogers, from whose work client-centred therapy has evolved, claimed that 'significant positive personality change does not occur except in a relationship' (Rogers, 1992: 828). Within this framework it is understood that in order for the therapeutic process to be effective a trusting 'therapeutic' or 'helping alliance' is imperative (Frank & Frank, 1991; Mearns, 1994). Rogers suggests that one of the most important qualities for an effective counsellor or therapist to possess is a great self-awareness of their own feelings and emotions in order to be able to meet the client on a 'person-to-person basis'. He describes this as '*being himself*' (Rogers, 1967:108). Within EAL/T many authors talk of the horse being an effective therapist in its own right as it knows nothing else but to be itself: a horse does not understand how to put on a false self or behave in any other way but with congruence, as it is an instinctive animal (Frame, 2006; Karol, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Meinersmann, Bradberry, & Roberts, 2008). It is argued that through beginning to build rapport and feeling safe in relationship with a horse the young

person can begin to feel safe in the therapeutic relationship, and this can then lead to positive change and learning (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Brooks, 2006; Karol, 2007; Meinersmann, Bradberry, & Roberts, 2008; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008).

Other concepts such as Rogers' 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1992) and the Winnecottian safe, or holding, space (Winnicott, 1965) could also be argued to be applicable to the horse-human therapeutic relationship and will be explored in more depth in this chapter. Because relationships with adults have, more often than not, been fraught with confusion and betrayal for many young people in care such as the participants at The Yard, the importance of a non-judgemental relationship with another living being is perhaps even more imperative, something also suggested by Levinson (1969, 1980). Writing about the role of therapy dogs with children Lori Friesen suggests that, 'children seem to perceive them as non-judgemental participants who are outside of the complications and expectations of human relationships' (Friesen, 2010: 261). In addition to a non-judgemental attitude other characteristics of the therapeutic relationship are suggested by Yorke, Adams and Coady, who state that,

a good helping relationship, characterised by mutual liking, respect, rapport, trust, warmth, acceptance, and collaboration, is the most powerful predictive factor for successful client outcome (2008: 17).

It is suggested that many of the above qualities can be provided by the horse (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Brooks, 2006; Karol, 2007; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). Certainly it will be seen that the words many of the participants used to describe their relationships with the horses contained words such as trust, respect, calm and safe. An example of this being Freya's description of why she was especially drawn to the mare Ruby, telling me, 'I like her (Ruby) because she is kind...and calm'. This suggests that the young people were perhaps experiencing some of the indicators provided above by Yorke, Adams and Coady (2008) of a successful therapeutic relationship.

By virtue of starting to feel safe with the horse and experiencing some of the above factors, which are claimed to be crucial in therapy, the young person may be able to start to express how s/he is feeling, and consequently the therapeutic healing process may begin. Many of the young people seemed to identify with certain horses and want to explore how the horses felt about situations such as partings, moving to a new home, meeting new horses and past

experiences. This was something also found by Trotter *et al.*, who write, ‘participants were often instinctively drawn to a horse that had characteristics similar to their own’ (2008: 263) and was a theme found in my previous riding therapy study with adults (Burgon, 2003). It may be that this was a way for the young people to explore and process certain issues that were relevant for them, but in a way that was one step removed, and so, perhaps, safer. Links with the psychological concepts of the use of identification, metaphor, and analogy within the therapeutic context will be explored later in this chapter, with especial reference to a centre which uses gardening and the use of metaphor with growing plants and personal growth and healing as this has many parallels to the work at The Yard with horses (Linden & Grute, 2002). First I look at how horses can perhaps provide elements of what Rogers (1967, 1992) termed ‘unconditional positive regard’.

### **Building relationships: horses and ‘unconditional positive regard’**

As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, being with the horses seemed to help provide a feeling of safety to some of the participants. The therapist Deana described how she felt that this then transferred to her being able to develop a therapeutic relationship with the participant Kelly. Deana told me how one of the participants Kelly called her by her name for the first time during one of her early sessions with us at The Yard. Deana had had been seeing Kelly for over six months previously at the residential facility where she had been placed by social services, and had found it very difficult to engage with her. On her first few sessions Kelly was very quiet and reserved but as she grew in confidence and started to build up a relationship with the mare Ruby she became more communicative, as demonstrated in the following section from field notes.

#### *Kelly and Ruby: round pen work*

Kelly - very sensitive and quiet manner with Ruby today, showing patience and perseverance with her as Ruby was initially reluctant to leave the yard. Then, up in the round pen, she was distracted by some geldings (male horses) in a nearby field - to which we laughed together as Kelly said ‘I know some girls like that’! Initially Kelly had a tendency to be unconfident and ineffective in her aids (instructions) and body language. However, she soon discovered that by remaining calm but having a confident body language and being persistent, that Ruby began to listen to her and lead and halt when Kelly asked with very subtle aids. Kelly was clearly pleased with the positive feedback

this gave her and became more communicative and confident in her manner with us.  
(Field notes).

In our debrief meeting following the TH session Deana told me how it was in this session that Kelly spoke to her by name for the first time. Later in an interview with Deana when I asked her to expand on this she told me,

...and it was very, very, difficult to engage with her. She was very defensive (.) and, well, yeah, I mean, I'd been working with her for six months and she hadn't actually called me by my name until we came here, and we'd been here for only a few sessions and then she called me by my name and (.) and I think that for me just (.) um, I saw such a contrast in her. I think that was (.) that was what was so clear for me was the time I'd been working with her, if that was the only side of her that I'd ever seen, I would have said, you know, she's very kind of (.) um, I might use words like hostile or defensive or difficult to engage, but here, I mean, she was like another child. She was like another person. Much softer, more open, more trusting, more willing to engage with me, and I could see a difference in her face when she was here to when I was working with her in the other place. And (.) yes, just more kind of open, trusting.

(Deana, Therapist).

Rogers talks of the need for 'unconditional positive regard' and empathy as being necessary conditions to facilitate therapeutic change. In terms of unconditional positive regard he says that this means there are no conditions attached to acceptance by the therapist, and, for empathy, that the therapist has an accurate, empathic awareness of the client's experience (Rogers, 1967, 1992). Both of these principles have been argued to be contained within the relationship possible with the horse and other animals (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Chardonnens, 2009; Fine, 2000; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). The horse has no preconceived judgements of the person before him/her and, additionally, some authors argue that horses possess an innate understanding and empathic behaviour towards many people suffering from social/emotional difficulties of some kind (Isaacson, 2009; Kohanov, 2001; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). Whilst issues of anthropomorphism may be levied at these claims, it could be seen on p133 with the encounter between Minimax and Ruby after she trod on

his toe that it was meaningful for Minimax to believe that the mare was demonstrating some empathy towards him.

Whilst it is not the case that all EAL/T centres follow a natural horsemanship approach, the philosophy and practice of natural horsemanship adopted by The Yard followed principles of respect and unconditional positive regard in terms of its horse management. The therapist Deana explains that for her this is evidenced by the fact that,

..there's a respect for their... the horses' spirits which in my experience with kind of a lot of traditional stables or schools is that they're objects to be used by whoever, whereas here they're very much individuals, um, and respected for who they are.

(Deana, Therapist).

Perhaps by the practitioners demonstrating principles of 'unconditional positive regard' towards the horses, together with the fact that horses, as with other animals, are unconditional and congruent in their behaviour, an environment is created where the young people are able to experience this principle. Chardonens talks of the horse as a co-therapist and suggests that,

a horse as a co-therapist presents, by the virtue of its characteristics and reactions, important similarities to the therapeutic conditions described as necessary and sufficient for the therapist to facilitate the change process (Chardonens, 2009: 327).

It may be that by building an authentic relationship with a horse, within an environment of unconditional positive regard, Kelly was finally able to build a relationship with her therapist, Deana, in the same way that Chardonens suggests that 'the animal helps the therapist build an authentic relationship with the child' (2009: 328). Other studies claim to show that the 'personal interaction with the therapist as the single most important factor in their treatment' Sloane *et al.*, 1975:225). These authors reported that patients who felt high levels of warmth, empathy and genuineness in their therapists had higher success rates of therapy. It may be that the young person perceives and feels the horse as providing some of these characteristics which then enables the growth of a relationship with the EAL/T therapist

The psychotherapist Brooks states simply that one of the reasons animals are more appealing to young people who have suffered abuse at the hands of adults is because animals do

not contain ulterior motives (Brooks, 2006). For Deana, she suggests that the horse provides these conditions and characteristics because,

...the horse doesn't read the referral form, doesn't have any preconceptions of this child who's coming, and have any idea of attachment disorder or therapeutic intervention or anything like that. Any label or ADHD or whatever. They meet the child in the present moment.

(Deana, Therapist).

The participant Lucy also voiced the opinion of how important it was for her that horses didn't label her. One day at The Yard Lucy told me about a difficult meeting she had recently attended regarding her disability benefit (DLA) and a student work experience placement at a local veterinary practice she wished to undertake as part of the college course in animal care she was enrolled on. Lucy was clearly agitated and upset about the meeting when she arrived at The Yard, telling me how she felt confused about being labelled disabled as that is not how she saw herself, and how, 'the forms have been made by people who don't have a single clue!'. However, once we were out riding on the horses in the countryside Lucy seemed to visibly relax and calm down. I asked her what had facilitated this change and she replied,

...the horses don't judge you, they don't care what that man (the DLA officer) said earlier, they just take you for who you are.

(Lucy, Participant).

A further example of how the horses seemed to facilitate the therapeutic opening up process is demonstrated by an extract from a TH session with Minimax. We had been informed by both his foster carer and social worker that Minimax would often get very angry and upset about being separated from his younger brother, who was in the process of being adopted, and this could spiral into aggressive and violent behaviour. A hope for Minimax attending TH was that the calm and therapeutic environment would help him become more able to express himself in more positive ways. After Minimax had been coming to The Yard for a while he started to become more relaxed and confident around us as described on p101. The following section from field

notes shows how he then started to open up and talk about some of the things on his mind that were clearly bothering him, and how he turned to Ruby for comfort when this became too much.

*Finding comfort: Minimax and Ruby*

Once he was grooming Ruby we started chatting about Christmas and Minimax started talking very animatedly, which was quite a change as when he had started TH sessions he had initially been rather quiet and withdrawn in terms of talking about anything personal. Minimax told us about what he had been given for Christmas by his older brother and went on to talk about his brothers in more depth than previously. He said he was sad when he had seen his older brother before Christmas and that they were both thinking about their younger brother (who they had only letterbox contact with now). Minimax got quite upset and agitated at one stage, angrily spitting, 'they (social workers) just don't understand, only Angie (his foster carer) understands what it's like'. 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).

It appeared in this encounter that Minimax found solace and comfort from Ruby in some way and was able through this relationship to turn his anger about the powerless situation he was in to sadness at missing his brother. Ruby seemed to offer the unconditional, safe, physical body that he needed, and provide him with elements which he was unable to express or receive from people, at this stage of his life at least. The taken for granted nurture and comfort, both physical and psychological, which is available for the majority of young people from their families, both immediate, or, extended, in the form of a loving aunt or grandparent, is not the case for young people in care who have been removed from their families. With the additional difficulties around touch within foster care regulations, due to the possibility of accusation of abuse (Pemberton, 2010), and the 'corporate parent' style of fostering, with relentless changes of social worker,



carers, and other people in their lives, the young person's need for actual physical touch and affection is often overlooked and lost. As has been explored in chapter 6 on the theme of attachment and further dimensions of tactile experiences with horses, it is suggested that young people who have been under-nurtured can perhaps experience being 'held' by touching and hugging large animals (Brooks, 2006).

Body therapists, such as bio-energetic theorists, believe that certain childhood traumas and conflicts are 'embodied' in the patient, i.e. by not being allowed to cry, and hence bottling emotions up, tension in the body can be a consequence (Kurtz, 1990). This can result in certain muscles becoming chronically tense leading to tension/pain/distortion in other parts of the body. It is suggested that relieving these tensions through massage/body exercises/chiropractic, and, perhaps through activities with horses, can result in a discharge of these pent-up feelings and emotions. The re-emergence of hidden early traumatic memories can then be explored and resolved through psychotherapy (Brooks, 2006; Kurtz, 1990; Scott, 1980). Whilst these authors are talking about adults in the main, and the therapists at The Yard acknowledged that the young people were often too young, or their issues too 'raw' to explore them in any depth, we would discover that Minimax often complained of various aches and pains, especially backache, as did many of the young people who attended The Yard. In the instance given above of Minimax and Ruby, it may be that by grooming the mare and having this tactile experience with her, he was then able to relax and this enabled the pent-up feelings about his younger brother to emerge. The area of tactile stimulation may also be additionally relevant in the case of Minimax as it was suggested that he was on the autistic spectrum. According to Scott (1980) this tactile element is especially important in the relationship between therapist and autistic clients where there are additional difficulties in attachment. Scott goes on to discuss the taboo of touch between therapist and patient and of how animals can therefore be valuable in this context, of providing a safe arena to explore and experience touch and tactile elements previously missing or having held negative connotations in the patient's life (Scott, 1980).

### **Calm and safe: horses and a safe space**

A further theme which featured strongly in the data was of the horses appearing to be calming for many of the young people in various ways. This calming effect seemed to have overlaps with other themes, such as the importance of the natural environment, the practice of natural horsemanship, and the therapeutic philosophy and style of The Yard, which is described in the

methods chapter. In this chapter I look at how feeling calm contributed to the therapeutic relationship between young person and horse, and the young person and other people.

Being calm seemed to be linked to feeling safe which is considered a fundamental element of the therapeutic relationship (Frank & Frank, 1991; Friesen, 2010; Kurtz, 1990; Sedgwick, 2001). Fine, referring to animal-assisted therapy in general, adds that 'it appears that the presence of the animal allows the client a sense of comfort, which then promotes rapport in the therapeutic relationship' (2000:1 82). The author Esbjourn speaks of the 'calming effect' that she claimed horses appeared to have on participants in her study on equine-assisted psychotherapy (Esbjourn, 2006). Whilst it is not possible to separate all the different elements that are present within the relationship between young person, horse, practitioner and environment, the calming effect of a combination of factors did appear to be linked to enabling some of the young people to relax and open up, a precondition for successful therapeutic interaction. Although most of the data concerning the theme of 'being calm' was observational in nature, both Minimax and Cinderella commented on how the horses made them feel calmer on a questionnaire they completed for the research. More often, however, the young people would refer to the horse's need to be calm, Kelly telling me how 'they like it best when you are calm around them'. Being calm seemed to be linked to trust for Emma as she went on to tell me it was important, 'to be quiet, to be calm. You've got to trust the horses as well as them trusting you, don't you?'.

During one TH session with Cinderella a young 3yr old filly had just arrived at The Yard and was still a little anxious about having left her previous home and horses. When I asked Cinderella how she felt Sherry was feeling and the best way to respond to her anxiety she replied, 'well, she's probably scared and missing her mum', and that it was important to be 'calm and kind to her'. Freya also used the words kind and calm when she told me that what she especially liked about the mare Ruby was that 'she looks sort of kind...and calm'. This suggested that Freya perceived Ruby as having a kind character, which was linked with the mare appearing to have a calm nature – the two were interlinked for her. Being seen to have a kind personality would seem to be a positive condition within the therapeutic alliance and perhaps a precondition to feeling safe and being able to trust. Developing a relationship with Ruby who she perceived as kind and calm, appeared to enable Freya to start to develop a relationship with her human therapist Deana. The authors Yorke, Adams and Coady (2008) in their study with trauma victims participating in

equine-assisted psychotherapy speak of how ‘Restoration of the trauma victim’s capacity for recovery hinges on provision of safety and development of trust...’ (2008: 17).

On another occasion, being with the mare Ruby seemed to allow Kelly to feel safe enough to open up and express her emotions about a recent traumatic experience to Deana, something that she had previously not been able to do. This was something that Deana saw as a significant breakthrough telling me that Kelly’s normal instinct was to run away from her difficulties. The following is an extract from my field notes from that session.

*Kelly assaulted: opening up in a safe environment?*

Kelly arrived and told us that she had been assaulted the previous day by a group of girls from her school. She moved quite slowly and stiffly but seemed pleased to be at The Yard and went over to say hello to Ruby, giving her a gentle stroke to which Ruby responded by turning her head to her and placing her muzzle in her hand. We gave Kelly the option of either taking Ruby for a short walk for exercise and to build on their relationship of starting to get to know and trust each other, or washing the horses’ tails (as it was one of the first warm sunny days of the year). Kelly chose to take Ruby for a walk so we suggested she got the grooming kit from the shed in order to groom her first. She started to groom her but was very quiet, finally saying that she may not be able to clean out Ruby’s hooves as it involved bending down and her back was stiff from the assault. We had touched on the assault a little before but now it felt as if Kelly wanted to talk about it some more. She talked about being jumped upon by eight or nine girls whilst others stood around filming it with their mobile phones. Deana and Kelly sat down at the bench and Kelly cried but the tears were silent. She said she hadn’t wanted to come today and wanted to go back to The Elms. Deana rang The Elms for someone to come back to collect her earlier than the normal session end time. In her session case notes Deana writes, ‘It is possible that being in this environment allowed Kelly to relax her guard a little more than felt comfortable for her and her instinct was to run’. In the end, however, once she knew someone was on their way for her, she seemed to relax and ended up having fun throwing sticks for Toby (the dog) in the field, being in no hurry to leave when the staff member from The Elms arrived to collect her. Instead she spent time showing him the horses and telling him a little about their different characters etc. (Field notes and therapy session notes).

In our post-session briefing after Kelly had gone, Deana told me how she saw this session as positive in that Kelly was able to start to open up in this environment. Even though this initially caused her to want to leave, when she realised that her escape route was not blocked she was then able to relax again and end on a positive note, not being in a hurry to end the session. Deana told me that she very firmly believed that Kelly's beginning to develop a trusting relationship with the mare Ruby was fundamental to this breakthrough in their therapeutic relationship, writing, 'there is certainly a relationship forming between the two of them'. She believed that, in turn, this enabled Kelly to start to feel safe enough with Deana to be able to express her emotions to her, which she normally kept very closed off. This is what Fine (2000) referred to when she talks about how animals can help clients relax and how, 'a therapist who conducts therapy with an animal present may appear less threatening and, consequently, the client may be more willing to reveal him - or herself' (2000: 183).

Many of the young people talked of how they believed it was important for the horses to feel safe. One way to help the horse to feel safe is by acknowledging their need to be able to move and allow them space and a perceived escape route. This is perhaps similar to how this enabled Kelly to feel safer above. Often it seemed that the participants explored feelings related to safety through the horses, asking how they felt about certain things such as leaving their previous homes, other horses, and how they behaved towards each other for example. In a semi-structured interview with Emma I asked her which horse she thought was the lead horse in the small herd. Emma replied that she thought it was Ruby and this was;

Emma: Because she doesn't put her ears flat back at them, she doesn't bare her teeth at them, she doesn't turn her bum on them. She just walks off from the argument sort of thing.

HB: Yes, she does, doesn't she?

Emma: Jason, if you've noticed, if you let him, he just sort of barges his way through.

HB: (laughs) yes, yes that's Jason...

Emma: Because they know she's (Ruby) not going to be really aggressive and they know that she's not going to kick or bite or something.

HB: Hm, hm. How do you think she makes the other horses feel by being like that?

Emma: Safe.

Perhaps through exploring the horse's behaviours and how she sees them relating to each other, Emma is in fact exploring aspects of her own psyche and feelings. Klontz *et al.*, talk of how horses 'serve as catalysts and metaphors to allow clinical issues to surface' (2007: 258). The powerful use of identification, analogy and metaphor will be explored more fully later in this chapter.

### **The adult's views; being calm, safety and trust**

Some authors make the connection between aspects of EAL/T and Winnicott's 'holding environment' (Brooks, 2006; Esbjourn, 2006; Lentini & Knox, 2009; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Esbjorn (2006) in her research on therapists' views of EAP found that many of them believed that the horses could provide aspects of the 'good enough mothering' that Winnicott had proposed. In the following extract from an interview with the therapist Deana, she also explains that in her view Winnecottian theories of object presentation and the holding environment are relevant to the theme of safety and trust within the therapeutic relationship in EAL/T and TH.

Well, I think the thing that comes up to me is how (.) how resonant working with the horses is to (.) child development and object relations theory in particular, and I remember being out with you one day when we took Ellie (horse) when she was very young, and you were introducing her to objects in the environment like green wheelie bins and things like that (.) um and we got talking about it and you talked more about your experiences and more about Lucy's article and reading that article, for me it's just pure kind of Donald Winnicott object relations theory of object presentation that the horse looks to you as a child would look to the mother to ascertain whether whatever it is in the environment is safe. And it was an amazing sort of mirror, really, that relationship between you and Ellie, and a mother and an infant. (.) but you know, it's about trust, building trust, and her looking to you and asking, 'is this going to eat me?' or 'is this safe?' and, you know, you demonstrating to her that this is a safe world. (.) And I think for a lot of these children that

has not been their experience. And so there's something that goes on, I think, within the horse handler, the therapist's relationship with the horse and with the child that facilitates that reworking of that old model that the world is not safe.

(Deana, Therapist).

Whilst the young people themselves spoke about the themes concerning 'being calm' and 'safe more in terms of the horses, many of the adults involved in the young people's care talked of how the participants would often be calmer after attending TH sessions. Peter, a mentor from the Youth Offending Team who brought Wayne for sessions told me how closed Wayne would be on his way to The Yard in contrast to their journey back to his foster home, when he would be much more open and talkative. In a questionnaire that some of the adults completed about TH, Peter wrote, 'he (Wayne) was always noticeably more relaxed as we drove away than when we arrived'. A foster carer, David, on the same questionnaire wrote about another participant '(he) is always calm on his return... there is a marked difference in his return in contrast to the anxiety he sometimes demonstrates at the start of the day'. The residential manager of The Elms, Carl, wrote about Kelly that she would often have 'a positive relaxed attitude' after a session. It is suggested that the very nature of therapy can create anxiety for some young people (Bowers & Macdonald, 2001; Brooks, 2006; Ewing *et al.*, 2007) and that introducing contact with animals within the therapeutic environment can help to provide a calming effect, especially during initial sessions (Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Fine, 2000; Friesen, 2010; Walsh, 2009). Laura, a foster carer for a number of young people who attended The Yard, believed that there was a link between them being relaxed with the horses and this enabled them to open up. On the questionnaire she wrote,

The children I have looked after all enjoy the time spent with the horses. Because they are more relaxed they may be more inclined to talk about any problems or worries they may have.

(Laura, foster carer).

One reason that horses may help facilitate a calm environment which, in turn, could contribute to the young people relaxing, is that horses inherently want a calm and peaceful existence as they need to conserve energy for when it may be required in order to escape potential predators. As has been discussed previously the horse will always look for a calm and intelligent leader s/he

can trust and feel safe with. Therefore, in order to have a successful relationship with a horse it is necessary to behave in a calm and trustworthy manner (Blake, 1975; MacSwiney, 1987; Rashid, 2004; Rees, 1984). In the next section I discuss how once the young people seemed to feel more confident and safe around the horses they would often start to explore the different horses' personalities and aspects of their lives, with these often appearing to be linked to similar characteristics and issues as their own.

### **Metaphor, Analogy, Projection and Identification**

The power and use of analogy and metaphor for changing ideas and affecting behaviour is well established, in both psychotherapy and other forms of communication. Gordon states that 'as long as recorded history has been around, and in myths that date back into the farthest and dimmest memories of human existence, metaphor has been used as a mechanism of teaching and changing ideas' (1978: xi). Within psychotherapy Freud (1920) used sexual symbolism to explore unconscious fantasies and dreams, whilst Jung developed the terms the 'animus' and the 'anima' to describe male and female aspects of the psyche, and often employed animals as metaphors and symbols of unconscious feelings and meanings (Jung, 1978). I now go on to give examples drawn from a therapeutic gardening project and how, in their work with torture victims, the therapists use the power of metaphor and analogy to help clients come to terms with their pasts, as there are many parallels with the practice of The Yard. Following this I introduce some examples of these aspects with the young people and horses in the current study. The authors of the therapeutic gardening project explain that,

Because the psychological work for victims of torture is so difficult to express in words, using nature as a frame of reference and a source of analogy and metaphor is very helpful for those with language difficulties (Linden & Grute, 2002: 42).

Clients attending The Natural Growth Centre (NGC) possess many similar emotional and psychological scars to the young people referred to The Yard. Linden and Grute (2002) write about how clients at the NGC have difficulties with language barriers in addition to their psychological problems of expression. Whilst the young people in the current study did not have the same language barriers to overcome they did often have trouble in expressing and processing how they felt, partly due to their age in addition to their experiences. Angie, Minimax's foster

carer, explained how she felt that there were similarities between horses and children in care in terms of their ability to communicate, which could perhaps help some of these young people to identify with them on some level. She told me, 'horses haven't got words either, neither have foster kids, they don't have the words for the feelings...'

The past experiences of some of the participants of The Yard and the clients of the NGC, although in different contexts, both contained terror, loss and abuse of some kind which can result in similar psychological distress;

The future is as difficult for refugees to contemplate as the past because they have had the bitter experience of having their futures ripped away from them. Any future plans they may once have had – plans concerning their studies, their working lives, their homes, their families – have been obliterated. This can leave them with a sense of futility as regards making new plans, since experience had taught them that at any moment these plans may be disrupted (Linden & Grute, 2002: 41).

We experienced time and time again many of the young people who attended The Yard being moved placement with little or no planning or consultation. This left them powerless, anxious and traumatised and is demonstrated in the following section from sessional notes of a TH session during which Kelly was informed that she would be leaving her residential placement to move to a foster placement with no notice. In addition to being very traumatizing for Kelly this left no opportunity for a planned and structured ending to the TH sessions.

#### *Kelly's last session*

On our return to the yard (from a ride in the lanes) the manager of The Elms was waiting for us. He informed Kelly that he had just received a call from her social worker (SW) explaining that Kelly needed to take all her belongings with her from The Elms to her mother's the next day as she would be moving directly into her new foster care home from there. Kelly was clearly shocked by this news. She was adamant that she wouldn't be going and wanted to speak to her SW. The manager rang the SW from the yard and Kelly spoke to her. Kelly reminded the SW of the original agreement, i.e. that if she didn't like the foster placement she wouldn't be obliged to go there. She explained that there was a younger child in the placement whose physical safety she had concerns for as



she had previously assaulted a younger child. Kelly cried openly and appeared very sad and disheartened. We were sad when she drove off for the last time. It wasn't a positive ending for the sessions.

(Therapy sessional notes).

This extract provides an example of the additional anxiety and trauma some of the young people who attended The Yard were subjected to within their often disjointed lives in the foster care system, above the other traumatic experiences of their childhoods.

In order to help the participants come to terms with some of the negative experiences from their pasts, sometimes embodying and expressing this as emotional/behavioural problems, The Yard hoped that the experiences provided by the horses would give the young people the opportunity to get away from a preoccupation with their pasts and to be able to be more fully, and healthily, in the present. The authors of the NGC explain that,

Medical Foundation clients are overwhelmed by their past experiences and cannot find a way to be in the present reality. They cannot concentrate on anything in the present and therefore cannot function well...the past is ever present (Linden & Grute, 2002: 39).

These authors go on to suggest that the environment and being in nature can help people suffering from trauma to be brought back into the present. This can be done by, 'focusing them on where they are – drawing attention to the grass, the sky, the birds singing...' (Linden & Grute, 2002: 9). In the case of The Yard, the powerful experience of being in the presence of a horse who lives instinctively and fully in the present, demands that, in order to be effective and safe, the handler too must be in the present. Gestalt therapy concentrates on how mind and body are interconnected, on learning to listen to instinct, and of being in the present (Clarkson, 1999; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1972). Being with horses naturally incorporates all of these elements and so has many parallels to gestalt therapeutic approaches. Once the young person is in the present the horse can act as a powerful metaphor for how they may be feeling and can ultimately, hopefully, serve as an unconscious way of helping them to heal themselves. Therapists at The NGC use the analogy of growing plants in a similar way suggesting that;

When potatoes are sown, clients understand that they have to be looked after for the future and this is analogous with the clients' need to look after themselves in order to be healthy and 'grow' (Linden & Grute, 2002: 41).

Horses offer the power of metaphor and analogy in similar ways. Looking after horses is a very time-consuming, physical and in-the-present task. This experience of caring for another animal can serve as both a conscious and unconscious metaphor for the young person caring for themselves both emotionally and physically (Bowers and Macdonald, 2001; Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Many comparisons on how it is important to look after aspects of the horses which mirror their own needs can be drawn, such as giving the horses rugs to keep warm in winter, checking the fields to keep them safe, and maintaining their correct diets. Certain horses may need additional or limited feeding depending on their individual weight issue for example. Some young people thought that it was 'cruel' to give certain overweight horses less food, and Cinderella wanted to give Leo 'a bit extra because he is my favourite'. However, when it was explained that rationing feed in this instance was for the pony's own well-being and health, this can serve as a valuable analogy in learning self-restraint and responsibility in other areas of the young peoples' lives. Minimax's foster carer also commented on how learning about horses had helped him to modify his behaviour telling me that,

yes, that they must understand how the horse is feeling..yeah, it feeds back to them that maybe people feel like that (.) And also he learned that if the horses weren't allowed to do something for a very good reason then he shouldn't...

(Angie, Foster Carer).

An example of how Minimax experienced this for himself is provided by the extract below from a session where he learnt why he needed to prevent the mare Ruby doing something she wanted (eating grass from the verge whilst walking in the lanes) for 'her own good'. He was then able to transfer this to an understanding of his own behaviour – an example of how the horse provided a metaphor which Minimax could understand.

*'It's for your own good Ruby'*

Once back in the yard Minimax headed straight to Ruby and put his arms around her neck, giving her a hug. He stayed hugging her for some time whilst we carried on with yard tasks around him until he eventually joined us in grooming the horses, although he obviously preferred to hug Ruby than groom her! As we still had a little time left over we asked if Minimax would like to lead Ruby up the track with us as we needed to take Leo for a walk for some of his rehabilitation exercise. Minimax found this a little challenging as Ruby took the opportunity of Leo walking very slowly to stop and try and eat grass on the verges, dragging Minimax towards the tastiest patches and being reluctant to walk on when he asked her to. We asked Minimax what he thought he may need to do to help encourage her and he replied 'she's like me when I don't want to go to school, sometimes I want to stop and do stuff on the way and Angie gets annoyed with me!' We talked for a while about why it may not be good for Ruby to drag Minimax where she wanted and not listen to the person who was leading her, and what this could lead to if it was somewhere dangerous and the leader did not have control of her, Minimax correctly identifying that it could be dangerous if it happened on the road with cars around for example. With a little practice he soon changed his body language to being firmer and more assertive with her, identifying when she was starting to think about heading for the grass and preventing her before she did. He told her 'it's for your own good Ruby'.

(Fieldnotes).

### **Identifying with the horses**

A useful and unique way in which horses can offer participants in EAL/T and TH the opportunity to explore internal issues is provided by their particular characteristics. Horses have very distinct personalities and positions in the herd, together with different past experiences, and it seemed that these often mirrored the young people's own personalities and experiences in some way. For example, the lead mare is looked up to, respected, and followed by the other members of the herd, whilst other horses are 'bottom' of the 'pecking order' when it comes to food/shade/water etc. Some horses are calm and gentle, some bold and curious and others more anxious and nervous, either due to their own personal characteristics and training and treatment in the past, or, most probably, a combination of the various factors. In addition, a number of the horses at The Yard were young and inexperienced and needed to be taught how to behave by people and the

other horses. Likewise a number of horses were older and more experienced and had ‘been round the block’, as Lucy put it talking about the older, lead mare Duchess. This combination of personalities and different pasts and behaviours provided a rich opportunity for using analogy and metaphor with participants in a non-confrontational way, and its uniqueness within EAL/T over other therapies is referred to by many authors (Karol, 2007; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Trotter *et al.*, 2008; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Questions about the horses to draw comparisons were sometimes asked if it was felt appropriate, but often young people would make connections and comparisons without any prompting, such as when Cinderella exclaimed, ‘she (Duchess) is just like my *mother*, stubborn old cow’!. This was on an occasion when Duchess kept walking away from her in the field, not allowing Cinderella to catch her. The incident led to a valuable TH session where Cinderella learnt that by changing her body language and approach, Duchess willingly allowed herself to be caught (as seen on p179/180).

Some examples of questions sometimes employed at The Yard to help facilitate the process of bringing self-awareness to participants are given below;

- How do you think Jason/Duchess etc is feeling today? How is s/he telling you? What could we do to help Jason/Duchess etc be less irritable and/or happier? What do you think Jason/Duchess etc needs to be happier and/or less irritable?
- Which horse do you think you are most like/is most like you? What is it about this horse which is similar to you? How do you think it feels to be this horse?
- Which horse would you like to be most like? What is it about him/her that makes you want to be like him/her? What would you have to do/be like to be like this horse?

The idea behind this style of questioning is to encourage the participant to find their own answers to any problems and issues they may be experiencing, but in a way which is safer for them as the focus is on the horse and not themselves. It is important to note, however, that some of these questions would only be employed if the young person had initiated interest and curiosity about the horse themselves, in line with the non-directive, person-centred approach of The Yard.

**‘I like him because he’s naughty!’**

Despite Emma supposedly coming to The Yard to look after and ride Timmy, the pony her adoptive mother had loaned to The Yard, Emma soon developed a strong connection and relationship with the horse Jason. This coincided with her getting to know him and his particularly strong character over the course of a few weeks. Emma told me that she especially liked Jason because ‘he is grumpy’ and would very much like it when he put his ears back at me in annoyance if I was changing his rug or doing something else which displeased him in some way. She would laugh and say ‘look he doesn’t do that to me!’ One day Emma was telling me about how her favourite horse at the agricultural college she was presently attending one day a week for work experience was ‘the naughtiest horse there’. I asked her why she thought she liked the ‘naughtiest’ horses best and she answered;

well it’s like apparently, but I don’t believe this (.) umm, but anyway, apparently horses can read your mind from a mile away so I think they can tell that I’m bad (.) so it’s like they know I’m on their side.

(Emma).

It seemed that Emma identified with the ‘naughty’ or what she perceived as the ‘bad’ side of Jason in some way. In the following extract from field notes Emma told me of some more similarities she thought she had with Jason when I revisited this theme with her.

*Emma and Jason: similar personalities?*

Out on the ride Emma said she had thought of some more similarities between Jason and herself. They were that he loved attention and that he was very good at ‘telling what they (people) are really like’ which she told me she was very good at too, being able to tell if someone really was nice or just pretending to be. She asked me what Jason (who was now retired from riding) used to be liked to ride and I replied that he was really lovely but hated schooling and doing dressage and that he got bored very quickly. Emma squealed with delight and laughed, ‘that’s exactly like me too, I get, like, *totally* bored in school, that’s why I’m really naughty to the teachers and wind them up, just like Jason!’ This obviously really pleased her and when we got back to the yard she immediately asked if she could catch him to put him into the pen for his dinner. As she went to catch him he

tried to follow me with his haynet but quickly stopped when Emma asked him to and put his head down helpfully so that she could reach to put his headcollar on. Later on whilst I was finishing putting things away in the shed and after Emma had finished all her tasks with Timmy, she went and got a brush and brushed Jason's mane until I was finished and had to ask her to stop. 'Ok in a minute, just let me finish brushing his mane, look how handsome you look now Jason'' she told him as he stood there willingly loose in the yard allowing her to brush him even though she was using quite a hard hairbrush.

I noticed that they both seem to really be developing a relationship and wondered if it was fulfilling some need for Emma that she was giving Jason attention now that he was semi-retired (which means he doesn't get as much attention as he used to). It seems that there is something going on as Emma knows that she can never ride him properly and, as she has told me that her favourite thing about horses is riding them, then her affection towards Jason is obviously about something else. Is it the fact that she sees him as being so like her she is so obviously pleased about?

(Fieldnotes).

It may be that by Emma initially being attracted to Jason due to perceiving their personalities as similar and as being on the same 'side' in some way, she was then able to engage in a relationship with him that was based on caring for him. As Emma had told me that her primary motivation for being with horses was being able to ride them rather than the other tasks involved in horse management, which she often shied away from, this relationship, based on her identifying with Jason, facilitated her being able to obtain some possible benefits from what has been termed 'acts of helpfulness' towards another being. Further discussion on this theme is covered in chapters 3 and 5 on risk and resilience.

### **Rejection and projection?**

The participant Minimax initially had the opposite reaction to Jason, the two of them seeming to take a dislike to each other on their first encounter. Both his foster carer and social worker told us that Minimax found reading social cues and body language difficult. This might have been related to him being labelled as having traits of autism spectrum. He also had a diagnosis of ADHD and was on medication. For whatever the reasons, it was apparent that on his first session meeting the horses, after he had got over his initial apprehension of being in a new place with

new people, and perhaps in part down to nervousness, Minimax was rather over-exuberant in his manner around the horses. He moved rather too quickly around them and tried to pat them too hard on their faces, which, whilst some horses will tolerate it, they generally don't like. In this case, Ruby and Duchess did put up with Minimax's behaviour, but Jason, having a low tolerance threshold and a very strong character, demanding respect from his handlers, very quickly made it known that he didn't approve of Minimax behaving this way towards him. He displayed his displeasure by putting his ears flat back and shaking his head at Minimax in a dominant and threatening manner. Minimax immediately understood this body language and backed away saying 'ooh who's a grumpy boy then'. He seemed a little cautious of Jason after this and stayed away from him for the rest of the session, which was reciprocated by Jason. In my reflexive fieldnotes after this session I write:

I started wondering here about parallels between Jason and Minimax. Jason very clearly doesn't tolerate people who are too 'in your face' or not 'in their body' (by which I mean people who are not very 'grounded' or self-aware about personal space boundaries). Jason demands that people are very respectful of him, confident but not dominant, but he can also be very dominant, pushy, disrespectful of space boundaries, and 'in your face' when he wants something! The two of them quite clearly seemed to 'push each other's buttons' to use psychotherapy speak. Is Minimax now avoiding Jason because he doesn't like the part of Jason which is like himself?!

(Fieldnotes).

Whilst I am clearly imposing a human-centric interpretation in the effort to understand what may have been occurring between the horse Jason and Minimax, certainly it appeared that Minimax did not like the part of Jason's behaviour which was in some way similar to his own as he avoided him after this encounter. Regardless of what is 'really' occurring it is through this sort of interaction with horses that learning and change can happen according to many practitioners and authors (Brooks, 2006; Ewing *et al.*, 2007; Lentini & Knox, 2009; Rector, 2005; Rothe *et al.*, 2005).

Interestingly, after Minimax had been attending The Yard for a few months, he began to show curiosity towards Jason again and wanted to start working with and riding him. This corresponded with Minimax's ability and self-confidence growing, alongside his ability to

monitor and control his own behaviour and body language with the horses. One day during a short informal field interview I asked Minimax some general questions around what he thought about the horses and their different personalities. After telling me that he liked Ruby because she was 'quiet and understood' him, he went on to tell me, 'I like Jason 'coz he's got attitude!'. When I asked Minimax if there were any other reasons why he liked Jason, he went on to talk about how Jason behaved with some of the other horses, saying 'he's like me at school, like sometimes when I get angry with some of the other boys when they say things and stuff'. I went on to ask Minimax what he thought he had learnt from being with the horses and he replied, 'well, you've got to think before you do things, it's like otherwise they might not understand... And they have to learn to trust you too'.

It seemed that the theme of trust had come into the relationship between the horse and young person again; perhaps by Minimax having built up a relationship and trusting and feeling safe with Ruby he was then able to have the confidence to return to trying to build a relationship with Jason, the horse who had initially caused such a strong reaction for both of them. In their study of an equine-facilitated group psychotherapy vaulting programme with 'at-risk' young people, Vidrine, Owen-Smith and Faulkner, make a similar suggestion, stating that

this sense of being valued by a nonjudgmental other appeared to be related to the experience of feeling safe with the horse. This in turn appeared to be linked to constructive risk-taking in a cyclical relationship (2002: 601).

### **Shared histories?**

The participant Wayne appeared to be especially drawn to new horses arriving at The Yard. We had an unusually busy time during the period of Wayne attending TH, with three or four new and young horses joining and passing through The Yard for various reasons. One horse, Missy, was on loan from a horse rescue charity but unfortunately, due to bad treatment in the past, was unsuitable for TH as she would bite and was unable to fit in with the other horses. This had implications of rendering our insurance invalid. It was a very difficult decision to send her back to the charity as obviously we felt a responsibility to her, understanding how hard it is for horses to constantly move home and not be able to secure bonds with other horses, which are so crucially important for them. There were many parallels with the lives of the young people in care who attended The Yard, and this made it especially difficult as we were aware that we did



not want to be seen to be 'giving up' on horses, as many of the young people may perhaps have felt this had happened to them. The Yard wanted to model a different approach, one of giving the horses a safe, secure, home and fresh chance, which we had been able to do with the mare Ruby for example. In the following extract from some of my field notes around this difficult time I write about how there appeared to be many similarities between Wayne and Missy and how it seemed that he wanted to explore some of these through the mare.

*Wayne and Missy: exploring pasts*

Beautiful sunny but crisp and cold spring day at The Yard again today. Missy still very grumpy and anxious on the yard so I put her in the wood pen separate from the others so she could eat her haynet in peace. Wayne and Peter (his youth offending team mentor) arrive early and when we ask Peter if he will be staying or walking his dog this time he replies that he will be staying but would like to walk his dog across the fields first if that is OK. As Wayne seems to find it difficult being around lots of adults we agree that this is a good idea. With Peter gone we try and engage Wayne in conversation about the things he did on his last session and what he would like to do this time etc. Wayne again remains rather withdrawn and uncommunicative but does agree to come and meet the horses. He is immediately especially interested in Missy being separate from the others in the wood pen and wants to stay and talk about her and why it is that she is apart from the other horses. We explain to him that it is for Missy's own safety and well-being as she is being bullied by the other horses and not being allowed to eat her hay in peace. He asks whether she is staying with us or going back to the charity (as he remembers us talking about this possibility on his last session) and we talk about the fact that she is going back so they can hopefully find a home which will suit her better and where she will be happier. After we have left Missy with her hay, Wayne agrees to come and groom Ruby and take her up to the round pen for a leading lesson in order to start getting to know her and learn some horse handling skills. I am aware that Wayne has suffered a long history of neglect and has recently moved foster placement and wonder if this is why he (as was another young person earlier in the week) is so interested in Missy, because he is relating to her experience? I wonder if by exploring her situation it will help Wayne process his own experiences in some way.

(Fieldnotes).

Our experience with Wayne was that he clearly found it difficult to communicate with adults but through relating to Missy, whose experiences seemed to mirror certain aspects of his life, he was able to start opening up and explore some of these issues through the mare. Writing about the use of metaphor in drama therapy, Jones (1996) explains that some drama therapists suggest that the unconscious connections made by the client through metaphor are more valid than bringing them to consciousness, which would detract from their power by rationalising them.

In line with the non-directive approach of The Yard, together with the fact that many of the young people who attended were clearly not ready to process some of their traumatic experiences, which were still often very raw for them, it was left for the young people to make any direct connections between themselves and the horses without intervention from the practitioners. An exception to this was when questions about the horses' personalities and how they were feeling etc, (as listed on p158) would sometimes be introduced if it was felt appropriate in order to bring greater awareness about the young person's behaviour towards the horses. Indeed, directive work in a psychotherapeutic sense would be unethical unless it was within a psychotherapeutic relationship. Being a social worker and not a psychotherapist, I was careful to remain aware of possible disclosures and where young people may be demonstrating that they were ready to start exploring difficult issues, and to discuss this in personal supervision and in the debriefing meeting after a TH session, in order to make a decision as to the best course of action for the young person. It often felt as though there was an unspoken understanding that sometimes the young people were talking about aspects of themselves and their lives through the safety of the horse. On a number of occasions, when I felt that the young person was trying to explore issues which were out of my depth, I made the recommendation s/he had a number of sessions together with The Yard play therapist and psychotherapist Deana. Issues of transference and the unique role of the horse may be relevant at this juncture. Transference and projection are where the client projects some of their own feelings and emotions onto another person, the therapist in the case of the psychodynamic relationship (Rycroft, 1972). The therapist then has to hold and understand which are their own and which are the client's feelings, and this can be a difficult and potentially dangerous process (Frank & Frank, 1991; McLoughlin, 1995). The horse may be especially useful in this respect as the horse can act as a 'pure' mirror, without any of the added complications of transference and counter-transference between client and human therapist. Trotter *et al.*, simply claim that 'the horse provides the vehicle for the projection of a

participant's unconscious worries and fears' (Trotter *et al.*, 2008: 267). Furthermore, by the horse 'modelling' positive characteristics, such as resilience, tolerance, patience etc, the young person may be able to take some of these on him or herself, in the same way Frank and Frank (1991) suggest this is possible within the evocative, or more non-directive, facilitating, therapies, of which the practice and philosophy of The Yard were based.

Another powerful example of how the horses 'modelled' certain characteristics and seemed to provide further opportunity for Wayne to explore and perhaps process aspects of his past is provided in the following extract from my field notes. Wayne had recently been taken into foster care and already experienced a change of placement. In addition he had difficulties at school and with his behaviour, resulting in him becoming involved with the youth offending team (YOT). Wayne had attended The Yard for about two months by the stage of the following example and had become more confident around the horses. In fact he was sometimes over-confident, wanting to try activities which were rather above his stage of ability, but this seemed to correspond with him becoming a little more communicative with us. Although he would still remain rather quiet when he first arrived, he would begin to open up once he was actually engaging with the horses.

*Wayne: identifying with Billy*

Despite our concerns that he may not attend, as he had missed his session the previous week, Wayne did arrive and had a very powerful session today. He was immediately interested to see the new young 2yr old colt Billy (who had arrived from Spain the previous week) and wanted to go straight into the field to see him. Normally we would not practice having young people in close contact with young or nervous horses but on this occasion as we now knew Wayne, and because it appeared to be important for him, I made an exception. This was only after I had explained to Wayne that Billy was still untrained and nervous of people and therefore we needed to be especially aware of our body language in order not to frighten him, and for him to feel safe with us. Wayne stood quietly in the field asking a lot of questions and commented about how Billy must be through a lot of changes since leaving Spain 'and leaving his mum?'. He asked if Billy's mother would be coming over from Spain to see him. I explained that horses of Billy's age who lived as a wild herd would naturally be independent by now as their dam would encourage them to go out into the world by themselves and form their own group of other

young horses. Wayne likened this to having his own crowd of friends who he goes out with in town. Billy was grazing next to Jason and Wayne pointed out that maybe Jason was like a big brother to Billy and helping him to settle in. We agreed that this was a very good analogy. As we were talking Billy slowly grazed his way over to us finally ending up standing right next to Wayne. Wayne seemed pleased about this and remained very quiet and aware of his body language in order not to startle the young colt, who finally allowed Wayne to very gently stroke his neck. We stood there quietly not wanting to break this special moment, but also aware that Billy was very young and virtually wild and unhandled - which could have caused him to startle and possibly bite or kick out in fear. However, both Wayne and the colt remained calm and finally Billy wandered off back to graze next to Jason. We commented on how well Wayne had handled the colt through his very mindful and aware body language and Wayne seemed pleased about this, although it is very hard to read his mind as he gives so little away. (Fieldnotes).

The author Paul Shepard talks about how he believes animals play a key role in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Perhaps an aspect of this was occurring between Wayne and his exploring the young horse Billy's transitions in his life. Shepard writes;

...animals have a critical role in the shaping of personal identity and social consciousness. Among the first inhabitants of the mind's eye, they are basic to the development of speech and thought. Later they play a key role in the passage to adulthood (Shepard, 1996: 3).

Melson too claims that animals play a vital part in children's growth and learning about themselves and others. She cites numerous studies that show how children's first narratives are 'peppered with animals of all kinds' and of how they help children express 'anger, aggression, excitement, fear, sadness, happiness, being 'good' and being 'bad'' (Melson, 2001: 133). This aspect of being 'bad' was something that Emma clearly expressed in her identifying with the horse Jason as being 'naughty' and 'bad'. Melson gives the example of the child psychoanalysts Bellack and Bellack who devised tests which incorporated inkblots and of how over half of the children they analysed this way saw animals in the inkblots. They concluded that this childhood propensity to animals held a key to gaining insight into the child's inner world, relationships and

conflicts in psychoanalysis and that 'animals may be preferred identification figures from three years to possibly ten' (cited in Melson, 2001: 137). Whilst the majority of the young people who attended The Yard and participated in TH were in their teens, it was generally accepted by the professionals and other adults who referred them that, due to their abusive and traumatic pasts, they were often emotionally developmentally delayed, acting out behaviours far younger than their actual years.

The psychoanalytic terms 'identification' and 'introjections' may be useful in terms of attempting to understand the intricacies of what is happening within the therapeutic space between horse and young person in TH sessions. Introjections are evaluations - negative in this context- about the self which are internalised and become part of how the individual defines and sees him or herself (Mearns & Thorne, 2000). Introjections such as 'I am useless' and 'I am bad' were common with many of the participants who attended The Yard, Emma being an example cited earlier with her introjections that she was 'bad', which is why she felt Jason understood her. In the session 'Kelly's last day' on p154 Kelly told her social worker of how she was frightened of what she might do to a younger child in the foster placement she had been told she was moving to as she had previously assaulted a younger child, clearly indicating to the social worker how she was scared of this 'bad' side she felt she possessed, and over which she felt she had no control. It was perhaps interesting that the participants Cinderella and Minimax chose these characters as their pseudonyms. Mearns and Thorne (2000) talk of how configurations built around introjections can resemble 'fairy tales'. They give the very example of Cinderella 'who could be wonderful if only she could find her 'prince'' and, 'the boy who could be the 'comic strip hero' if only he could do better than he can' (Mearns & Thorne, 2000: 109). Minimax chose his name after a toy character and certainly had problems with his behaviour at school, which his carer said had contributed to resulting in him being academically behind other children of a similar age.

## **Conclusion**

It appears that there were a multitude of factors occurring in the interactions between the horses and the young people, with it being very difficult to separate these out. Psychotherapeutic themes of identification, metaphor, introjections, and Winnicott's safe 'holding' environment, alongside Rogerian principles of unconditional positive regard, are argued to be especially relevant in this chapter and examples given of their application. The data in this chapter has drawn more heavily

on the views of therapists and other adults involved in The Yard, as it is an area that they were particularly represented. How the young people expressed themes related to psychotherapeutic processes was more often through the horses; for example they often spoke of how the horses needed to be calm and safe and how trust was important on both sides of the relationship.

Whatever the guiding processes were, it emerged that many of the participants were able to relax and open up in the presence of the horses. Whether it was a combination of being in the natural environment, the philosophy and style of the practitioners of The Yard, the natural horsemanship ethos, or merely just being with horses, it nevertheless appeared that the horses were the 'glue' or motivating factor that brought these young people back week after week, and the relationships they developed with them that facilitated the start of the therapeutic process for many of them. In the next chapter I explore another area related to the therapeutic literature, that of the practice of mindfulness and its growing application in the therapy field, alongside its links to the natural environment and the expanding field of nature or eco-therapy.

## Chapter 8

# Horses, Mindfulness and the Natural Environment

### Introduction

A major theme running throughout the data, related to both the young people and adults, was based around the words ‘calm’ and ‘relaxed’. For the young people this theme of calmness seemed most strongly linked to the horses; for the adults, references to being in nature also featured quite strongly. The themes of being in nature and relaxing with the horses appear to have links to the nature therapy literature (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Coleman, 2006; Peacock, Hind, & Petty, 2007) and this is entered in more depth later in this chapter, together with other suggested benefits from being in the natural environment with horses, such as the learning and physical benefits. First I describe how both being with horses and being in nature can perhaps bring people closer to experiencing what is described as mindfulness, in the modern Western concept of the practice. I provide examples from the data which illustrate how the young people were able to adapt their behaviour, which sometimes appeared risky, and demonstrated an unawareness of their actions, in order to have effective relationships and experiences with the horses. To do this the young people needed to become more aware of their body language and how their emotions and feelings affected the horses, whilst at the same time being relaxed and focused; similar principles to those described in some of the mindfulness literature.

### Mindfulness, Child Psychotherapy and Therapeutic Horsemanship

Mindfulness within Western health models has evolved from ancient meditative traditions and has its roots in Buddhism. In its simplest definition it is the practice of relaxed concentration in the present moment, as opposed to ruminating on past events or being preoccupied with the future (Biegel *et al.*, 2009; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Moss, Waugh, & Barnes, 2008). Mindfulness is suggested as being a method for observing ‘what is happening right now, in our bodies, minds and the world around us’ (Halliwell, 2010: 16).

Being safe and developing a successful partnership with horses requires being in the ‘here and now’, relaxed concentration, and attention to body awareness. This is because the horse is constantly looking for direction from its handler/rider through its own means of communication, which is a keen awareness of body language and physiology due to millennia of being a prey

animal. If the handler is distracted and not aware and present the horse will quickly respond by taking control of the situation as it will feel unsafe. The sociologist, Game, in describing riding, suggests that what is required 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: 8).

Germer (2005) describes the opposite of mindfulness as *mindlessness* and gives examples of this as including rushing through activities, carelessness, being unaware of tension and a preoccupation with the future or past. The young people referred to The Yard would frequently arrive in either a hyperactive state or, alternately, rather distant and withdrawn and often unaware of how their behaviour affected the horses. Their social workers and carers informed us that many of the participants could become stuck on past events in their lives, either repeatedly going over these events or acting out behaviours. Emma's mother Linda, telling me about how Emma was on a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and had a one to one teaching assistant due to her difficult behaviour at school, went on to say; 'Yeah, you know, she'd go off or, you know, there has been quite a lot of time with (Emma) thinking of the past'. By being with the horses it was found that the young people would become more focused, attentive and aware of their body language, and, in turn, be able adapt this in order to have effective relationships with the horses. As many of the young people, like Emma, who attended The Yard found it difficult to engage in traditional educational and therapeutic approaches it may be that EAL/T and TH practices, which naturally incorporate many techniques and practices in working with horses which parallel mindfulness practices such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), can offer those benefits but within a more accessible approach and environment.

### **Horses and being calm**

A core element of mindfulness practice is to obtain a calm and relaxed state of mind and body, whilst also being aware of thoughts and sensations without judgement. The physical health benefits of lowering stress levels are well documented in addition to the mental health benefits and so mindfulness based exercises may be useful to help achieve this (Halliwell, 2010). Some of the young people openly expressed how the horses made them feel calmer. Feeling calm also



seemed to be interlinked to feeling safe, with the participants often expressing this as the horses need to feel calm and safe, and was another theme to emerge from the research. The theme of feeling safe is explored in more detail in relation to the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist in the previous chapter, but in this context is linked to feelings of calmness. In a semi-structured interview with Lucy I asked her how it made her feel being around the horses. She replied;

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).

Lucy went on explain how learning about horse behaviour helped her be able to work effectively with horses and how this also helped her become less focused on negative past events at a difficult time in her childhood;

...and knowing exactly what you want to do and at all times because you're the leader. You're the herd leader. Yeah. And it kind of, it kind of helped me focus on something else rather than me.

(Lucy, Participant).

One of the questions in a questionnaire completed by some of the young people for the research study was, 'How does being around the horses make you feel?'. MiniMax wrote, 'The horses change your mood and they help to calm me down' and Cinderella put simply, 'they have a calming effect'. Whilst it could be possible that these young people were repeating comments they had heard the adults involved in their care telling me, it is nevertheless arguable that the theme of calmness resonated with them in some way by virtue of the fact that they felt impelled to respond to the question in the way that they did.

The EAL/T practitioner and counsellor Sally referred to how she believed that being in the horses' environment is in itself relaxing and 'slows you down'. Going on to talk about EAL/T at the residential facility for young people with autism where she also worked, Sally said that she believes the horse helps create a peaceful space where the young people can relax, explaining,

And that stillness, I mean, if we weren't talking now we'd probably be sitting here quite quietly, wouldn't we?. The horses have been pottering around quite quietly, and the whole thing just slows down. So, it seems to me that some of the youngsters really feel quite relaxed with the horses, like it's almost a relief in a way to be with a non-verbal being. They've had all the staff yacking through the day and other kids yacking, and now they're in a peaceful space with a non-yacking sensuous being who actually knows how they're feeling.

(Sally, Counsellor).

In the section on mindfulness in the literature review (chapter 3) I describe how mindfulness therapies such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) differ from traditional psychotherapeutic and analytic approaches that concentrate on looking at the client's 'problem'. They are, instead, more concerned with bringing attention to the body and encouraging relaxation, together with an emphasis on 'being mode' as opposed to 'doing mode' (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002:76). This approach is aligned to gestalt body therapies which have commonalities with some of the practices of The Yard where a keen awareness of body language, with exercises to encourage and facilitate this, was encouraged. Mindfulness practices understand that suppression of negative emotions can cause stress (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Germer, 2005). Many of the young people who attended The Yard were unable to engage in traditional psychotherapy due to a number of reasons. This could include their age, 'conditions' such as ADHD which made concentration difficult for them, and because their issues were perhaps too 'raw' for them to explore openly (Biegel *et al.*, 2009; Zylowska *et al.*, 2008). Instead, these young people may benefit more from exercises which MBSR techniques employ such as stretches, mindful walking and yoga, in order to encourage calmness (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). An exercise which has similarities to these and included a 'body scan' was employed in the 'invisible riding' technique developed at The Yard. This exercise focuses on bringing awareness to each part of the body in turn in order to feel where tension may be being held. By relaxing these parts of the body increased sensitivity and connection with the horse at a deeper level can be achieved and the horse will be more comfortable and 'tuned' in to the rider as a result. In the next section I go on to provide an example of this exercise with the participant Freya.

### **'Invisible' riding: awareness and relaxation on the back of a horse**

Because they are big, powerful and potentially dangerous, horses demand attentive, moment-to-moment concentration. Paradoxically, however, because they are also prey animals horses find attention concentrated too fully on them anxiety-provoking – this is how a predator would stalk them (Rees, 2009). Instead it is more important for the handler to be aware of their *own* physiology, body awareness, breathing patterns, and how they move around the horse, in order to convey a relaxed, confident, manner so that the horse will feel safe. A number of natural horsemanship and classical riding trainers incorporate yoga, Alexander technique and other practices involving body awareness and breathing exercises to assist in teaching more mindful body awareness (Bentley, 2001; Rolfe, 2007; Tottle, 1998). Drawing on links between attachment theory and mindfulness, Shaver *et al.*, 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: 269). Perhaps a combination of these elements could be seen to be at play in the next section drawn from a TH session with Freya. In this session Freya found how achieving a state of mindfulness enabled her to connect with the mare Ruby in a way which was very meaningful for her, and which facilitated a profound change in her behaviour and manner, from potentially risky and harmful at the beginning of the session, to calm and centred by the end.

#### *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 begin to join in with 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 bargey 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 in her life with her peers and with 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 (try standing on one leg with your eyes shut!) 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 coordinating 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'.

(Extended sessional notes).

The above session with Freya would seem to indicate that she achieved some of the elements which are described in the mindfulness literature. By becoming more present and 'in the here and now', together with incorporating some of the body exercises suggested as being important in order to achieve body awareness, Freya was able to leave her usual mode of being, which was to be unfocused, unaware, and potentially harmful to herself, to find a new way of feeling and behaving. It may have links to what Segal, Williams and Teasdale suggest when they write about how a main aim of the body scan exercise practiced in MBSR is to help participants 'develop concentration, calmness, flexibility of attention, and mindfulness' (2002: 110). It appeared that the body scan and the other exercises undertaken together with the presence of the horse enabled Freya to achieve the levels of mindfulness, concentration and relaxation that she demonstrated during the 'invisible riding' session. The horse Ruby would appear to have been the motivation that enabled Freya to participate in the process and may have acted as the 'stronger and wiser other' that Shaver *et al.*, (2007) mention in their suggestion of the similarities between attachment and mindfulness. Freya certainly displayed affection towards Ruby at the end of the session when she stretched down to hug the mare, a bond which was not immediately apparent until she had experienced some connection and communication with her. There may also have been elements of Freya having experienced some aspects of the 'authentic functioning' that Heppner and Kernis (2007) and Brown, Ryan and Creswell (2007) propose, and which I explore in more depth in the section with Cinderella and the mare Duchess later in this chapter. Freya was initially over-confident and displayed risky behaviour, which it is proposed by Heppner *et al.*, (2008) can be a defence mechanism to hide underlying fear. Certainly, as Freya attended further TH sessions she became able to show her lack of confidence around the horses and was able to overcome this in a more authentic way which was safer and more meaningful for her. An

example of this is provided on p108 in chapter 5 in a roundpen session with Freya and the horse Hector.

### **Mindful horses**

One of the reasons horses may be useful in helping facilitate participants to achieve aspects of mindfulness is due to their particular psychological characteristics. As previously mentioned horses are social prey animals, constantly on the lookout for potential danger despite millennia of domestication. They rely absolutely on the security of the herd and a trustworthy leader to ensure their survival (Budiansky, 1998; Kiley-Worthington, 1987; Rees, 1984). In the absence of another horse they will turn to a human to provide this, but, if the human is unable to, the horse will learn to rely on him/herself to remain safe. This can often lead to unwanted and potentially dangerous behaviour as, under perceived threat, the horse may decide it is safer to run away from the handler than stay with him or her, with potentially dangerous results for both human, horse, and, sometimes, whatever else is in their way. Being herbivores, horses have to graze for the majority of the day so it would be inefficient for all the horses of the herd to be constantly alert and on the lookout for danger. Generally, therefore, one older, wise mare, known in equine ethology as the lead mare, is deemed intelligent and wise enough to be the gauge of whether something is perceived as a threat and to take fright from or not. In order to do this, horses have developed highly attuned senses and can 'read' body language and detect fear, for example. This may be demonstrated by a combination of raised heartbeat and breathing, minute change in muscle tension and perhaps smell of sweat, as it is understood that horses have a highly developed sense of smell in addition to their other senses (Blake, 1975; Gehrke, 2006; Kiley-Worthington, 1987). It is therefore possible for human handlers to influence the horse's behaviour by learning to control their own body language and to bring down a raised heartbeat through breathing techniques and other mindful exercises. As the counsellor Sally described it,

...the thing that horses do really well is they're incredibly sensitive to body language and emotions. And although other animals are, it's not in the same way and they don't have that ability to mirror them. I mean, there's some confusions about this issue, I think, but the reality is that if you are afraid and uptight, the message to the horse is there is something to be afraid about, so the horse gets afraid and uptight too. And this works the

other way too, so if you are calm and relaxed the horse is more likely to be as well.  
(Sally, Counsellor).

Practicing mindfulness, in terms of becoming ‘mindfully embodied’ and aware of one’s own body language is necessary to be able to work effectively with horses on the ground, as well as ride them. In the following example of a TH session with the mare Ruby, Wayne was able to overcome a challenging and potentially frightening experience by practising mindfulness. This was in the context of being aware of his body language and breathing, and moderating them, in order to demonstrate to Ruby that there was nothing for her to fear.

*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 enjoyed 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 (the 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.

(Extended sessional notes).

In the examples of TH sessions with both Wayne and Freya where breathing and body scan exercises were employed, there would appear to be links to the mindfulness practice of 'mindfulness walking'. The authors Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002) also describe this as 'meditation in motion', where participants are taught a technique of walking mindfully keeping a 'soft gaze' and suggest that it can be a particularly useful exercise for people who feel agitated and find it difficult to 'settle'. These mindfulness practices draw on principles that for some participants it is easier to achieve mindfulness with 'a practice that involves physical movement than with one that does not' (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002: 181). Coleman (2006) further believes that it is easier to come closer to mindfulness through being in the natural environment. Through a combination of being outside in the natural environment, in close contact with a 'stronger, wiser other' (Shaver *et al.*, 2007) and practicing exercises with similarities to some of those described in the mindfulness literature, it may be that participants such as Freya and Wayne, who sometime found it difficult to concentrate and 'settle', were able to experience some of the benefits suggested as arising from achieving a sense of mindfulness. Morgan and Morgan (2005) write about how most of the time people are in a state of 'partial attention' and this can be more so for people who are stuck in patterns of negative thought due to past experiences. These authors suggest that experiencing mindfulness and 'optimal presence' brings other benefits in terms of more positive relationships, and empathy and compassion towards others due to gaining an enhanced sense of well-being (Morgan & Morgan, 2005). Wayne certainly appeared to demonstrate some empathy towards Ruby's fear and was able to monitor his own fear and emotional response in order to remain with her, and eventually calm her down.

### **Self-esteem, authenticity, aggression and mindfulness**

In this section I provide an example of how the participant Cinderella learnt to adapt her behaviour, using some techniques aligned to some aspects of mindfulness practice in order to



successfully catch and halter the mare Duchess. The authors Heppner and Kernis (2007) and Brown, Ryan and Creswell (2007) write about how mindfulness can lead to 'authentic functioning'. Heppner and Kernis (2007) explain that authentic functioning is when the individual gains increased self-knowledge and awareness which can enable him/her to connect to their 'core-self'. Although a controversial concept they claim that their research 'has shown that mindfulness and authenticity are interrelated' and that more positive relationships, lower stress levels and better mental health are a result of authentic functioning (Heppner & Kernis, 2007: 249). In addition Chambers, Gullone and Allen (2009) make the link between mindfulness and emotion regulation which could also be seen to have some relevance to the examples given in this chapter with a number of the participants.

As previously discussed, in order to have a successful partnership with a horse it is necessary to be self-aware and in control of your body language. Horses are incredibly sensitive and will respond unfavourably to aggressive or agitated behaviour, sensing even increased heart and breathing rates. Working with and learning about horses is inherently experiential; it is only possible to receive feedback through embodied practice with them, no amount of theoretical learning will achieve the same result. The following fieldnotes on a TH session with Cinderella showed how she demonstrated some of the behavioural traits of being highly sensitive to criticism described by Heppner *et al.*, (2008) and Heppner and Kernis (2007). I then go on to describe how Cinderella gained some insight into how her negative thoughts and feelings affected her body language, which in turn affected the horse Duchess. She discovered how *being* with these feelings instead of repressing them, and relaxing, both in mind and body, then exploring how she could change her body language, resulted in her having a more positive experience with the mare 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 bloody 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 me 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 bloody cow, don't be bloody 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 bloody cow.... 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, also with no problem, her body language reflecting a much more gentle approach towards the horses who responded accordingly.

(Extended sessional notes).

It would appear that Cinderella's feelings surrounding her mother (from whom she had been separated for some while, and with whom she had a very volatile and inconsistent relationship according to her social worker) were quite close to the surface, as demonstrated by her comparing Duchess to her mother in the heat of the moment, after being rejected by the mare. Another claim that is perhaps related to Cinderella's experience with Duchess is that more mindful and authentic functioning can result in the participant becoming less aggressive as they begin to gain greater 'secure' self-esteem (Heppner & Kernis, 2007; Heppner, *et al.*, 2008). This claim is supported by the authors Zylowska *et al.*, (2008) who reported a reduction in aggressive behaviour in their study with adolescents assessed with conduct disorder who participated in a mindfulness programme. Where individuals possess fragile self-esteem due to their negative life experiences (such as many of the young people attending The Yard who had had to develop protective defences due to their traumatic pasts) they may be more likely to be highly vulnerable to challenge (Heppner *et al.*, 2008). Some of the participants at The Yard were referred with referral forms which spoke of their difficulties in taking instruction, of being ultra sensitive to criticism, and of aggressive behaviour, traits which suggest fragile self-esteem. Cinderella's aggressive manner may have been linked to her possessing fragile self-esteem, or high ego-involvement, and so she may have already been expecting rejection and failure with Duchess. Heppner *et al.*, suggest that 'aggressive behaviour is one means by which people attempt to restore their damaged self images' (2008: 487). Her aggressive body language then resulted in her perceived failure in the task of catching and haltering the mare Duchess and so her defence mechanism of further aggressive behaviour was triggered; 'social rejection or ostracism often leads to heightened aggressive behaviour' (Heppner *et al.*, 2008: 487). However, by allowing Cinderella to sit quietly and not judge herself, or the mare, negatively, but just relax and *be* with her feelings for a while, it appeared that Cinderella was able to explore and process some of her difficulties around trust and security, albeit possibly unconsciously. In turn this was reflected in her body language becoming gentler and softer with the mare and, as a consequence being able to catch and halter her successfully, which in turn provided her with positive feedback to her

actions. This would seem to have some connection with Segal, Williams and Teasdale's (2002) description of MBSR exercises which they suggest can help participants gain greater awareness of how negative emotions can be expressed through the body. In addition, by being able to regulate her response there may be links to the 'mindful emotion regulation' that Chambers, Gullone and Allen propose when they suggest that it can 'allow the individual to more consciously choose those thoughts, emotions, and sensations they will identify with, rather than habitually reacting to them' (2009: 569). By engaging in embodied activities with the horses which demand authentic behaviour, as this is all horses will positively respond to, it may be possible that participants achieve aspects of mindfulness and some of the positive benefits to self-esteem and behaviour as a result.

Ultimately, by being enabled to take responsibility for her own actions and choices of how she responded towards Duchess's behaviour, Cinderella may have been experiencing aspects of the *experiential freedom* and *organismic trusting* proposed by the authors Shaver *et al.*, (2007). By being able to reach a mindfully embodied state she was able to act in an authentic manner. When Cinderella initially approached Duchess her body language reflected her inner emotional state of mind, of being angry at perceived criticism and the mare reacted accordingly by rejecting her. Cinderella's normal pattern of behaviour in response to rejection was to become increasingly angry but in this case she was in an environment where she was able to practice a different approach. Being encouraged to bring a sense of awareness to her actions without negative judgement and within a peaceful environment, may have enabled Cinderella to relax which would appear to be a crucial part of all mindfulness practices, Coleman writing that 'being outdoors provides mental space and clarity, allowing our body to relax...' (2006: xv).

### **Some further observations on horses and mindfulness**

It may not be possible for many of the young people who attended The Yard to consciously process some of the suggestions or practices put forward in the mindfulness literature, since the level of self-awareness at adolescence is different than in adulthood, and their own particular difficulties surrounding their traumatic pasts often being too raw at the time they participated in TH. However, many of the elements involved in working with horses seem to embody a number of the mindfulness techniques described by Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002) and Zylowska *et al.*, (2008) amongst others. Consequently young people participating in TH may be enabled to achieve some of the same benefits that mindfulness practices claim, such as reaching a state of

calmness and heightened awareness. This is linked to heightened self-knowledge and hence self-regulation according to Brown and Ryan (2003) and Chambers, Gullone and Allen (2009). Mindful experiences with horses may be more accessible for some at-risk young people with behavioural, emotional, or attention challenges than traditional MBSR or MBCT or other therapeutic techniques. This was demonstrated through the examples with Cinderella, Wayne and Freya who all appeared to gain some benefit from participating in exercises and techniques with the horses which had some similarities to those employed in some mindfulness practices. Perhaps a more important and useful application of TH, however, is that the benefits suggested to be gained from mindfulness practices, in particular MBSR, are achieved naturally through working with horses, as these same principles of relaxed awareness are a requirement of a successful partnership with the horse; and the young people, almost without exception, were motivated in wanting to achieve this relationship.

In the next section I go on to discuss themes related to the natural environment which have overlaps with mindfulness, in addition to many of the other themes that arose through the research.

### **Psychosocial and Psychospiritual dimensions of Horses and Nature**

The benefit of being in the natural environment was a thread running through several of the other themes that arose through the research, and has various layers of meaning. Therefore it has been difficult to separate the effect of being in nature from some of the other themes. Being in nature was a backdrop to the TH sessions, and is referred to as a 'background to activities' by Wals (1994). At the same time the natural environment had its own characteristics which were considered fundamental to the whole experience provided at The Yard. Some of the themes that emerged were articulated by both the young people and the adults, others just by a number of the adults who went into some depth with theoretical and philosophical aspects related to being in the natural environment. As was the case with many of the other themes the young people would often speak about their experiences at The Yard through their perceptions of how the horses felt about certain things. This was the case with the theme of 'being calm' which was generally attributed to factors associated with the horses for the young people, but was more strongly identified with the natural environment for the adults. Whilst 'feeling calm' has also been explored in previous chapters in relation to mindfulness and psychotherapeutic insights, in this section I will look at how 'being calm' also appeared to be linked to being in the natural

environment. Some of the nature and ecotherapy literature talks of the spiritual dimensions of being in nature; of how it can be 'restorative' in its own right (Kaplan, 1995). Although the data is more limited on this area due to methodological difficulties involved in gathering aspects of the spiritual dimensions of being in the natural environment from the young people, Cinderella did, nevertheless, write 'being in nature de-stresses you' in a questionnaire about her experiences of being at The Yard. Mostly, however, it was not through words but through their body language, attitude and behaviour that the participants would appear to relax and engage once we got out into the fields and open spaces. Another area that both the adults and some of the young people talked about was of how the environment and being with horses was linked to 'feeling free' and 'escape' in some way. I explore these concepts drawing on theory from both the nature and ecotherapy literature and some of the Jungian theories around symbolism and archetypes which are explored in more depth in the literature review chapter 2.

Lastly there are the more obvious benefits of physical activity involved in working with and caring for horses, and how this was possibly linked to the young people being more willing to engage in educational and learning activities. Again, as these are not things the participants spoke about directly, I draw more heavily on my fieldnotes and data from the adults to describe these elements of TH that emerged from the research.

### **Nature, horses and 'being calm': the natural 'restorative' environment**

The view of the importance of the environment in facilitating the young people to relax, be more open and motivated to learning was voiced by many of the adults involved in the young people's lives. There is a large body of literature claiming that the natural environment is fundamental to health, and that our distancing and dominance over nature is largely responsible for many elements of mental, physical and spiritual ill health (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Louv, 2008; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). Nebbe (2000) and the deep ecology movement suggest that we have a 'natural bond' with the biosphere as we are all interconnected (Lovelock, 1979). Other literature makes links to the particular psychological benefits of the natural environment. Kaplan (1995) talks of the 'restorative environment'. The authors Berger and McCleod state that 'the concept of conducting transformative and healing work in nature is not new' (2006: 80). They and other authors claim that the healing power of nature can be traced back historically to when humans lived alongside nature and animals and understood, in a lived, embodied way, the connection of all things (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995).

This understanding of the natural environment as being an important element of TH for the participants was expressed by the adults in different ways. As mentioned earlier in this chapter many of the adults involved in the young people's care spoke of how they would be calmer after attending TH sessions. This was repeated by the foster carer, Laura, writing about another participant in a feedback form, '(he) is always calm and relaxed after a session'. Whilst most of the data concerning possible links between nature, being calm and a therapeutic environment was observational in terms of the young people, many of the participants did comment on how the horses helped them feel calmer. In their responses to how horses made them feel on a questionnaire they completed for the research Cinderella and Minimax both wrote the word 'calm'. When I asked her what it was that she especially liked about Ruby - as she often chose to work with her on TH sessions - the participant Freya told me that it was because, 'she looks sort of kind...and calm'. Additionally, during a conversation with Cinderella in one of the sessions as we chatted about the horses she told me that, as well as the horses, being in nature was also important to her in terms of de-stressing; 'it's like, if you're stressed, being in nature de-stresses you'.

Both the counsellor Sally and the therapist Deana talked about the importance of being in the natural environment and of how it contributed to the therapeutic process. Sally explained that she believed that there were a number of reasons for why being in nature was an important element of EAL/T, including how the horses can be instrumental in helping everything 'slow down'.

And that stillness, I mean, if we weren't talking now we'd just be sitting here quite quietly wouldn't we? The horses have just been pottering around quite quietly, and the whole thing just slows down.

(Sally, Counsellor).

She went on to add,

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 reiterated similar claims, also mentioning bird song and views in her understanding of the importance of the natural environment in the therapeutic process, stating that,

I think this environment is very special and you can hear the bird's songs, the spaciousness that you can have here and just being able to look out across nature. It feels really holding as well. Yeah, so I think the environment has a lot to do with it.

(Deana, Therapist).

As I have mentioned previously, it is claimed that the very nature of therapy can create anxiety for some young people (Biegel *et al.*, 2009) and that introducing contact with animals within the therapeutic environment can help to provide a calming effect, especially during initial sessions (Levinson, 1969; Walsh, 2009). One reason for why horses may be effective in initiating a calm atmosphere is that they inherently want a calm and peaceful existence as they need to conserve energy for when it may be required in order to escape potential predators. In addition the horse will always look for a calm and intelligent leader s/he can trust. Therefore, in order to have a successful relationship with a horse it is necessary to behave in a calm manner. Some young people may forge relationships with other animals that also require a similar, calm approach. Talking about her work with a 15 year old boy and his beginning to establish a relationship with a Llama, the psychotherapist Brooks says how Llamas, like horses, are curious and will want to approach a person who remains calm and unaggressive (Brooks, 2006). This is the case with many of the animals found in the outdoor, natural, environment as opposed to domesticated pets found in the home, and so these animals demand an additional awareness of body language and emotion regulation. In the current study an example of this is provided in chapter 4 on p74, where it is seen that the young people would become transfixed by the rare sight of a wild fox or deer in the fields and woods surrounding The Yard and be able to monitor their body language accordingly, becoming very quiet and calm.



### **‘Horses for courses’: Horse management and a calm relaxing environment**

An important factor in the ethos and practice of The Yard was of creating an informal and relaxed atmosphere for both the horses and young people. The natural environment, horse management, and person-centred orientation of The Yard were all interwoven and equally important in helping create a ‘therapeutic environment’ and ‘safe space’.

Talking about both the environment and how the horses were managed within a natural horsemanship system and philosophy, Deana told me,

Well, it might be that they’re closer to their natural state. That they live with the herd, and that they have much more freedom (.) they are (.) um they live outside (.) not shut in stables. Yes of course they’re domesticated, but for me they are (.) there’s a respect for their (.) um the horses’ spirits. (They’re) respected for who they are.

(Deana, Therapist).

The way the horses were kept was something that seemed important for the participant Emma who told me that the pony Timmy was much calmer at The Yard than he had been at his previous stables, which was based upon a more conventional approach where the horses were kept in individual stables and separate paddocks. Emma told me that he had been permanently anxious and unsettled at this stable yard. She then went on to tell me that she thought all the horses were calmer and more ‘settled’ at The Yard. When I asked her why she thought this was Emma answered,

Well, here they’re not forced to go in the stables, 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).

Linda, Emma’s adoptive mother, reiterated how she felt the general environment of The Yard was helpful to Emma in terms of suiting her particular needs. She explained that,

I think it’s a sort of more comfortable environment, so she feels more relaxed.... She didn’t like the pressure of routine at (her last stables). You know, when you have to get a horse brought in and out at a particular time, feed them at this time, you’ve got to do this,

you've got to have it (horse) turned out with that one and you've got to have it there, and you know, it was very regimented at the last place. And I think that was a difficult thing for her. She really does not cope with, you know, strict regime, you know. She struggles at school in that respect.

(Linda, Emma's adoptive mother).

By creating a relaxed environment for the horses it was hoped that this would assist in creating a relaxing environment for the participants. This is something that the EAL/T practitioner and counsellor Sally reiterated. Sally explained that, for her, the impact of the environment on the horses' well being is fundamental in creating a calm atmosphere, which she believes is vital in terms of creating an effective therapeutic environment telling me, 'And the horses are relaxed too in this environment, and that's crucial'

Just being outside and relaxing with the horses was something that a number of the young people seemed to want to do and benefit from. Accordingly, The Yard tried to facilitate and encourage this whenever possible, a non-directive approach being able to accommodate a flexible approach to TH sessions. On one occasion in a session with Minimax he chose to spend time just lying down in the field with the mare Ruby and we left him to relax with her whilst we busied ourselves on some field management tasks nearby.

#### *Minimax and Ruby relaxing together*

It was a lovely warm sunny summer's day today with a bright blue sky and a warm breeze on which the birds were drifting across the valley. When we went out into the field to bring in Ruby and Jason, Ruby was lying down, quietly dozing in the sun. Minimax went straight over and sat down on the grass next to her; he seemed very relaxed with her, as did Ruby with Minimax. She was quite happy to remain lying down with him - which is quite unusual for horses as they are obviously extremely vulnerable lying down and will only remain so with someone they completely trust and feel secure with. We pointed this out to Minimax, who shrugged - but with a grin on his face as though he knew the two of them had a special relationship. As we carried on with pulling up ragwort (poisonous plant to horses) Minimax and Ruby remained lying down together, the mare with her eyes half closed, Minimax quietly relaxing next to her, seeming to be lost in thought.

(Fieldnotes).

In a study with young adolescents from urban Detroit, Wals found that several of participants spoke of how nature was a place 'where you can be alone and think by yourself' (1994: 19). The author goes on to state that,

away from their everyday distractions, these students can think freely about their emotions. The peacefulness, the slow pace, the sounds of the birds, the sun shining through the leaves, are some of the elements of nature that, to some of the students, are soothing and inspire reflective thought (Wals, 1994: 19).

Often the participant Wayne would also seem to just want to be on his own with the horses and would spend time quietly stroking and hugging the mare Ruby. One day we were all sitting at the bench in the yard and I was trying to ask Wayne questions about the horses for the research, not very successfully. Wayne seemed to find this distracting and asked if he could go and eat his lunch with the horses instead. He then went and put his chair next to the fence amongst the trees so he could watch the horses whilst he ate his sandwiches. (This is perhaps an example of what Davies (1998) refers to when he writes about how young people will extract themselves from the research process, which I discuss more fully in chapter 4). It was a very peaceful, warm spring day, the birds were singing, flowers were out and the only sound was the occasional snort of a horse or a sheep bleating in the distance. Altogether it was very relaxing. After he had finished his lunch Wayne came back and told us, 'I could just sit here and watch the horses all day'. Although Wayne had not commented specifically on the environment it certainly appeared that it was a combination of the factors of the horses and the natural environment which had seemed to attract him to wanting to spend time just sitting quietly contemplating them. A more conventional yard of metal and concrete where the horses were shut in stables, with the associated stress-related behavioural problems of kicking doors and biting, would possibly not have created the peaceful environment which seemed to engage Wayne on this occasion. The authors Louv (2008) and Taylor, Kuo and Sullivan (2001) make the claim that being in nature can alleviate the symptoms of ADHD in young people due to its 'attention restoration' ability. It would appear that Wayne was demonstrating how being in nature with animals can create a relaxing, yet motivating and 'attention restoring' environment.

### **‘Special places’, learning opportunities and the natural environment**

One sunny summer’s day after he had been attending TH for a number of months Minimax came bounding into the yard, exclaiming ‘I LOVE being here’. This was quite an expressive statement for Minimax who normally kept his conversations with us directed towards talking about the horses, apart from the occasional outburst about his brother and his thoughts on social workers (not very positive!). When I quizzed him a little bit more on what he meant by this, he characteristically clammed up again, just muttering, ‘I don’t know, just everything’ and busied himself with changing his boots. As he appeared not to want to expand on his comment, I didn’t question him any further. This is an example of one of numerous times I was faced with one of the many ethical dilemmas inherent in being a practitioner-researcher; of wanting to persist in questioning in the quest for more information but, at the same time, being aware of the frustrations and limitations in this endeavour. Ultimately, as a practitioner first and foremost the young person’s well-being held priority so there was a clear ethical distinction for me. However, I was aware that there were times that further rich data could perhaps have been generated from pushing for more information.

Some authors have written about the importance of favourite or special places for both adults and children, and, especially, natural places, believing these have importance for a number of reasons ranging from cognitive and developmental (Heerwagen & Orians, 2002; Kellert, 2002), emotion regulation and restoration (Korpela *et al.*, 2001), attention restoration (Kaplan, 1995), attachment to place (Jack, 2010) and as therapeutic ‘sacred’ space (Berger & McLeod, 2006). Whilst the young people who attended The Yard hadn’t chosen the space themselves because they had been referred for TH, nevertheless they may have benefited from some of the aspects that these authors refer to, as demonstrated by Minimax exclaiming that it was ‘everything’ about The Yard. The author Wals (1994) suggests that the natural environment is important for young people to escape some of the problems in their home environment and how it ‘provides a friendly atmosphere away from the worries many of the students have at home or at school’ (1994: 16). He also speaks of how nature is intriguing, how ‘nature piques the curiosity of these students and in doing so inspires learning’ (Wals, 1994: 18). This was something that appeared to be the case with two of the young people Lucy and Freya who both showed an especial interest in nature and the natural environment. Lucy had a good knowledge of wild plants which she had learnt from her school and whilst we were out in the fields or out hacking in

the lanes would often point out some that she knew were edible. She also knew the names of lots of wild flowers and animatedly told me about the importance of flowers and bees to ecology through pollination. During one TH session with Freya we were walking around the fields conducting a routine field maintenance check after which the young people then sometimes completed a 'field maintenance' quiz. On this occasion the wild garlic had grown up profusely in the small woodland at the bottom of one of the fields. We showed Freya how these could be picked and eaten, demonstrating this by eating some ourselves. At first Freya feigned disgust, saying 'uuugh, I'm not eating *that*'. However, she was interested in participating in identifying the correct leaves and picking some of the younger tender ones. Afterwards we took some back to the yard and Freya took a few leaves with her when the staff member from her residential home came to collect her. We were then surprised and pleased when the following week she asked if we could go and pick some more of the wild garlic to take back to put in salad for dinner that evening. The staff member commented that normally Freya wouldn't eat greens in any form so it seemed that somehow having a connection to the plant and process by picking it herself had facilitated a positive change in her eating behaviour.

This interest in plants and the natural environment accords with biophilia theory, which claims that we have a natural fascination and affinity with our natural surroundings due to our long history as hunter-gatherers (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1984). Whatever the reasons behind Freya's interest in nature, the experience of identifying and picking the wild garlic provided an opportunity for her to participate in a valuable learning experience as suggested by Wals (1994) when he talks about how nature inspires learning. In her study on the effects of 'greenness' on children in urban environments, Wells goes further to suggest that engaging in the natural environment has been shown to 'have a profound effect on children's cognitive functioning' (2000: 790). Katcher and Wilkins (2000) suggest that through being motivated and inspired to learn about nature this then transfers to enabling communication skills and dialogue to be opened. These authors write, 'learning came from nature, but it came into a dialogue between people. Learning was a social skill and was designed to equip a child to enter into conversation with others' (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000: 165). For some of the young people, like Freya, who because of their negative experiences could find it difficult to engage with adults who they had learnt not to trust - often with subsequent knock on effects on their education - finding a forum in

which they could engage with adults and find opportunities to learn and communicate could be the beginning of building more positive opportunities and futures.

### **Horses, nature and relationships**

Another idea which has resonance with EAL/T is that each part of nature – the landscape, the elements, the weather, animals – can ‘trigger parallel psychological and spiritual quests that can open a channel for mind-body work’ and that nature can act as ‘a bridge between people’ (Berger & McLeod, 2006: 87). Talking to me about a difficult time in her childhood Lucy told me how the pony Minnie had brought elements of this to her life, helping her build relationships with others,

Lucy: Because I already had a good repertoire [sic] with animals. What I needed was a repertoire [sic] with humans as well. She was....she was the table.

HB: Like a bridge?

Lucy: Yeah. Yeah.

(I understood Lucy to mean rapport when she talked about repertoire. She expanded in later discussion that she was trying to get across that what she needed was to learn a way of communicating with humans as well as animals).

Emma’s adoptive mother, Linda, talked about how she felt that the environment, in terms of being outdoors, the orientation and practice of The Yard, and with the horses as the motivating factor, had helped her and Emma build on their relationship, which she explained had sometimes been difficult. Linda told me how Emma struggled in the school environment as she found the structure and social side of it really difficult, telling me ‘it’s something she just lacks completely’. She explained how it was difficult to motivate Emma to do anything, both in school and at home in the holidays, but, because she ‘likes being outdoors’ and due to her interest in horses, found that this was something that she could encourage. This was in the hope that it would benefit Emma, in terms of both physical health and social skills, and at the same time help with their relationship, telling me.

It’s been a good experience for both of us you know. And it’s really been a positive thing for us building a relationship. Not always having to battle. So the experience I feel now is

hugely better and more balanced than before. And I mean, on the way there and on the way back home in the car we're talking, so even that part of the, um, you know, going to see the horse is positive because we'll have a chat on the way there and a chat on the way back which is positive, instead of her just sitting there in silence or getting out of the car and walking off..

(Linda, Emma's adoptive mother).

This appeared to correspond with what Emma told me when I asked her about the differences she felt from being at The Yard to being in other places, telling me,

Yeah, so like after I've done everything and I know I'm going to be going home soon I just suddenly get really bored and I don't know why. But I mean like I get really excited on the way there, but on the way back I'm like, 'OK, I'm bored and I don't have a *clue* what I'm going to do when I get home.

(Emma, Participant).

The counsellor Sally talked about how she had a mixture of animals at her EAL/T practice, ranging from chickens to rabbits, guinea pigs and dogs in addition to a horse, as she believed this was useful in facilitating interest and conversation through the interactions between the species. She said that this 'provides lots of opportunities to talk about things' and that the horses and other animals,

...in a sense help you get back in contact with something (.) it's not that you don't know it, it's just somehow (.) it got buried.

(Sally, Counsellor).

On the larger farm on which The Yard was located there were sheep and lambs, chickens, a rather mischievous goat and a rich abundance of wildlife, such as many varieties of birds together with rabbits, foxes and the occasional deer. This provided useful opportunities for discussion and quiet contemplation. An example of this was when during a TH session with Kelly a fox padded silently across one of the fields with a rabbit in its mouth, causing Kelly to sit down on the grass with us and watch with fascination as it crossed our path, seemingly unconcerned about our

presence as long as we remained completely still. At times like these it felt as though we were all connected in some way to the moment that was unfolding and to the other animals and larger environment, in a way that is difficult to express in words.

### **Connection and ‘listening to your instincts’**

The idea of being in contact with something else that Sally mentions is perhaps linked to the idea of being connected to a larger entity in the way that the Gaia hypothesis and ecologists speak of everything being connected (Lovelock, 1979). Nebbe states that ‘humans evolved with the earth, with and within the natural environment’ and that we therefore have a basic need to connect with the natural environment (2000: 391). In their study on therapeutic horticulture Sempkit, Aldridge and Becker (2005) found that participants spoke of feeling free, connection to the natural environment, and how they found distractions from their problems, all themes which arose in the current study and are perhaps related to being in the natural environment alongside the interactions with the horses. The Gestalt ecotherapist Cahalan (1995) writes about ‘ecological groundedness’ which he suggests is a state of healthy functioning that can be gained by connecting with nature. Perhaps we experienced elements of this in the TH session with Kelly whilst we watched the fox.

Deana spoke of how she believed the horses were part of the whole environment and therapeutic process when she explained,

The recognition that we are connected to each other as the horses are connected to each other as well, um. And I think that has a profound effect on young people.

(Deana, Therapist).

The participant Lucy told me how she felt that it was important to listen to your instincts when around horses, and of how city life could repress this;

Lucy: ....and you’re not sensitive to horses’ or animals’ needs because you’re too wrapped up in, you know, city life and your proper senses haven’t built or whatever, and you’re just going to make the situation worse. So if you listened in the first place, listen to your heart rather than your head.



HB: Right. Right. So when you're being around horses, it's more important to listen to your...

Lucy: Your instinct

### **Freedom, escape and getting away from problems**

This idea that being in nature, in the elements and with horses and other animals can reconnect us to something is also perhaps linked to some of the things both the young people and adults talked about, of how being with the horses in the natural environment took the young people away from their problems and gave them escape from the stresses of their other lives in some way. Lucy told me that for her being with horses and animals in nature helped her 'to escape and keep busy. Escapism'. She went on to explain how coming up to be with the horses, 'it kind of, it kind of helped me focus on something else rather than me'. When I asked Lucy if she could expand on what she felt was more important for her, the horses or the environment she answered,

Well, I'm not sure. I think it's a bit of both with me personally because the thought of horses... animals, makes me calmer anyway....Um, then, just kind of the thought of going to see the horses makes me kind of push out any irritations.

(Lucy, Participant).

Korpela *et al.*, (2001) in their study with adolescents found that they spoke about their favourite places in nature as places they went to calm down and escape from their problems. Another view proposed is that being in nature is restorative, Kaplan (1995) calling this 'attention restoration theory'. This may be relevant to what Lucy refers to, and to what Freya experienced in her interest in the natural environment. Some of the adults also brought up what they perceived as the importance of being with the horses and the environment as helping the young people to get away from their problems. Angie told me that after sessions Minimax would be,

calmer, it seems to take their minds somewhere else, gives them a different view on things, it takes them away from the problems...yes he would talk about the horses instead of that.

(Angie, Foster Carer).

Deana too, spoke of how different she would feel when she was at The Yard, telling me,

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).

Telling me about one of her clients with Aspergers syndrome who had limited verbal skills and would often appear anxious and frustrated at the residential facility where he lived, Sally explained how his behaviour and general demeanour would change once he was at her EAL/T smallholding.

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).

For Emma being at The Yard seemed to signify freedom on different levels. She told me that she liked being at The Yard more than school because,

(school) is like really boring and *crowded* and stuff, this place feels like it's got more freedom and stuff.

(Emma, Participant).

Emma went on to tell me that she envied horses, that she was 'jealous of them' as they could do what they wanted and didn't have to worry about behaving in certain, socially acceptable, ways. This was because,

In the wild they go where they want, when they want, they go splashing in puddles and

not worrying about getting wet, roll in mud.

(Emma, Participant).

Jung talks about horses in dream interpretation as representing instinctive drives and as a symbol of the individual wanting to break loose from restricting conscious control, seeing them as a positive message in this instance (1978). In addition to Emma talking about how horses represented freedom in some respect, Lucy may also have been referring to aspects of this when she talked of how horses could help to connect to 'your instinct'.

### **Horses, myth and magic**

These themes of how horses represent freedom and wildness on some level are perhaps linked to cultural aspects; of how the horse has been incorporated and represented in culture throughout history as often symbolizing different parts of our psyche related to themes such as power, domination and our instinctive drives, together with their role in magic, myth and dream symbolism (Atwood, 1984; Howey, 2002; Jackson, 2006; Jung, 1978). I have explored some of these themes in more depth in the literature review in chapter 2, but an example of how the horse came into myth and legend in the daily life of The Yard is given by the mare Duchess and Cinderella. One day during a TH session with Cinderella, Duchess came in from the field with a strange purple mark across her wither (top of shoulder) which we thought was probably bird droppings from a bird that had been eating purple berries. However, before we had the opportunity to voice this deduction Cinderella cried, 'look she has been touched by unicorn dust!'. Many of the young people would call Duchess 'the fairy horse' due to her pure white coat and wise and gentle nature and would often initially be drawn to her before gaining the confidence to work with the other younger, or more challenging, horses. This example serves to illustrate how children's imaginations and stories are interwoven in their everyday lived experiences, and how the horses could precipitate this side of their imaginations. In Jungian psychology the unconscious and imagination are important aspects in the quest for self-understanding, and, although Jung wrote about these in terms of adults, the role of fairytales in child development is suggested as providing a culturally socializing function (Jones, 2008). White horses, such as unicorns and Pegasus have long been associated with being healers, wise, or good helpers to humans in some way; they are archetypal in that respect (Held, 2006; Jackson,

2006). This theory also perhaps has connections to the 'collective unconscious' that Jung referred to (Jung, 1983, 1990) and how white horses have become embedded into a collective understanding of their significance. An interpretation of Jung by Hannah, Frantz and Wintrose (1992) goes on to suggest that horses can show us the way when we are lost and cannot help ourselves due to their clairvoyant and divinatory power.

Another area where horses seemed to enable some of the participants to connect with other aspects of themselves was in the way that they empowered the young people to feel more powerful and confident, such as when Lucy exclaimed 'I feel like the queen of the world' when she was riding. There seemed to be connections between being in the natural environment with the horses which led to wanting to try new things, to be open to learning and to taking some risks. Nebbe (2000) describes how more positive ways of being can be gained by being in nature. She suggests that the very nature of being in the natural environment with exposure to the elements bring us closer to our ancestral roots of having to adapt and learn certain skills and coping behaviours in order to survive, giving examples of these coping behaviours as 'self-sufficiency, risk taking, initiative, and co-operation' (Nebbe, 2000: 394). Some of the young people spoke of how they especially liked the horse Jason because he was a 'challenge' and would want to try new and more challenging activities on the horses. An example of this was when Kelly told us wistfully, 'I wish I could just go galloping off across that field' one day when she was riding Ruby along the lane next to a large, sloping, inviting field.

### **Physical activity and learning in the natural environment**

Linked to the aspect of risk taking inherent in being involved with horses that Atwood (1984) and Scanlan (2001) suggest as being a strong motivating factor in their attraction, is the physical activity involved in looking after and caring for them. It is well documented that exercising is linked to feeling good through the release of endorphins (Halliwell, 2005). Mucking out stables, maintaining the fields, throwing up the muck heap, changing and carrying water buckets, filling and hanging haynets; these are things that need doing daily in addition to grooming and exercising the horses. Many of the young people who attended The Yard participated in little physical activity and their carers would voice despair on how difficult it was to persuade them to engage in outdoor pursuits such as joining them for walks, or taking up a sport or other healthy outdoor activity. A number of the participants were overweight and unfit and some had food issues, although others, such as Minimax, were sometimes hyperactive. Whilst, on occasion,

some of the participants would seek to avoid certain tasks that they particularly disliked, for some this was filling haynets, for others it was mucking out, generally all of them would engage in these tasks once they understood that they were necessary for the horses' wellbeing and health. Alongside the inherent physical aspect of looking after and caring for the horses, educational opportunities were created wherever possible within the context of learning about horses. This could be learning the 'points of the horse' which involved reading from a diagram and matching it against the real horse, to measuring and weighing their feeds. TH sessions could involve more, or less, formal educational opportunities depending on the requirements of the participant and referrer, and included projects about the role of the horse through history to learning about the horse's food production and links to the natural environment. The following extract is an extract from fieldnotes about a meeting with a staff member from Wayne's pupil referral unit (PRU).

#### *Learning in context*

Today a staff member from the PRU which Wayne attended came out to The Yard for a meeting. This was to discuss some of his learning goals and possible curriculum work we could incorporate into sessions with the horses. She immediately commented on what a peaceful, relaxing environment she found The Yard and how she believed it was more beneficial for Wayne than the school environment in which he struggled. We went on to discuss Wayne and his academic level and what sort of things we could introduce into TH sessions of an educational element. She explained Wayne's educational ability as being at low primary level, which surprised me because he had managed reasonably well with the points of the horse sheet we had given him, although he had obviously struggled with unfamiliar words such as 'wither' 'stifle' and 'fetlock'. When she sees this sheet she says she is surprised that Wayne had even attempted the worksheet due to the size and amount of writing on it and level of difficulty of words. She claims that Wayne would normally have played up and refused to attempt something of this level; 'I'm surprised he had a go at that, normally at the centre he would have started playing up if we had given him something that difficult... or walked out or something'. She goes on to suggest that perhaps this is due to the combination of being in the outdoor, natural, environment, together with the educational tasks that have meaning because they are related to learning about something he is motivated about and so have context.

(Fieldnotes).

Emma's adoptive mother talked about how she believed that Emma's motivation to be with horses and preference for being outdoors, as opposed to being inside school, had helped her with both physical aspects in addition to learning and social skills. She told me that Emma had huge issues around food and Emma herself told me 'I will just chuck food around and stuff'. By being motivated to improve her riding and be able to progress onto bigger and fitter horses, Emma was able to understand that she too needed to have a balanced diet and exercise.

The thing with horse riding that is eventually going to make her get fitter and eat better, you know, is that she's got to eat properly because she's got to be fit, she's got to have exercise if she's going to be a good rider. You know, it's almost sort of lurking in the back of her mind. It's motivation.

(Linda, Emma's adoptive mother).

An aim for Cinderella on her referral form was for her to engage in more physical exercise. In addition her respite carers told us that it was difficult to persuade Cinderella to eat a healthy diet. We found that food was an issue that came up during TH sessions with Cinderella who would want to give the pony Leo extra portions in his feed. In a questionnaire that Cinderella completed for the research she wrote about the pony Leo, 'I gave (Leo) a little bit extra today 'coz he's special!'. However, unfortunately Leo suffered a painful foot condition (laminitis) resulting from eating too much rich grass and getting overweight in his previous home, and therefore needed to be on a restricted diet together with managed exercise. During the following TH sessions Cinderella learnt about the importance of a balanced diet, of the importance of vitamins and minerals and of the need for exercise in order for Leo to remain healthy, and it was hoped that this knowledge would be transferable on some level to her own health and wellbeing. Certainly Cinderella showed she cared about Leo's wellbeing by being willing and happy to walk him out in hand for his exercise regime, which, in turn, helped with her own exercise.

### **Space to let off steam**

For some of the other participants being outside with space around them could be an opportunity to let off steam. One day Minimax was accompanied by another boy on a temporary foster placement with Angie. This boy, like Minimax, was quite exuberant, which, together with

Minimax's difficulty with his peer group, ensured that it quite quickly became clear that it was unsafe for them to be together in the yard with the horses loose. This was because the horses were picking up on their agitated behaviour, which was causing them to become anxious and agitated themselves.

### *Working outside with the horses*

Deciding it would be better to get the boys outside into the fields and leave the horses to eat their hay in peace we suggested a field maintenance session, telling the two boys that we needed to check all the fences and also do a general safety check of the fields. We explained that we needed to look for poisonous plants and any broken branches and rubbish that may have blown in after the storm of the night before. We left them to work out how they wanted to do this to themselves but gave them the suggestion that they could work together or separately depending on what they decided. They decided to complete the task by running up and down the steep hills, looking at the fences and calling suggestions to each other whilst successfully wearing themselves out - to our relief! Once they had calmed down it was possible to gain the boys attention and show them how to push the electric fencing posts back into the ground with their boots. We talked about the reasons why it was important to divide the field up so that one part was rested over the winter - in order that the grass could re-grow in the spring and the parasitic horse worms die out. Once we had completed this task we continued around the field doing a field safety check and encouraging the two boys to identify different plants which could be both good and bad for horses to eat. We also looked for examples of safe and unsafe fencing and areas the horses may find useful for shade or shelter, such as under trees or hedges, in order to protect themselves from the weather. Afterwards, sitting at the bench in the yard with a cold drink, they both completed the field maintenance quiz, although choosing to do this individually in quiet concentration. Following this session, Minimax's carer Angie, told me how Minimax had been engaging in particularly risk-taking behaviour recently, climbing up very high walls and trees and putting himself at-risk. We wondered if by exploring safety, within the context of keeping the horses safe, this might have transferred to his own feelings of safety on some level.

(Fieldnotes).

This extract serves to illustrate how the environment could be useful for both aspects of fitness and exercise; in the case of Minimax and the other boy to let off steam, and, for other participants such as Cinderella, to encourage more physical exercise. A study by Taylor, Kuo and Sullivan (2001) showed how young people diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) were better able to concentrate and engage in both school work and other activities when in 'green settings'. They suggest that 'before engaging in attentionally demanding tasks such as schoolwork and homework, ADD children might maximize their attentional capacity by spending time in green settings' (Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001: 73).

It is increasingly being recognised that childhood obesity is rising and is linked to health problems (British Medical Association, 2005; Ebberling, Pawlak, & Ludwig, 2002; McCurdy *et al.*, 2010). Munoz writes that 'it has been suggested that those with access to natural outdoor areas, that they can use easily and feel comfortable in, have higher levels of physical activity' (2009: 6). Whilst it was not necessarily particularly easy for the young people to access TH as this required a referral, an objective of The Yard was to create a relaxed and 'comfortable' environment so this may have helped facilitate physical activity in the way Munoz suggests. Other authors have written about how young people from deprived backgrounds are especially excluded from the natural environment and at greater risk of obesity and related health problems (Ward Thompson, Tavlou, & Roe, 2006; Wells, 2000). As the participants who attended The Yard were often from these categories it could be argued to be especially important to find motivating engaging outdoor activities, such as those provided by EAL/T and TH, for these groups of young people.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at how being with the horses and the associated exercises and approach of The Yard have similarities to aspects described in the mindfulness literature. A major theme running through the research was related to calmness, both of the young people's own accounts of feeling calmer when with the horses, and the adults reporting their behaviour as being calmer after attending TH sessions. Often the young people talked of how it was important to be calm around the horses in order to be a calming influence on the horse and to help them feel safe. In order to achieve relaxation and more mindful behaviour, some mindfulness practices such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which employ exercises such as the body scan and of being in the 'present moment', have many similarities to aspects of being with horses and



some of the emphasis and exercises employed at The Yard. In addition I explored how relating to the horses and learning how their behaviour could influence the horse could bring a growth in self-awareness and perhaps has links to the 'self-regulation' and 'authentic functioning' that the mindfulness literature refers to.

I then went on to explore the role of the natural environment within the context of TH at The Yard. A central tenet of the philosophy of The Yard was that being in nature offers therapeutic benefits due to a number of practical and theoretical reasons. It is also related to the style of 'natural horsemanship' practised, which strives to manage horses within an environment as 'natural' as possible to their wild state. Practically, being in the natural rural environment offers 'space to let off steam'. It provided an opportunity to run around and be noisy for some young people, many of whom found the formal classroom, or therapy, environment difficult. Once they had expended some energy it seemed to enable some participants to be more motivated to learn and engage with the practitioners and horses. The physical activity involved from working with horses was also a suggested 'spin off' benefit from TH sessions, with an understanding of the relationship between physical and mental health noted. On a philosophical level theories drawn from some of the environmental literature seemed to be applicable. Themes of the motivating aspects of the natural environment and of being drawn towards being in nature from biophilia theory may be relevant; as illustrated by Freya being interested in foraging for naturally growing garlic. Other relevant theoretical literature speaks of the 'restorative' benefits of nature and of it being a place where young people can escape from their problems and be calm. Conversely, the natural environment can be a wild place and some of the young people found how the weather and changing seasons can affect the horses, as demonstrated by Wayne and Ruby on a windy day on p177. This was connected to suggestions of how the natural environment and horses are culturally linked to themes of freedom and wildness. Some young people appeared to find the environment of The Yard somewhere where they could explore risk and overcome and set themselves challenges, such as when Kelly wished she could go 'galloping across the fields', and Lucy talked of how she liked a 'forward going' more challenging horse. Perhaps the natural environment offers what Wals (1994) terms a 'background to activities' in which all the other aspects fitted, and that were all ultimately interlinked so one could not occur without the other, in a similar way to the Gaya hypothesis (Lovelock, 1979).

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

This study arose out of my experience of being a practitioner at ‘The Yard’, a therapeutic horsemanship programme (TH) I established for a foster care company in the UK. As a qualified social worker with many years experience of working with and training horses, together with additional training in equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted therapy (EAL/T), I saw an opportunity to provide an alternative learning and therapeutic experience for ‘at-risk’ young people, through the medium of horses. Despite much anecdotal support for the benefits of EAL/T there remains limited research in the field due, in part, to its being a relatively recent addition to the therapeutic domain, and also because of the financial, political and practical limitations inherent in research into alternative therapeutic approaches (Bergin & Garfield, 1994; Daniel-McKeigue, 2006). Due to the additional ethical and gatekeeper problems involved in undertaking research with vulnerable young people in the care system and other agencies, there is even less practitioner-researcher or practice-near research within the area of EAL/T with this group, and no in-depth ethnographies such as the current study that I uncovered in my literature review.

I wanted to contribute to the evidence base by providing insights gleaned as practitioner-researcher through in depth ethnographic observation of The Yard, together with documentation of the experiences of a number of the young people participating in the TH programme. Seven young people participated in the study; in addition, I interviewed and included the views of five adults who were connected to the young people and/or TH at The Yard. The young people were referred from various agencies including the foster care company that originally funded the TH programme, a youth offending team (YOT), pupil referral unit (PRU), therapeutic residential children’s home, and private referrals. The young people were understood to be at-risk according to the risk and resilience literature due to experiencing various difficulties, challenges, disadvantages and exclusion of some sort. These included having been taken into local authority (LA) care due to assessed neglect and/or abuse in their parental home, being in contact with YOT due to criminal activity of some kind, and/or experiencing difficulties in the school environment, with three of the participants having a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN). All the participants were considered to require additional therapeutic and/or learning support, with four

regularly seeing a psychotherapist or educational psychologist. As many of the young people found it difficult to engage with traditional school and therapeutic environments they were referred to TH as an alternative and/or additional intervention.

In this chapter I provide an overview of the themes that arose during the ethnographic research and were explored in the study. I organised the data in terms of theoretical frameworks that proved useful and relevant in discussing the categories that emerged. These theoretical frameworks were aligned to five areas: the risk and resilience literature, attachment theory, psychotherapeutic processes and the role of the horse in the therapeutic relationship, mindfulness, and the nature/outdoor therapy field. A preliminary report of the study is also forthcoming in the journal of social work practice.

### **Insights from the ethnographic research study**

Through mixed-method data collection involving ethnographic observations, detailed ‘thick descriptions’, and field and semi-structured interviews, together with a number of questionnaires with both the young people and adults involved in their care, I gathered a wide range of data. The results of the study revealed that a number of themes arose related to the young people’s experiences with the horses, together with the orientation and setting of The Yard. These themes have links to some of the claims and theoretical frameworks outlined previously in the animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and EAL/T literature. As a number of the themes overlapped I grouped them in relation to their theoretical orientation. The themes were loosely based around issues of nurture, attachment and trust, social well-being and resilience, identification with the horse, a ‘safe’ space and calming influence, role of the horse in the therapeutic arena and the natural environment and spiritual dimensions. Relevant theoretical frameworks adopted were from the risk and resilience literature, attachment theory, psychotherapeutic literature, mindfulness and the nature/outdoor and ecotherapy fields.

It was found that in all cases the young people developed relationships with the horses on some level. These were sometimes strong attachments, such as in the case of Cinderella and Leo, and, in others, seemed to involve the young people identifying with different horses at certain times of their lives. Minimax spoke about how he believed the mare Ruby ‘understood him’ and both Cinderella and Emma told me how they could talk to the horses and ‘tell them their secrets’. Trusting and having an attachment to a non-judgemental, warm, sensitive, living breathing horse could perhaps offer experiences similar to those suggested as important in attachment theory in

the AAT and EAL/T literature, of satisfying needs for healthy and safe physical, emotional and social contact (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Chardoness, 2009; Walsh, 2009). Establishing these relationships, and, in turn, beginning to trust and feel safe with the horses, seemed to be a prerequisite to the young people feeling able to try more risky activities with the horses, such as round pen exercises and riding. These led to gains in self-confidence and self-esteem, both from successfully overcoming challenges and from becoming more proficient in horse management and handling. It is argued that self-esteem is crucial to resilience and that 'mastery' experiences, through which young people feel accomplishment from being successful at challenging tasks, can be useful in promoting resilience as this can promote self-efficacy (Frame, 2006; Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985). A second area considered important for healthy development and successful life outcome is the development of empathy, and of emotion regulation, awareness and coping strategies (Goleman, 1996; Lexman & Reeves, 2009; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). By learning about horse psychology and the different personalities, characteristics and histories of the horses, many of the young people appeared to be able to identify and empathise with them. Wayne empathised with a young colt having left behind his herd and dam (mother horse) in Spain and with another horse returning to a rescue charity. He wanted to spend whole sessions just being with the horses and discussing their lives, seeming to gain reassurance from processing their experiences. Through her affection for the old pony Leo, Cinderella demonstrated her ability to empathise with his illness and change her usual pattern of behaviour to overcome her fear of the medical profession, remaining to help reassure Leo whilst he received treatment from the vet. Some of their carers also commented that a number of the young people were able to regulate and control their behaviour, both through being motivated to be with the horses, and because they understood that they needed to modify their behaviour in order to have successful relationships with them. An example of this was given by Emma's adoptive mother who said that it was only by Emma being motivated by horses that she would do any academic work in school, which had to centre on horse subjects. Lucy learnt that she could monitor her emotions through the horses, telling me how she would calm down around the horses as she understood they did not respond well to angry behaviour. In addition she said that they had taught her how to act confidently around them, which in turn helped her feel more confident. The therapist Deana believed that this was a two way process, and that the horses also monitored and changed their behaviour depending on the young person with them. She gave the example of the mare Ruby who she said would act like a different horse with different people, being gentle and quiet with nervous and

unconfident children, but sometimes challenging and mischievous with young people who were more outgoing. The ability to regulate emotion and possess emotional understanding is argued to be vital to successful childhood development; Southam-Gerow and Kendall claiming that 'delayed or limited emotion understanding may place youth at-risk for disorder' (2002: 201).

A third prominent theme concerned the horse and the therapeutic relationship. Some authors make the claim that horses can provide a bridge to building a relationship between client and therapist as the horse provides many of the qualities essential in the successful therapist-client relationship (Brooks, 2006; Chardonnnes, 2009; Karol, 2007; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). This was corroborated by the EAL/T therapists in the current study. Deana recounted that Kelly called her by her name for the first time in a TH session and posited how horses do not have any preconceptions of the child as, 'the horse hasn't read the referral form... doesn't have any idea of attachment disorder'. In her study with 'at-risk adolescents,' Frame (2005) reports a similar finding, of how the experiential nature of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) and contact with the horses appeared to facilitate rapport-building between the participants and therapists. This author writes that the 'interactive experiential component of EFP provided this client unique opportunities to establish rapport with her therapist that overcome her previous discomfort and led her to endorse the importance of talking' (Frame, 2005: 116). The participant Lucy said the fact that the horses 'just take you for who you are' was something that was important for her. This concept of unconditional positive regard was expressed by the young people in different ways and seemed to be one of the factors that enabled them to build relationships with the horses which then led to other psychotherapeutic benefits. The therapist Deana suggested that the horses provided a 'holding' environment on some level, both literally when sitting or lying on top of a horse, and metaphorically, in that the young people felt safe because they trusted them. Some of the related themes centred around the young people being able to have healthy tactile experiences and express love and affection to the horses, in ways that they may not have been able to with the humans in their lives.

The fourth area that was perceived as having importance to TH by the adults who contributed to the study, was of both the physical and philosophical setting in which The Yard was located. It was found that the natural environment may have incorporated elements of the 'backdrop to activities' suggested by Wals (1994), which encouraged a restorative and calming atmosphere. Being outside in the elements, with space and freedom was suggested by the EAL/T practitioner and counsellor Sally as having a big impact on the behaviour of one of the young

people she worked with. Sally said this particular young person was much calmer once he was at the TH centre than in the residential facility where he lived, where he would often appear anxious and frustrated. Both the participants Emma and Lucy talked about how being outside in the countryside made them feel differently. For Lucy, being in nature facilitated listening to her instincts more than being in the city; for Emma it was about how it had more freedom than her school environment. In addition, Cinderella said that being in nature was 'de-stressing'. Some of the adults noted that many of the young people were more responsive and open to learning in the natural environment and context of The Yard. The staff member from Wayne's school informed me that Wayne had written the first essay he had ever attempted since attending the PRU, about the horse Jason. Learning in context seemed to be the motivational factor for Freya, who expressed interest in being able to pick and eat wild garlic from the woods adjoining The Yard. Wals (1994) suggests that this is because 'nature piques the curiosity' of young people and so inspires learning. The therapists Deana and Sally believed that a combination of factors was responsible for creating the calming atmosphere of The Yard that in turn facilitated a positive learning and therapeutic environment. These included the peaceful natural environment in which The Yard was located, the use of the natural horsemanship approach to the management of the horses adopted, and the encouragement of a respect for the horses' feelings. The informal, non-directive and experiential learning environment, which contrasted strongly with the characteristics of the school environments in which many of the young people struggled, was seen as highly influential. Elements of these factors were also mentioned by the participant Emma and the adults Linda and Peter.

Many of the insights gleaned from the study confirmed other EAL/T literature in terms of familiar themes of the role of the horse in the therapeutic process. These include links to attachment theory (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Chardonnnes, 2009), and increases in confidence and self-esteem, development of empathy and the ability to overcome behavioural problems (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Burgon, 2003; Cawley, Cawley, & Retter, 1994; Kaiser *et al.*, 2004; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). However, the theme of mindfulness in relation to EAL/T has received less attention and connections are limited to a handful of references by authors and practitioners who have noticed links (Broersma, 2007; Kimball, 2002; Soren, 2001). These authors suggest that being with horses can bring people closer to what is described as mindfulness, a way of bringing attention to the present moment. Interacting with horses demands being in the present moment due to their large size and

particular characteristics; those of being inherently fearful and requiring clear leadership. Horses also require *relaxed concentration*, which is different from intense concentration and requires more body awareness, also linked to mindfulness practices such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Because they are prey animals horses live perpetually in the ‘here and now’ as they have evolved to react instantaneously to signs of attack at any moment. Their acute awareness of tiny occurrences draws the attention of participants working with them to the present moment, enhancing mindfulness. Their large size also impresses participants, increasing attention, whilst their need for clear leadership demands being in the present moment. Dealing with horses, then, requires awareness spread over a wide range of scales: the environment in general and its changing stimuli, the horse and its movements, attention to where one is going and body awareness, all practiced within a framework of *relaxed concentration*.

It was clear that themes linked to mindfulness, such as calmness, were linked to other themes, for example the natural environment and the role of the horse in the therapeutic relationship; in fact it became apparent that all the themes overlapped in some way and all were interwoven to a considerable extent. However, what did appear fundamental to the whole process was of the horses’ particular and unique characteristics, which seemed to provide a motivational backdrop, or ‘glue’ to the overall experience of TH.

### **Limitations of the study**

There were a number of limitations to this study. In terms of the participants it is acknowledged that this was not a random selection. The respondents were all recruited from The Yard, a TH programme which I, the researcher, had established. Therefore the participants were all known to me; I had a prior relationship with them to some extent, and could choose who to ask to participate in the research and who to leave out. In fact the reality of the recruitment process was that, due to the limited number of participants attending The Yard over the period of the research project and their transitory and disjointed lives, together with the convoluted consent process, the decision was made to ask initial permission from the majority of the young people who were attending during the start of the research study, which amounted to fifteen attendees.

Unfortunately, however, because many of the young people did not remain at The Yard for the length of time it took to complete the consent process they were unable to be included. One social worker refused to give consent due to her fear that it was adding yet another layer of bureaucracy and pressure on the particular young person. In another case I had verbal consent

from the young person involved and all the other gatekeeper consents in place, but he then moved foster placement to another part of the country and I was unable to gain any further contact with him. This resulted in only seven young people ultimately participating in the research study.

Whilst the main objective of the study was to provide a descriptive exploration of the participants' experiences of therapeutic horsemanship (TH), together with my reflexive observations, the small sample size makes generalization of the findings limited. Having a larger number of participants over a variety of different research sites may have provided further observations and insights into TH and enhanced the study. Nevertheless, I make reference to Payne and Williams who claim that 'qualitative research methods can produce an intermediate type of limited generalization, *'moderatum generalizations'*' (2005: 296). These authors suggest that these modest, pragmatic generalizations drawn from personal experience provide useful contributions on how social interaction and everyday life is constructed (Payne & Williams, 2005). It is also acknowledged that it was not possible to separate out any other variables that may have impacted on the participants' experiences at The Yard; it is not possible to know from this study whether participating in TH at The Yard had an independent effect on the young people, or whether a combination of other factors present in their lives at the time were also involved. However, the phenomenological approach I adopted for this study is more concerned with the abstract concepts often found in social work research, such as people's experiences, emotions and feelings, and maintains that these hold as much validity as other findings and methods (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Denzin, 2002). Hollway and Jefferson go so far as to suggest that there is no place for attempting to separate variables and seek measurements in human behaviour or feelings, claiming that this results in limited understandings and no context to people's meanings (2000). Moving onto questions of an ontological nature, the authors Gubrium and Holstein (1997) suggest that what is important are not questions concerned with reality, but how people's experiences are represented and interpreted, whilst rejecting extreme post-modern claims that nothing exists beyond interpretation. In this study my epistemological position rests in a middle-ground between understanding that there is a reality 'out there', whilst acknowledging that my interpretation of this hinges on a multitude of other factors related to my life-experiences.

Problems of respondent bias are another area of consideration. As a practitioner-researcher conducting 'practice-near' research, my position could be argued to compromise relationships and the process of both the research and practice of TH. There is a multitude of evidence pointing to researcher-bias and the fact that 'people respond differently depending on



how they perceive the person asking the question' (Denscombe, 2003: 169). There are also questions of researcher-contamination, of how people may act differently when under observation (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). However, as a reflexive undertaking I agree with May (2001) who argues that it is simplistic to imagine that it is possible to conduct any qualitative research as though it is 'uncontaminated' by the researcher's presence. My focus has revolved more around my observations and reflections on the processes unfolding as I understand them, together with a psychosocial approach to analysing the social interactions which took place at The Yard (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). In addition I align myself with feminist-informed discourses which argue that reflexive practice is necessary in order to challenge the power imbalances inherent in current social work relationships (Butler, Ford, & Tregaskis, 2007).

### **Implications for social work practice and related fields**

From a clinical and practice perspective, it is hoped that this study offers a useful contribution in terms of providing an in-depth exploration and discussion of the experiences of young people participating in therapeutic horsemanship. An awareness of participants' experiences is important for practitioners and therapists in order to tailor treatment interventions in their own TH and EAL/T practices. In-depth exploration of the philosophy, style and orientation of the practice of The Yard also offers useful information for practitioners in terms of providing concrete examples of how different modalities are applied in practice. Bloor suggests that ethnographies of therapeutic practices can be useful for other practitioners and settings as,

Rich description of particular kinds of therapeutic practice, for example, can assist practitioners in making evaluative judgements about their own practices, preserving what seems to them good practice and experimenting with the adoption of new practices where this seems appropriate. (1997:229).

The Yard employed an eclectic mix of therapeutic and learning styles, ranging from experiential, non-directive, approaches to more directive, gestalt and mindfulness-influenced exercises, all within a person-centred framework. There is a multitude of approaches being adopted in the burgeoning EAL/T field, including cognitive-behavioural therapy and coaching models, some of which include ridden work while others are completely non-mounted interventions. This study

identifies the particular emphasis of The Yard and will, it is hoped, have useful application to other styles and approaches, as similarities and differences can be drawn to beneficial effect. Through providing insights into the practice and activities undertaken at The Yard, together with the particular theoretical therapeutic orientations, the study gives specific and concrete examples of some of the theoretical frameworks, as they relate to practice.

One finding of over-riding importance from a practice perspective is that horses would seem to offer an opportunity for excluded, disaffected, and often, resistant, young people to engage with professional therapeutic and educational practitioners through building up relationships with the horses. It has been suggested by a number of authors that traditional 'talk' therapies may not always be the most appropriate for some disengaged young people who may find this method too intense (Biegel *et al.*, 2009; Brooks 2006; Ewing *et al.*, 2007). This study found examples of how participants were able to engage with therapists and practitioners where they had been unable to do so previously, such as Kelly calling Deana by her name for the first time during a TH session. The author Frame also found this theme in her study with at-risk adolescents, writing, 'It was posited that the dynamic interchange between the adolescents and horses provided a depth to the clinical work, which exceeded the traditional confines of an office' (2006: 133). How the young people developed positive relationships with both the horses and practitioners also has relevance to relationship-based social work theories. Howe makes reference to this arguing that the quality of the social work relationship is a fundamental aspect of effective practice and stating that 'relationship offers the chance to feel safe and be understood' (2009: 158). As has been seen through the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, safety was a major theme and often expressed as the horse's need for safety, which could be understood to be a reflection of how prominent different aspects of safety were for the participants. It has been shown that as the young people began to feel safer with the horses that they were, in turn, then able to open up to the practitioners and therapists, demonstrating how important it is within the social work relationship for young people to feel safe before they can trust and open up, however this may be achieved. In addition, feeling understood by the horses was another area found to be important for the young people, as many participants spoke of how they felt the horses understood them. With reference to relationship-based social work, Howe writes that it 'is human to want to understand and be understood by others' (2009:158). This was expressed by Freya speaking about Ruby when she exclaimed 'it's like she can read my mind', and provides an

example of how important it is for social workers and other practitioners to be able to convey ‘Empathy – to see and understand how the world looks and feels from the client’s point of view’ (Howe, 2009:166).

Another area of importance to social work and psychotherapeutic practice that horses were shown to provide to many of the participants is around the theme of touch. As has been discussed in chapter 6, the area of touch in the social work and therapeutic relationship is fraught with difficulty and complexity (Lynch & Garrett, 2010; Pemberton, 2010), yet it is also acknowledged as being a fundamental psychological need (Levinson, 1980; Scott, 1980). Julia Twigg, writing about how the body is positioned within social policy in health and community care, makes the point that ‘the body has been evaded for reason of ‘good practice’’ (2002: 425). In their paper on ‘touch practices’ within social work, Lynch and Garrett (2010) argue that social workers generally agree that reassuring and comforting touch in the area of child protection is important and valuable in building the therapeutic relationship and for demonstrating empathy. In the current study, it was found how many of the young people, and particularly the boys, seemed to find comfort from tactile experiences with the horses, such as Minimax and Wayne often spending time hugging the mare Ruby. This perhaps provides some useful information to social work and other related fields on the importance of touch for many of these young people who have experienced dysfunctional and confusing tactile relationships, and of looking for alternative ways of facilitating this, perhaps through other pets and animals if EAL/T is not available/appropriate. The field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) makes much reference to the healing element of tactile experiences with animals for both young people and adults, with the much cited study by Friedmann *et al.*, (1983) on how stroking a dog can lower blood pressure being used as a prime example, amongst other claims of the therapeutic benefit of touch with animals (Brooks, 2006; Melson, 2001).

Related to themes concerned with the body, it was found that a number of the young people were able to modify their behaviour by gaining awareness of the role of their body in interactions with horses. This is an area which would seem to have links to mindfulness-based therapies which are broadly concerned with encouraging mind-body awareness alongside relaxation, and was a new theme to emerge from my research. An example of this is given on p177 where Wayne learnt how monitoring his breathing and body language reassured and calmed the mare Ruby when she became frightened in the wind. In terms of implications for practice this perhaps provides support for considering other body-centred alternative therapeutic activities for

engaging young people in order to encourage positive behavioural change, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction programmes (Biegel *et al.*, 2009) and other gestalt-based and outdoor activities which stress the value of an acknowledgement of the mind-body link (Carns, Carns, & Holland, 2001; Ewert, McCormick & Voight, 2001; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1994).

### **Reflections on resilience as related to the study and wider socio-political influences**

The insights related to resilience frameworks, attachment and psychotherapeutic perspectives provide examples of how these areas can be related to practice with young people through experiences with horses. Through beginning to engage in a healthy and motivating intervention, young people are able to acquire benefits that may lead to greater resilience. Increases in self-esteem and self-confidence were reported in the study, together with other psychosocial benefits such as behaviour modification, the acquisition of empathy, improved relationships and social skills and the opening up of 'positive opportunities'. These are all of relevance to social work in terms of empowerment and enabling positive change for individuals (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Denzin, 2002; Fook, 2002a; Walker, 2003). Despite there being only limited literature describing it, there is in fact a long tradition of involving young people in outdoor activities within social work with the aim of engagement and bringing about positive change, and the insights gleaned from the current study would appear to support the aims of these interventions (Moote & Wodarski, 1997; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). Within the current 'Big Society' political and financial climate of promoting community-led initiatives to provide solutions to social issues, it may be that interventions such as TH and EAL/T together with other alternative therapeutic and educational programmes can offer some of the elements suggested in this directive. Many of the current TH and EAL/T centres are charitable and voluntary organisations drawing on community resources and involving a wide range of people with different skills and experiences, all centred on an equine environment. These factors can possibly make these TH, EAL/T and other alternative programmes more accessible and attractive to young people who would normally be resistant to professional agencies and traditional therapeutic and educational interventions.

Through completing this study my perception of resilience has evolved from a purely academic and theoretical understanding to a deeper, embodied, perspective. By this I mean that by being deeply engaged and in relationship with the young people through the practitioner-researcher process I was able to witness firsthand how their experiences with the horses seemed to provide them with resilience-related benefits. However, I am also aware of how wider

structural and socio-political elements also have a major influence and are intrinsically intertwined. This was demonstrated by how fragile and disjointed the lives of some of the young people in foster care were, such as when Kelly discovered she was moving foster placement the following day whilst in a TH session. For some of the young people, gains they may have made such as feelings of increased self-efficacy and being able to have influence over their future, together with enhanced social relationships and trust, may have been shattered by experiences such as this. Another example of how socio-economic and political factors impinged on The Yard, and therefore on the lives, progress and impact on the resilience of the young people attending, is provided by the political structure within which The Yard was located. Being funded by a private foster care agency The Yard became a victim of the profit-making drive behind this structure, when the company was sold to a larger conglomerate who decided that it was not economically viable to retain an essentially, loss-making initiative within the organisation. This relates to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory that argues that it is impossible to separate the micro from the macro in terms of how all societal systems are inter-related. Having a humanistic (and largely positive) perspective I could only hope that any small gains made in personal resilience factors would provide longer term benefits to the young people as proposed in a 'dynamic state' model (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Place *et al.*, 2002).

### **Methodological and theoretical contributions together with implications for policy**

A major methodological tool I employed was writing detailed reflexive fieldnotes after each TH session. As I have discussed in chapter 4, the research methods chapter, these field notes evolved from being rather clinical and based on recording the 'facts' of the TH session into long and highly descriptive accounts exploring as many elements as I could manage to record. However, the full value of these detailed fieldnotes only became wholly apparent when I embarked upon the data analysis and where I began to see elements and patterns which would easily have been overlooked without my descriptive and, at the time, seemingly trivial, records of events. Examples of this are where I recorded how some of the young people mentioned the smell of the horses and instances where we noticed wildlife on the farm. Initially these were not things I considered important to record, concentrating on the 'concrete' interactions between the horses and participants. However, as I became more immersed in the practitioner-researcher role my fieldnotes grew correspondingly and, in retrospect, they have provided a crucial part in the ethnographic process. It is hoped that this knowledge, of the value of detailed, descriptive and

reflexive fieldnotes, will prove useful for other ethnographers in the field of social work and other related research.

Another area in which it is hoped the study will be proved useful is in its impact and contribution to participatory research with young people in a social work context. An intention of the research project was for the young people who participated to gain some benefit by way of their involvement being an empowering experience, as opposed to the disempowering experiences they often encountered within their various agencies. For example, Wayne and Minimax were initially difficult to engage in the research process when I explained the research to them; they simply seemed to 'switch off' when forms and paperwork were produced. However, when I applied the research to a real situation, such as asking for their input on the questionnaire and rephrasing the research in terms of their contribution as providing an understanding of how horses could possibly help other young people, they were immediately motivated and keener to engage and offer suggestions. In line with participatory values, there has been greater emphasis in social work on service user research in the past decade, with the Government having stated that it wants to increase the involvement of young people in the evaluation of services and policy (McLaughlin, 2005). Despite this notion that participatory research is 'better', and the call for more research with young people to adopt 'participatory' methods in recent years, there is criticism of the levels and reality of participation and its assumed superiority (Holland *et al.*, 2010). Notwithstanding these criticisms, Walker argues that it is necessary in social work for more research into service provision to include the views of young people not least because services for children and young people's mental health have

been based on adult concepts, models, and practices. This has led to paternalistic, patronising practices that seek to emasculate children and stifle their creativity and wisdom (2003: 136).

Walker claims, therefore, that the input and views of young people in the services they are engaged in is imperative in order to ensure service provision is effective and in order to find out 'what works best for which children in what circumstances' (2003: 136). Limitations are acknowledged insofar as this study has not been as participative as was initially intended. Nevertheless, hopefully it has provided some insight into the process and the positive and

achievable aspects as well as the pitfalls and more difficult areas of participative research with disenfranchised young people.

On a personal level, undertaking this study has provided me with increased appreciation and understanding of the potential and depth of the role of the horse in the therapeutic and learning arena. Through the academic endeavour of the data analysis and writing I was able to have a useful distance from the practice together with the opportunity of in-depth analysis of the intricacies that developed between the young people and the horses. This has led to an increased awareness of how sometimes allowing the work to unfold instead of being too goal-orientated could often result in a very powerful experience for participants. It has also made me realise how much more there is to learn, and that there are areas of the horse-human relationship which will perhaps always remain unknowable. Nevertheless, it has confirmed my commitment and passion for this work and will enable me to return to the practice of TH with increased knowledge and understanding of horse-human dynamics. By having an enhanced understanding of the theoretical basis of TH I am hopeful that this academic experience has benefited my capability as a practitioner and will, in turn, contribute to the wider field of EAL/T as a whole.

Finally, on a wider level it is hoped that by contributing to the research base this study will go some way towards supporting further research that will begin to provide a robust evidence base for the effectiveness of TH and EAL/T. In turn, it is hoped that such a base would help influence policy decisions regarding the provision of further funding to enable access to TH and EAL/T for a wider range of the population and, ultimately, allow it to be accepted as a mainstream therapeutic intervention.

### **Counter-indications of TH and EAL/T**

It is important to acknowledge that horses do not suit everyone. Some young people may have health conditions, such as allergies, which render TH and EAL/T unsuitable or inappropriate activities. Although it was not an issue in the current study, some young people may just not like horses. Cultural aspects of EAL/T and AAT are also important to note. Many of the theoretical frameworks that support the interventions, such as attachment theory, are argued to be 'laden with Western values and meanings' (Rothbaum *et al.*, 2000: 1093). Other authors mention how some cultures view certain animals as 'unclean' (Friesen, 2010), and an equine-assisted learning study with North American Indian 'First Nation' youth found it necessary to adapt the Western

understanding of resilience as an individual construct to include ‘their inner spirit (internal) and relations with their collective community’ (Dell *et al.*, 2008: 82).

Another area, often neglected in the literature, concerns the ethical considerations and treatment of the horses involved in practicing EAL/T, and of the effect participation may have on the animals (Gehrke, Baldwin, & Schiltz, 2011; O’Rourke, 2004). There is much research centred around the abuse and cruelty of animals by young people and adults who have suffered abuse themselves (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2004; Risely-Curtiss, 2010) and so it is vital that the horse’s welfare is paramount and supervision of the young people is adequate. Whilst there are different theoretical and practice models involved in EAL/T, in my opinion it is beneficial for all the practitioners involved to have in-depth equine experience, including knowledge of the horses in the particular practice, in order to provide a safe environment for both participants and horses.

A practical consideration and large obstacle to the provision and availability of EAL/T is its not inconsiderable cost. The staffing costs of two professional practitioners together with the upkeep of horses, premises and public liability insurance etc, mean it has a considerably higher hourly cost than traditional talk therapy. Nevertheless, if all of the many different aspects to TH and EAL/T which have been explored through the study are taken into account, such as it offering an alternative option for some young people who may find it difficult to engage with traditional educational and therapeutic approaches, together with the suggested benefits gained from being in the natural environment, the psychosocial benefits from contact and relationships with animals, the physical and mental health benefits of exercise and challenging and risk-taking elements, then it may seem an economical intervention after all.

### **Suggestions for future research**

As a marginal intervention with such a limited research base, any further good quality research into EAL/T is to be welcomed at this stage. A criticism levied at current research is that studies are of mixed quality with small sample sizes, lack of control groups, and varying populations within studies, resulting in difficulty in standardization (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). A large proportion of the literature comprises anecdotal and descriptive accounts by practitioners, together with ‘grey’ literature such as dissertations and theses (Esbjorn, 2006; Frame, 2006; Graham, 2007; Hayden, 2005; Held, 2006). Despite the limited amount of good quality qualitative research into EAL/T, the fact that these studies find similar themes of psychosocial benefits to those uncovered in the current study surely warrants further investigation



of the field. One of the advantages of qualitative research is that it can provide in-depth exploration of the processes that are occurring in the social environment and this can then provide a framework for future studies. Whilst the difficulties of conducting quantitative, empirical, research within the area of psychosocial studies has been documented previously, it would nevertheless be useful to have a wider contribution of studies with larger populations and more standardized measurement techniques. In addition, research is presently hampered by a lack of regulation and standardization within the field of EAL/T and a wide range of perspectives in terms of theoretical underpinnings. There are currently no governing or accrediting bodies overseeing the practice and training of EAL/T practitioners and trainers, so the field is confusing and unregulated, although a number of individual training organisations including EFMHA are working to address this. More standardisation and centralisation of EAL/T will facilitate easier access and understanding for researchers.

In terms of particular themes that arose from the study, the area of empathy within the different aspects of EAL/T practice has received limited attention within the literature. In relation to social work research it is claimed that service users consistently value social workers ‘who appear to understand them and who care’ as a key factor in the social worker and client relationship (Forrester *et al.*, 2008: 42). Through the young people claiming that the horses understood them and that they could ‘tell them their secrets’, in addition to appearing to show an understanding of the horses’ feelings themselves, different elements of empathy seemed to be at play and this may be an interesting area for further research. Another relatively un-researched area of particular interest and relevance to social work to emerge in the study is that of community participation and social inclusion. It appeared that the young people enjoyed attending The Yard and were motivated to participate in the activities offered. For some of the young people, participating in TH seemed to enable them to acquire social gains such as better peer relations and interactions with the therapists and practitioners. In addition, their interest and motivation in being with horses led to a number of the young people going on to participate in other horse and animal related experiences in the wider community. During her time of attending The Yard, Emma started helping at a local riding for the disabled centre as part of her school curriculum, Lucy went on to successfully complete a small animal care course at a local college, and we were informed that another young person had been accepted on an equine course. Social work is underpinned by values of the importance of increasing community participation and the inclusion of marginalised and excluded groups of vulnerable people into mainstream society

(BASW, 2002). Similarly, The World Health Organisation states that community participation is an important part of health and functioning (WHO, 2001). Research that paid attention to the longer term outcomes of attending TH and EAL/T by follow up studies with participants would provide useful information and guidance for further practice and policy. Last, but not least, more research into the impact and effect of the different styles and practices of EAL/T on the horses who participate would be welcomed, as this is an area which has received less attention in the literature. Clearly, in order to be able to provide an effective, safe, healing, environment it is vitally important that the horses employed are physically and emotionally healthy and content themselves. This is something that Cinderella referred to when I asked her what she most liked about The Yard, replying,

The horses, also there is no nastiness at The Yard, everyone is polite and the horses just get on with each other.

(Cinderella).

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## APPENDIX A



# RESEARCH PROJECT INTO EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING/THERAPY AND THERAPEUTIC HORSEMANSHIP

### Information sheet for children and young people

#### **Would you consider taking take part in some research?**

I am doing some research into Equine Assisted Learning/Therapy (EAL/T) and Therapeutic Horsemanship (TH) as part of a PhD at Cardiff University and would like to invite you to take part in the study.

#### **What are Equine Assisted Therapy and Therapeutic Horsemanship?**

EAL/T and TH are activities with horses which involve learning how to look after and care for horses and also learning about how they communicate and behave with each other and with us. Horses communicate through body language and will mirror behaviour, so by learning how to communicate with a horse we can also learn more about ourselves.

Activities include grooming, learning how to work with and look after horses, feeding and stable management tasks. Sometimes riding and educational activities are included.

#### **Why am I doing the research?**

The reason I am doing the study is that there is very little research into EAL/T and TH and so it is hoped that this research project will help towards supporting more studies to be done. Hopefully this will lead to more young people and adults being able to attend EAL/T and TH in the future.

#### **Who is being invited to participate and what will it involve?**

Children and young people who are participating in EAL/T and TH programmes and/or have other contact with horses, are being invited to take part in the study. The research will have no effect on the sessions, as the reason for the study is to explore what is naturally happening between the horses and participants.

I will be a practitioner in the sessions and may ask you if you would be willing to answer some questions about the experience, or perhaps complete a small evaluation questionnaire.

If you do consider taking part I would be more than happy to come and talk to you about it first with your parent/foster carer/and/or social worker/teacher present so that you can have the opportunity to ask me any questions you may have.

There is no payment involved on either side in taking part in this study. However by participating you may hopefully be helping to gain more understanding of EAL/T.

### **What if I don't want to take part?**

You are, of course, free to choose not to take part in the study and this will have no effect on whether you can attend EAL/T or TH sessions now or in the future. If you do agree, you can choose how long you wish to take part, from just one session or for the length of your attendance in the project/up to the length of the study. You can choose to stop being in the study at any time and this will have no effect on your participation at the stables you attend.

### **Confidentiality**

When I write up the study everyone's names will be changed (including the horses!) so that no one can be identified. You will be welcome to choose your own name for the study and I am very keen that you will feel able to join in with offering any suggestions about the research. All the paperwork will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and I will ask if you are happy with what I have written. In the future the study may be published in some publications and journals.

### **Contact Information**

If you would like more information about the research or would be willing to have a chat with me about it before deciding please contact me:

Hannah Burgon

XXX XXX

Email: [hannahburgon@hotmail.com](mailto:hannahburgon@hotmail.com) or XXX



**APPENDIX B**

Cardiff School of Social Sciences  
Cardiff University  
Glamorgan Building  
King Edward VII Avenue  
Cardiff CF10 3WT

**Consent Form (Young People)**

*Equine Assisted Learning/Therapy and Therapeutic Horsemanship  
research project*

**Name of Researcher: Hannah Burgon**

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheets enclosed and had any questions about the research answered to my satisfaction.
I give my consent to take part in the study and understand that I can withdraw from the research/interview at any time.
I give my consent for information obtained in the research/interview/questionnaire to be published in academic journals/other publications in the future (all identifying features/names made anonymous).
I understand that I will receive no payment for agreeing to participate in this research.

.....Age.....  
Name of participant (print name)

.....Date.....  
Signature of above

**Person with authority to give consent (SW/Parent/carer)**

.....Date.....  
Person with authority to give consent (Print name)

.....Date.....  
Signature of above  
Copy for participant and copy for research file



## APPENDIX C

### RESEARCH PROJECT INTO EQUINE ASSISTED THERAPY/ LEARNING AND THERAPEUTIC HORSEMANSHIP

#### *Information sheet for Participants (Adults)*

Equine assisted therapy/learning and therapeutic horsemanship are interventions aimed at assisting children, young people and adults with additional support needs to gain physical and mental health benefits from being outdoors in nature learning about and working with horses. This type of experiential learning and therapy is well established in the USA and is beginning to be employed in the UK.

However published research remains scarce and so the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper insight into the experiences and views of practitioners, carers, parents, social workers and other people involved in some way with EAL/T and therapeutic horsemanship.

A separate study is taking place exploring the experiences and perceptions of participants of EAL/T and therapeutic horsemanship.

As part of this study you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire and/or take part in an interview with the researcher, Hannah Burgon. This will last about 45 minutes and take place at a time and place convenient with you.

All information that is collected about you during the course of the study will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. You will not be identified in any report or publication arising from the research.

There is no payment for taking part in this research but hopefully taking part in the study may help further your understanding of EAL/T and therapeutic horsemanship. In addition the information from the study will contribute to the wider research base into the interventions.

The project has the full support and consent of the equine projects involved and Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

#### ***Contact Information***

If you would like more information about the research project please contact;

Hannah Burgon  
XXXXXX email: [hannahburgon@hotmail.com](mailto:hannahburgon@hotmail.com) or XXX

Cardiff University  
Cardiff School of Social Sciences  
Glamorgan Building  
King Edward VII Avenue  
Cardiff CF10



**APPENDIX D**

Cardiff School of Social Sciences  
Cardiff University  
Glamorgan Building  
King Edward VII Avenue  
Cardiff CF10 3WT

**Consent Form (Adult)**

***Equine Assisted Learning/Therapy and Therapeutic Horsemanship  
research project***

**Name of Researcher: Hannah Burgon**

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheets enclosed and had any questions about the research answered to my satisfaction.
I give my consent to take part in the study and understand that I can withdraw from the research/interview at any time.
I give my consent for information obtained in the research/interview/questionnaire to be published in academic journals/other publications in the future (all identifying features/names made anonymous).
I understand that I will receive no payment for agreeing to participate in this research.

.....  
Name of participant (print name)

.....Date.....  
Signature of above

Copy for participant and copy for research file

## **APPENDIX E**

### **XXXX Ltd Therapeutic Horsemanship Programme**

#### **Child Protection and disclosure policy and procedure for Therapeutic Horsemanship**

1. A full risk assessment is undertaken prior to a TH referral. This will include any concerns around relevant contact restrictions/child protection/health/behavioural/other issues.
2. The child will be informed by the TH practitioner in a child friendly and accessible way that if s/he raises anything of concern (i.e risk to self or others) during a session then the TH practitioner will be required to take the action outlined in 3 below.
3. If a child voices anything that raises concern in a TH session the TH practitioner will listen and acknowledge that she/he has heard the child. The TH practitioner will then suggest that the child talks to his/her carer about the issues after the session has finished. The TH practitioner will inform the child that what s/he has said is of concern and that their carer/SW will need to be informed for the child's own safety.
4. Any behaviour by the child that causes the TH practitioner to be concerned of risk to the child/staff/horses/any other animals will result in the session being stopped and the carer being contacted to return to collect the child immediately. If this is not possible the child will be taken to a safe environment until s/he is collected.
5. At the end of the TH session a de-brief with the carer and child can take place to discuss the session. If there is anything that the TH practitioner needs to discuss separately with the carer, the TH horse handler will remain with the child whilst the TH practitioner does this.
6. If the TH practitioner thinks that there are any concerns that need to be relayed immediately this will be done, either directly to the carer after the session as above, or if this is not possible, by telephoning the carer/SSW/child's SW/XXX director with the child's consent if possible.
7. All sessions are written up and a de-briefing is held with the TH practitioner and horse handler after the session. This is then sent to the carer's supervising

social worker (SSW) as soon as possible. The SSW then sends copies to the child's social worker (and carer if required). A copy is also kept on file. Referrals are discussed at monthly team meetings and recommendations made to the child's SW to refer the child for TH sessions with the project Play Therapist if this is deemed appropriate.

8. Any child protection issues will be handled in accordance with XXXX standard child protection policy.



## APPENDIX F

### XXXX Ltd Therapeutic Horsemanship Programme

#### *HORSE MANAGEMENT POLICY AND CODE OF ETHICS*

1. The horses welfare is paramount - any concerns re: their health, physical or otherwise, to take priority over a session. Decision to be taken in conjunction with TH practitioner and horse handler as to what course of action to be taken. Hannah Burgon to be consulted at earliest opportunity but if she not available and decision needs to be taken to call vet, then this to be undertaken. XXX also to be consulted if possible.
2. Horses to be kept as naturally as possible within constraints of environment available; i.e a natural horsemanship management policy is followed with horses kept together as part of a herd and in a free range barn system. Their feeding reflects this and worm counts are regularly undertaken in order to avoid chemical worming as much as possible. Hay unsprayed by chemicals used as first choice when it is possible to obtain. Clipping is avoided unless absolutely necessary and NO trimming undertaken (unless for first aid/veterinary reasons or when tails are trailing on the ground).
3. NO whips or spurs to be used (a lunge stick can be used in the round pen to encourage, change direction only).
4. Tack: Hackamores to be used as standard and saddles regularly checked for fitting. The importance of taking care over fitting tack, how it is put on and the effect of the riders weight on the horse's back, to be carefully explained and demonstrated to participants in sessions.

5. The horse's physical and emotional needs to be constantly under supervision during a session. This is the responsibility of both practitioners but especially the horse handler. Participants are encouraged and supported to learn about horse behaviour and to be aware of how the horse is feeling, what the horse's body language is telling them and the other horses, and of the effect of their own behaviour and body language on the horse.
  
6. Last but not least, remember that how we treat and care for the horses reflects on what we are trying to convey in the sessions; i.e. principles of respect, compassion, patience and understanding!



3. Do you think that the horses notice your moods? How do you know? Do you think that our behaviour affects the horses and if so how?

5. How do you think the horses like us to treat and behave around them?

6. Is there anything you have especially learnt from spending time with the horses?

8. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Name:.....Date:.....

Thank you very much for your time and patience completing this questionnaire!

Hannah Burgon - 2007

## APPENDIX H

### XXX Therapeutic Horsemanship Programme

#### Questionnaire for carers/social workers/parents

Name of Young Person.....

1. Do you think that the young person has learnt anything from attending Therapeutic Horsemanship? Are these things that could be applied to other parts of the young person's life (such as learning about responsibility, empathy, how our behaviour affects the horse and vice versa etc).

2. Do you notice any changes/differences in the young person after participating in Therapeutic Horsemanship sessions? I.e in behaviour/body language etc. If so what do you think it is about attending TH that may have contributed to this?

3. Do you think that it has been beneficial for the young person to attend therapeutic horsemanship? If so please explain what the benefits are. If not, please state the reasons why not?

4. Do you think that horses/animals are therapeutic in general and if so can you say why they may be particularly so for young people with additional needs?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add? Please continue on another sheet if necessary.

Name.....Date.....  
Position.....

Thank you very much for your time

## APPENDIX I

### PhD Questions for Young People

#### Introduction

I am doing some research about horses and young people and would like to talk to you about your experiences with horses, what sort of things you like and don't like about horses, what you have learnt from horses etc.

1. Would you mind telling me a little bit about yourself? How would you like me to describe you for the research? Would you like to choose a pseudonym (false) name for yourself?
2. Do you have a favourite horse and if so could you tell me what is it about that horse that you like? How would you describe XXX what sort of personality has s/he got?
3. Thinking about all the horses here, which horse do you think you are most like and why?
4. Which horse would you *like* to be like and what is it about that horse that you want to be like?
5. Who do you think is the lead horse in the herd? The horse the others trust and will follow? What is it about this horse do you think that the others have chosen her/him as leader?
6. What do you think about horses? How do you see them? Are they like a work animal, a dumb creature, a friend, a teacher or anything else?
7. How do you think the horses/particular horse chosen/ see you?
8. How do you think the horses like us to behave around them? Do you think that horses have feelings? If so how can you tell?
9. Do you think horses can tell our moods and if so how do they tell you? How do you think they can tell if we are stressed/bad mood for example? Have you learnt any different ways of dealing with stress when you are around horses?
10. Do you ever feel differently after you have been to the stable/s with horse/s than you did before you got there? In what way? What was it about the horses/stables that made you feel differently?
11. What do you like best about being with/working with horses? Are there any special experiences you can think of? What are your favourite things? What has been your best experience with XXX (horse)
12. If you were telling someone else about what it's like to look after/have a horse how would you tell them/what would you say?

13. Can you tell me what the most important things you have learnt about horses/being with horses are?
14. Can you think of some of the ways being with horses/having a horse/coming to the yard helped you in other parts of your life? I.e with friends/school/how you feel about yourself
15. Is there anything else you would like to add/tell me about the horses?



## APPENDIX J

### Tables of Participants

#### Young people participating

Name	Age at start	No x sessions	Time attended	Referrer	Research contribution
Cinderella	15	6	1 yr	Foster Care Agency referral	Informal field interviews, questionnaire
Emma	15	20+	1 yr	Private/Social Services-voluntary participant	Informal field interviews, semi-structured interview
Freya	14	16	1 yr	Residential children's home	Informal field interviews
Kelly	14	9	6 months	Residential children's home	Informal field interviews
Lucy	19	30+	2 yrs	Private – voluntary participant	Informal field interviews, semi-structured interview
Minimax	12	15	2 yrs	Foster Care Agency	Informal field interviews, questionnaire
Wayne	12	8	6 months	Youth Offending /Pupil Referral Unit	Informal field interviews

#### Adults – main participants

Name	Role	Research contribution
Angie	Foster Carer - Minimax	Interview & questionnaire
Deana	Therapist at The Yard	Interview & case notes
Linda	Adoptive mother - Emma	Interview
Peter	YOT mentor - Wayne	Interview & questionnaire
Sally	Counsellor at The Yard	Interview & case notes

#### Adults – supplementary contributions

Carl	Manager – residential home 'The Elms'	Questionnaire
David	Foster Carer	Questionnaire
Laura	Foster Carer	Questionnaire

