

# Mentalizing and Emotional Labor Facilitate Equine-Assisted Social Work with Self-harming Adolescents

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**Abstract** This article explores equine-assisted social work (EASW). Horses' capacities to mirror human emotions create possibilities for authentic relationships between clients and staff. This study examines what eases or counteracts the horse's capacity to facilitate relationships perceived by humans to be authentic. Video recordings of the human-horse interactions of three staff members and four female self-harming clients aged 15–21 years in a residential treatment facility were analyzed. The findings show that if the staff gave instructions and advice similar to traditional equestrian sports in combination with viewing the horse as an object, EASW is not facilitated. EASW seems to be facilitated when the horse is perceived as a subject by both staff and clients, provided that the staff gave meaning to the horse's behavior. The staff needed to highlight empathy for the horse when the horse is not able to fulfill its task without adding depth to the client's performance, to avoid raising defense mechanisms. The essence of EASW were perceived as eased by staff members when they focus on the client's emotions and help the client understand that the horse is acting in response to the client's and the staff's behavior through mentalizing and enacting emotional labor in regarding the horse as a subject. The results indicate the need for higher demands on

staff members in order to facilitate EASW. Depending on whether the staff and the clients focus on performance or on emotions, different positive or negative outcomes on communication, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-image will be likely to emerge.

**Keywords** Adolescents · Emotional labor · Equine-assisted social work · Mentalizing · Self-injury

## Introduction

Equine assisted social work (EASW) may contribute positively to the treatment of adolescents with psychiatric disorders, or those who are at risk for developing such disorders. It may be of value to develop social skills, feelings of mastery, meta-cognition and reflectivity abilities, self-confidence and self-esteem in these individuals (Bizub et al. 2003; Dell et al. 2011, 2008; Hauge et al. 2013; Holmes et al. 2011; Klontz et al. 2007; Macauley and Gutierrez 2004; Rothe et al. 2005; Rothe 2005; Smith-Osborne and Selby 2010), as well as to contribute to the development of communication skills, emotional awareness and regulation, reduce anxiety, and provide opportunities for experiencing authentic relationships (Bizub et al. 2003; Carlsson et al. 2014; Karol 2007). Even though not all studies point in the same positive direction (Ewing et al. 2007; Greenwald 2001), there is reason to explore how EASW may be used in the treatment of different patient groups, such as young persons with self-injury problems.

In a recent study by Carlsson et al. (2014), several young women in a particular group of clients had experienced abuse and rejection in previous relationships. As a result, they had a greater need to build new relationships, even though they perceived authentic relationships as unsafe.

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Jordan (2010) calls this *relational paradox*. When clients developed problems beyond their diagnosis such as high degrees of perfectionism in combination with low self-esteem and high demands they have placed on themselves (Abrahamsson et al. 2007; Hagqvist 2010; Holmqvist et al. 2007; Jablonska et al. 2009; Kåver and Nilsone 2003; Lundh and Bjärhed 2008; Lundh et al. 2007; Lunner et al. 2000; Searcy 2007), along with difficulties with emotional regulation (Gianini et al. 2013; Silvers et al. 2012), these complications may have necessitated specific requirements for interacting with this particular client group. In addition to these treatment difficulties, young clients may perceive institutional environments as stressful, making the relationship between the staff and the clients even more vitally important (Richmond and Padgett 2002; Walter and Petr 2008; Zegers et al. 2006). To facilitate this relationship, the horse as used in EASW may be useful.

EASW involves a triangular relationship between the staff, client, and horse that supplements conventional treatment, for example, in this study, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The focus is on increasing mental health, and the activities with the horse are performed to trigger behavioral changes by providing tools to solve emotional problems. The primary emphasis in EASW is not riding, as in therapeutic riding for the physically disabled. The activities in EASW can involve caring for the horse, training with the horse, riding, carriage driving, and vaulting (gymnastics on horseback), similar to other equine-assisted interventions. EASW is not defined in a particular manual or program that can be followed. Instead, the work is flexible and depends on the staff's skills and educational backgrounds, the horse's abilities, and the client's skills and wishes.

The foundation of EASW is the horse's ability to read and respond to human emotions (Carlsson et al. 2014). In this way, the horse may make humans aware of its own emotions. To avoid accidents, interacting with the horse necessitates that the client has the ability to be aware of his/her emotions. All humans, whether staff members or clients, need to regulate their emotions. The horse reflects human emotions through body language, which is perceived as immediate, honest, clear, and nonjudgmental (Carlsson et al. 2014). The horse feels comfortable when the humans' authentic emotions are acknowledged and their body language acts according to these emotions (Chamove et al. 2002; Ekesbo 2011; Henry et al. 2005; Minero and Canali 2008).

Horses are flight animals with great sensitivity to their environments. They sense fear and interpret human intentions as expressed through body language and pheromones (Ekesbo 2011; Smith-Osborne and Selby 2010). A person's attitude toward the horse often directly affects the behavior of the horse (Chamove et al. 2002; Hama et al. 1996; Henry

et al. 2005). Carlsson et al. (2014) found that the essence of EASW is that the horse has the capacity to function as an emotional mirror for humans. The term emotional mirror refers to the fact that the interaction with the horse is likely to open up emotional awareness and regulation, which in turn may facilitate more authentic relationships between the clients and staff members (Carlsson et al. 2014). The findings of this study indicated that one outcome of EASW could be a decreased resistance to change. It seemed that the participants' abilities to regulate their emotions and change their behaviors were improved. The horse did not seem to raise clients' defense mechanisms; therefore, they dared to act in more authentic ways. Thus, the horse seemed to set the framework for the interactions between the staff and clients (Carlsson et al. 2014). As it is possible for any human to fail in interacting with a horse, the staff-client relationship was perceived as being more equal, and this created an informal and dynamic atmosphere. The created relationship was based on empathy, trust, respect and negotiation, and the clients revealed private matters in a non-institutional arena; namely, the stable. This is likely to be one of the main reasons why the clients expressed the development of a more authentic relationship with staff in the EASW program (Carlsson et al. 2014).

As EASW is designed to increase clients' self-esteem, self-image, and their capacity for emotional awareness and regulation, as well as modifying behavior and reducing anxiety, the mentalization theory may be a well-suited theoretical framework to study the processes involved in treating young women who exhibit self-harming behaviors. According to Bateman and Fonagy (2012), the theory of mentalizing includes the organization of the self and the development of emotional regulation. Mentalization deals with a person's ability to self-reflect and an individual's capability of distinguishing between external and internal realities and correctly assessing their own physical experience of mental and emotional processes—in other words, for a person to see him/herself from the outside and see others from within. Mentalization is not just about empathy or understanding how others think and feel; it is about giving meaning to the behavior of others. Mentalizing involves thinking and feeling about one's own thoughts and emotions, while taking into consideration the thoughts and feelings of others. It involves creating hypotheses concerning emotions, thoughts, and intentions about what is happening both in oneself as well as in others. Mentalizing is about a person's ability to understand that others are drawing conclusions about that individual's behavior at the same time he/she is drawing conclusions about their behaviors. It is about emotional awareness and regulation to develop stable internal representations of thoughts and feelings, thereby creating a coherent self-experience in order to create secure relationships. Mentalizing could be

seen as a form of social cognition, where the person looks beyond the visible shell of the body to understand the behavior of him/herself and others—to seek explanations of human behavior in terms of intentional mental states. Based on theories of mentalizing, mental suffering could be caused by the fact that a client is more in touch with her thoughts than with her emotions. The mental suffering could also be about being thrown back and forth in emotional storms without being able to reflect on them. Strong emotions such as anxiety, fear, and anger are usually assigned lower mentalizing ability, according to Bateman and Fonagy (2012).

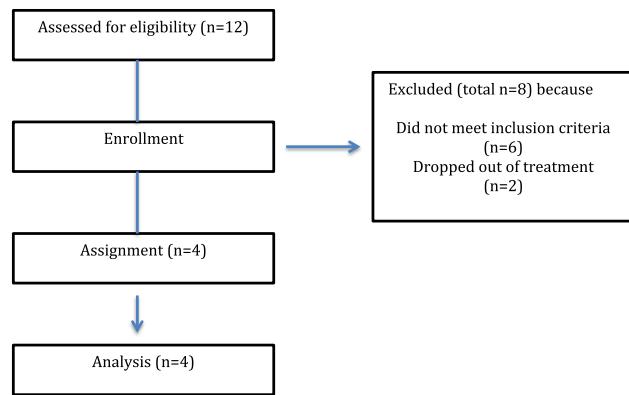
Additionally, Guy et al. (2010) define emotional labor as the staff members' need to (1) know the client's feelings by intuition and communication and at the same time adapt their feelings to the situation, (2) elicit the desired emotional response, and (3) understand that the client may not want to show the emotions necessary to create interpersonal relationships that more effectively consider the behaviors and feelings of their clients. This form of emotional labor requires the staff to manage their own emotions as well as the client's emotions, a task that requires active listening, responsiveness, empathy, and the ability to negotiate. Although it is often characterized as unprofessional for staff members to show their emotions to their clients, it may be of value in some interventions (Guy et al. 2010).

EASW involves a triangular relationship between the staff, client, and horse. This study focuses on the interaction between the staff and clients. Which factors related to the staff-client relationship is operative when participation in EASW is regarded as successful? Which factors are in operation when it is not successful? In addition, we explore the extent to which the staff's and clients' attitudes toward horses may also affect the capacity of the horses to facilitate authentic relationships between the staff and the clients.

## Methods

### Participants

All enrolled clients at the current treatment center were female self-harming adolescents between 15 and 21 years. The treatment center were chosen because they had individually client treatment with horses. The clients were recruited through the treatment center. All clients at the center were given an information letter with detailed information as well as verbal information. A total of 12 clients were asked initially but included were only those who had more than one semester's worth of experience with EASW. Two clients that fit the criteria of inclusion,



**Fig. 1** Flow of participants

two girls with the most experience with horses prior to their inclusion in EASW, were not included in this study because they dropped out during the treatment before the study started. The other four girls included had met horses in the company of friends a couple of times, except for one who had no prior experience with horses. The clients, who were all of Swedish ethnicity, came from different regions throughout Sweden (Fig. 1).

All participating staff had previous experience with horses and had undergone a three-year riding therapy educational program. Otherwise, the staff had different educational backgrounds; one was a social pedagogue, one was psychotherapeutically trained, and one was a riding instructor as well as a treatment assistant. Even though the staff came from different educational backgrounds, they all had specific education and experience in CBT and dialectic behavioral therapy (DBT), which formed the theoretical bases in therapeutic work with clients.

Moreover, the horses that were observed varied in terms of breed, age, gender, experience, temperament, and size. This study included horses like Shetland ponies, Icelandic horses, Lusitanos, Dutch warmbloods, and Norwegian fjord horses. The treatment center allowed the horses plenty of free movement in a herd, which allowed for social contact with other horses. These factors have been found to be important to ensure a calm and safe environment for the participants (Hartman et al. 2012).

### The EASW Intervention-Setting

The present study was conducted at a Home Care and Housing treatment center where the opportunity for having treatment together with horses were offered. Participation was voluntarily and conducted in a facility with riding arena, stables and therapy room. The environment around the facility in the form of woodlands and meadows were also used. EASW was offered for 1 h per week as a complement to the ordinary program. Tasks ranged in

difficulty and everything from grooming (brushing the horse, plaiting mane), riding (in the arena or for a walk in the forest), stable work (cleaning stables, giving food or water), or agility with the horses. The clients kept the same horse as much as possible throughout the intervention that focused on the experience and not to become skilled at the activities at hand. Because EASW is flexible, an individual design was made for each client based on her treatment goals and desires. To reduce the risk of stigma, the treatment given to this client group was based on a combination of cognitive, behavioral, and personality approaches (Lunner et al. 2000; Neponen and Broberg 2000; Norring et al. 2002). EASW was carried out individually based on knowledge of each client group's needs for perfection and previous experiences with clients not being comfortable working in a group with horses. In addition, the staff set boundaries for what could be done in each session based on the safety of the client and the horse. The horse's temperament, behavior, and willingness to interact were assessed on a daily basis.

The client's assessment included a mental status examination. If the client exhibited a negative emotional state, signs of aggression, and could not contain their anger, for example, the session with the horse was cancelled for safety reasons. If there were indications that the clients were acting as if the horse was a potential sex object, the session was also cancelled. It was unusual for the staff to need to end the session abruptly. Usually, the clients' empathy for the horse made them said that they needed to wait until they were okay to be with the horse. There was no requirement of previous experience with horses, or even animals, in general, for participation in this study. The clients continuously learned about the horses so that they would be able to interact safely with them. Several of the clients were initially frightened, but this was often quickly replaced by appreciation.

### Procedure and Analysis

To facilitate the analysis, observations were video recorded for the full length of the EASW session (Heath et al. 2010), which gave us adequate opportunity to observe the participants' verbally and non-verbally expressed emotions. The video recording started on the second or third session, making it possible for the participants to get used to the researcher's presence. To develop trust, several visits were made prior to the observation sessions. To be close to the action, a mobile video camera was needed, and familiarity with the activities facilitated the video recordings (Heath et al. 2010).

EASW is an individual treatment in this setting, and the clients were therefore observed individually. Video recordings were conducted for three sessions in total for each adolescent. One of the staff members had two clients in the study and was, therefore, recorded six times. In cases

where the observer had to choose to shoot only one of the participants, the choice was always to follow the client. The video camera was held about 2–5 m from the participants when grooming and working closely with the horse in the stable, and about five to ten meters when riding or driving in the paddock or outdoors. The video-recorded observations were made based on the hypothesis that there could be aspects of the interactions of which clients and staff members were not aware of; therefore, they would not mention them. Video recordings made it possible to explore different issues on different occasions (Heath et al. 2010). From an ethical standpoint, the participants were spared from numerous observations if additional issues were raised along the way. Additionally, the participants had the opportunity to comment on their experience (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Heath et al. 2010).

The observations were supposed to show the actual work performed in EASW and constitute the basis for interpretation regarding whether the essence of EASW was facilitated or not. The videos were analyzed separately for each client-staff pair, and the recorded observations were transcribed. The analysis focused on the interaction between the staff and the clients regarding whether the horse's ability to be an emotional mirror facilitating relationships perceived as authentic was eased or counteracted. This process included multiple viewing of the data and coding of categories, identifying relationships, and comparing of categories until central themes emerged. The process used both inductive reasoning by constant comparison and deductive reasoning generating variables from theory an earlier research. By switching between searching for patterns and searching for fragmentation without seeing the pattern as the final result, emphasis was placed on the dialogue between patterns and fragmentation. The object of study was considered as an unknown, exotic place, even as the approach in the study was not from a stranger's naive point of view (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007). Service users were included in the analysis when earlier research indicated that they could bring unique perspectives and experiences to data interpretation (Sweeney et al. 2013). Both clients and staff members gave comments of value considering the coding of data when they were separately looking at their own videotapes and were allowed to have a dialogue about the findings. In addition, the coding was checked by a dialogue with referees in research and practice.

### Results

The analysis of the videos elicited four different themes that were divided by the focus in the interaction according to doing and performance, or being and feeling. These themes were then separated by the role the participants

gave the horse—whether the horse was seen as an object or a subject. The themes that emerged are presented and discussed below.

#### Doing and Performing with the Horse as an Object

The clients spent most of their time with the horses doing things like agility training or riding. As most of them could be described as having a high degree of perfectionism combined with low self-esteem, they tended to focus mostly on performance in these tasks. If someone besides the staff was watching, for example a parent or another client, it seemed that the client was focused even more on performance. The emphasis on performance seemed to make the clients participate less in interpersonal communication with the staff. If the staff also emphasized performance the horse was most often regarded as an object, by both the clients and the staff. In these situations, the horse was expected to act immediately on the command of the client, and the focus on the horse's situation decreased to a minimum, with the result that it was seen as an object.

*When the horse does not listen to you, hit him with the stick to make him more sensitive to your commands (Staff H).*

As quoted above, the staff did not consider assigning meaning to the horse's behavior when the horse did not listen to the client. This lack of communication about emotions prevented the horse from functioning as an emotional mirror for the humans. By viewing the horse as an object, the staff and the clients could avoid the opportunity of obtaining emotional feedback from the horse. These situations favored cognitive aspects, rather than the emotional aspects of the individual. As a result, the client focused even more on performance. This could enhance their previous experiences concerning the demand for perfect performance as being the basis of their value as a human being. One girl provided the following information about her family:

*They think they are better than everyone else, and they say there is no such thing as mental illness. In my case, they say it's just about some temporary personality problems. They have a lot of rules, such as waiting to eat until six persons have received their food. Then you have to sit straight, be slim, stylish, and you should have good grades. (Client A).*

In another observation, the client jumped off the horse and cried because she was not able to ride as instructed. She seemed ashamed and frustrated, and she expressed a strong sense of self-criticism when communicating with the staff. The client described herself in both speech and action as being worthless. There were also examples of

clients who seemed less motivated to participate in the EASW when the focus was on performance.

*Staff L: Is it the case with you that you often think it is quite a hassle to get out in the stable?*

*Client D: Yes.*

*Staff L: Because it requires you to perform?*

*Client D: Yes, it is that I have to perform.*

The forms of activity focused on performance, where the horse was looked upon as an object, had similarities with traditional equestrian sports (i.e., riding). The staff emphasized control over the horse and obedience in correctly performing the exercises. Accordingly, cognitive and behavioral aspects were more of interest than were emotional aspects.

#### Being and Feeling with the Horse as an Object

Although the focus was not on performance in the second theme, the staff and the clients still regarded the horse as an object. This is so because neither of the members of the two groups considered the horses' perspective. However, sometimes it was not fully clear, if the participants only regarded the client's experiences, or if they took the horse's perspective into consideration as well. For example, when the client was asked to cut the tail of the horse, even though the client talked about having difficulties cutting hair in general, it is not evident if the girl considered the horse's perspective when she cut the hair of the horse. In some observations, it was not possible to deduce whether the clients and the staff considered the horse's perspective when it was not communicated, either through body language or facial expressions. The conversation was about emotions, but only about the client's emotions, and not the horse's. This did not provide an opportunity for the client to understand the emotions of the horse; as such, the possibility of learning to take the perspective of another was lost. Accordingly, the horse's ability to be an emotional mirror was not facilitated.

#### Doing and Performing with the Horse as a Subject

In situations where the clients petted, brushed, and looked at, or talked to the horses, it seemed the communication between the staff and the clients was more focused on the horse's perspective and on how the horse understood the clients' behaviors. The staff and the clients worked together to formulate hypotheses about the horses' emotions, thoughts and intentions. The staff helped the clients understand that the horse could draw conclusions from the client's behavior; in fact, not only from client's behavior but also from the client's energy levels. The clients got

help to understand that they needed to be in contact with the horse to make it listen to what the clients wanted.

*He just closed his eyes and ate his carrot. It seems like your energy isn't enough to get him to put his hoof on the flat stone on the ground today. Maybe you can get in touch with him again when he looks at you (Staff B).*

If the staff emphasized grooming the horse before riding, this could have indicated that the horse was regarded as a subject, despite the focus on performance. The same could be said when the staff gave instructions to warm up and walk the horse before exercising, or when making a riding plan based on the perception of what the horse would like to do, or on what it could manage to do. In all these examples, the horse was apparently being treated as a subject. In some cases, the staff even let the client communicate with the horse to find out what they wanted and what they could do together, pinpointing the horse as a subject.

When performing with the horse, the staff sometimes tried to lead the client to be more attentive to the horse by asking the client to look at the horse's eyes to get answers about what the horse was feeling. The staff emphasized empathy for the horse when the horse was not able to fulfill the task without adding debt to the client's performance. There were also examples where the clients showed empathy for the horses and moved things away, making it easier for the horse to get through a passage. Alternatively, the clients would choose to pet the horse to calm it down. In various ways, the staff gave instructions to the client to help the horse understand what to do. The communication between the staff and the clients focused on empathy for the horse, thereby giving meaning to the horse's behavior. This, in turn, opened up communication about emotions—above all, emotions that perhaps the clients were not so willing to talk about.

*Staff L: What was your feeling there when she was following you, even if you walked with speed or slowed down?*

*Client G: I felt proud.*

*Staff L: On a scale of 1–10, where 10 is good, where were you then?*

*Client G: A 10.*

Although the focus was still on performance, it seemed that when the horse relieved the client from some responsibility for the outcomes of the performance, which seemed to reduce the client's feelings of shame, the horse was perceived as a subject. The clients shared the failure, as well as the success, of the performance with the horse. When performing with the horse in this way, they could speak of the horse as a friend. When they succeeded together, the client shared her success with her friend, the horse, by petting and praising the animal.

## Being and Feeling with the Horse as a Subject

Both the staff and the clients could pet the horse for different reasons. When the horse was petted for being a friend or a partner, this indicated that the horse was regarded as a subject. Another example of when the staff and the clients both regarding the horse as a subject was when they were concerned about the horse scratching himself, and/or feeling bad about the itching, or expressing empathy with the horse. There might also be conversations about how to brush the horse to make the grooming experience more comfortable and not so ticklish. Here, the focus was on the horse's perspective, and empathy for the horse was shown by the clients. The clients realized that the horse was reflecting their emotions.

*Client D: Would he not be bothered by the pigeons on the roof?*

*Staff L: No, he will not be bothered by that. Remember to breathe!*

Client D then took a breath and pulled her shoulders back.

*Staff L: Good, take three deep breaths.*

Client D closed her eyes and breathed.

*Staff L: Well, did you notice that you got a reaction from him? You were quieter and more relaxed, and then he thought it was nice that you were relaxed.*

*Client D: Yes.../So he becomes stressed when I get stressed.*

*Staff L: Yes, exactly. He reads you like a book.*

*Client D: It could result in an accident.*

*Staff L: Yes, that is why it is so important to manage our emotions.*

*Client D: If I'm sad?*

*Staff L: He knows if you are sad too.*

Some of the clients were afraid of horses. Even so, they participated in the EASW. They could relate to the horse and recognize they had things in common, such as being stubborn. The horse provided the opportunity for the client's self-reflection, in that the horse's message was negotiated between the staff and the clients. In this way, it was less threatening; therefore, it did not arouse the client's defenses to the same extent as when the message came from the staff. This seemed to be a conscious choice by the staff when they were perceived as understanding that the clients did not necessarily want to show their emotions to create relationships. It could be that the staff talked about the horse's emotions to compare with the client's emotions.

*Staff B: Now you need to open the knot. Now the horse is frustrated. He wants the food quickly. Speed up the opening of the knot.*

*Client A: Laughter.*

*Staff B: Do you know the emotion?*

*Client A: Yes, I want an iPhone. I want an iPhone.*

*Staff B and Client A: Laughter.*

The staff gave meaning to the horse's behavior. Furthermore, the staff could talk about the client's emotions and the horse's response to those emotions, making it easier for the client to understand that others—here, the horse—draw conclusions from their behavior.

*Staff B: How much energy do you feel that you have now?*

*Client A: Better than the last time.*

*Staff B: It affects the horse, as you can feel he is quicker to follow when you are higher in energy. He looks tired. Are you tired?*

The horse was also considered a subject when the girls were invited to celebrate one of the horses' birthday. The clients and the staff talked about making a birthday cake for the horse. They talked about him using his name, as if they talked about a human friend. There were also comparisons about horses and their different personalities, indicating that the horse was looked upon as a subject rather than an object.

*Staff B: Who does he remind you of?*

*Client A: Matheus.*

*Staff B and Client A: Matheus (they say simultaneously, both laughing).*

*Staff B: Are you as worried when he does what Matheus normally does?*

*Client A: No, because I rely more on him. It feels like I know him better.*

That did not mean that clients or staff did not relate to the fact that these individuals were horses. For example, the dialogue during the birthday, about the horse probably not being able to understand that it was his birthday. They still considered that the horse could experience it as a good day with good food and sweets, even if it couldn't experience it in the same manner as a human. The conversations also touched on the fact that the horse could have a bad day, but that it could be positively affected by the client being positive and happy, and vice versa. Together, the staff and clients created hypotheses about emotions, thoughts, and intentions, beyond what was happening both with themselves and regarding the horse. This could lead to the clients knowing that the horse could be happy when they came out to the stables, thus increasing their motivation to participate. The opposite could also occur, meaning that motivation decreased when clients were not keen on getting in touch with their emotions. The clients could hesitate to work with the horses, knowing they had to focus on their emotions.

*Client D: No, I have to keep focused on my emotions.*

*Staff L: Yes, it requires an internal control and focus.*

*Client D: Yes.*

*Staff L: A job inside you?*

*Client D: Well, just so.*

*Staff L: And sometimes, you think; Goddammit, I cannot! But then you say anyway that once you came out here, it gave you something good.*

*Client D: Yes.*

*Staff L: So, it is worth it?*

*Client D: Yes.*

In the end, however, the clients made their choice to participate because they knew that they usually felt better once they had participated. Another factor that influenced their decision was whether the client had bonded to the horse. Some clients were so attached to the horse they worked with that they considered whether they could bring them home with them when their treatment had ended. Finally, some of the clients said that they had become attached to the horses so much so that they considered them to be dear friends. They had real difficulties thinking about saying goodbye to the horses. From an ethical standpoint, this was something the staff considered and tried to prepare clients for. At the same time, it provided further opportunities to work with emotions.

## Discussion

The results indicate that when EASW included instructions similar to traditional equestrian sports combined with the view of the horse as an object, the horse's ability to facilitate authentic relationships was not incorporated. The opposite results were observed when the horse was seen as a subject, including considerations about the horse's perspective, as well as the work with the client's emotions. The essence of EASW was facilitated when the clients got the help needed to understand what is "me" and what is not "me," together with the opportunity to get in touch with their emotions. This process enabled a degree of authenticity that could later be translated into an authentic relationship.

The theoretical starting point considered in the analysis of the process in EASW is theories of mentalizing (Bateman and Fonagy 2012) and theories of emotional labor (Guy et al. 2010). The analysis shows that even if the staff focused on the clients' emotions and thoughts in accordance with the principles of emotional labor (Guy et al. 2010), the absence of hypotheses about the horse's emotions, thoughts, and intentions, according to the theories of mentalizing (Bateman and Fonagy 2012), seemed to counteract the horse's capacity to mirror the emotions

facilitating authentic relationships. It seems like the level of focus on the horse as a subject was a crucial factor in giving meaning to the horse's behavior, and in trying to understand how it thought and felt, according to the theories of mentalizing (Bateman and Fonagy 2012).

Mentalizing is about a person's ability to understand that others draw conclusions of their own behavior (Bateman and Fonagy 2012). The findings illustrate that the staff needed to help the client talk and think about their own thoughts and emotions and the thoughts of others—here, the horse's—to facilitate the horse's capacity to mirror emotions. The results indicate that the boundaries are fluid between the themes, but when the focus is on doing and performing and the horse is seen as an object, there is less chance that the horse will facilitate the building of authentic relationships by being an emotional mirror.

We also found that there is a great need for the staff to check both the horse's and the client's ability to handle the task, without adding to the client's debt, making sure that her defense mechanisms are not aroused. When the staff opened up for talking and thinking about both the client's and the horse's emotions, thoughts and intentions, making sure that they responded to the client's emotions without judging, they created the opportunity for authentic relationships. Additionally, the staff needed to ask questions about the clients' considerations about these emotions, thoughts, and intentions. In one client-staff pair, this was the least frequent type of communication, and as in the other pairs, it alternated more between the different themes. To be with the horse as a subject it seemed that either the staff or the client had attached emotionally to the horse. Clients that had attached to the horse were more concerned about the horse's well-being and therefore seemed to regard it more as a subject. This, in turn, led to a focus on emotions facilitating authentic relationships. These results correspond with Bachi (2013, 2014) that concludes that a number of areas of attachment theory such as safe haven, affect mirroring, reflective functioning and nonverbal communication were applied not only for the clients but also for the staff.

In this study, it was found that the essence of EASW is facilitated by emotional labor in combination with mentalizing, including focusing on the horse as a subject. As earlier studies have shown, an individual's attitude toward the horse affects his/her activity with the horse (Chamove et al. 2002; Hama et al. 1996; Henry et al. 2005), which in turn affects the possibility of the horse being perceived as an emotional mirror. Additionally, clients communicate less with the staff when the focus of the task is mostly on performance. This type of focus also affected their motivation to complete the EASW, and in principle, the horse was more or less redundant when the mirroring was more related to the performance, or the lack thereof.

When the horse instead was seen as a subject as a result of the client's attachment to it, the focus turned more to emotions, and vice versa. Similar results have been shown regarding stress reduction, including grooming, rhythmic stroking of the horse, encouraging slow breathing, muscle relaxation, encouraging optimistic thinking, and reflecting on the emotions that are experienced (Pendry and Roeter 2013). Empathy seems to play a major role here. Or in other words making an effort to put up hypotheses about both horses' and clients' feelings, needs and thoughts, which resulted in an increased intensity in the communication between staff and client. As in the theory of emotional labor (Guy et al. 2010), the staff members needed to find out about the client's emotions, and by providing space for the horse to mirror them they got the opportunity to talk about them. It is also evident that the staff needed to adapt their emotions and elicit the desired emotional response to the situation, refusing to let the client's defense mechanisms be brought up, by understanding that the client may not want to show her emotions.

One further aspect of importance in this study included the staff's ability to make the client understand that the horse draws conclusions about the client's behavior. In other words, letting the client see herself from the horse's perspective and letting the client see how the horse gained meaning in the situation at hand—helping the client to reflect on what is happening, rather than focusing on making sure that the right things are done. By going through the horse's perspective, the staff seemed to avoid triggering many of the clients' defense mechanisms, in contrast to when the staff was talking entirely from their own perspectives. The staff also seemed more able to solve emotional problems and to help the client organize her authentic self, thereby developing emotional regulation, which Bateman and Fonagy (2012) would call mentalizing; in other words, helping the client to be less occupied with their thoughts and more in touch with their bodies and their emotions. By focusing on performance, the clients were more focused on their thoughts, in contrast to focusing on being and feeling, where the clients were more in touch with their emotions. When in touch with their emotions, it seemed that the staff and the clients developed an ability to create authentic relationships.

Petting or grooming the horse seems to create an emotional bond, and this does not require an ownership relationship between man and horse, as has been shown in earlier studies (Bachi et al. 2012; Endenburg and van Lith 2011). However, it might be relevant that the client had the same horse throughout the treatment process, as even Haugé et al. (2013) highlight in their study. In addition, it can be stated that activities like grooming and petting have an impact on the propensity for communication, especially regarding the clients. Reduced communication is seen by

clients when riding, as in traditionally equestrian sports, by regarding the horse as an object, and the opposite—regarding the staff making the activity focus more on performance.

Looking back at previous studies showing that communications skills can be improved by attending EASW (Beck and Katcher 2003; Bizub et al. 2003; Burgon 2003; Macauley and Gutierrez 2004) as well as being absent from it (Pauw 2000), the study results could shed some light over that discrepancy. The communication decreases among clients and increases among staff when the focus in the interaction is on performing and the horse are regarded as an object. The opposite occurs when focusing on emotions and regarding the horse as a subject, resulting in increased communication among clients and decreased communication among staff that are more focused on asking questions. It is important to note that horses and their abilities to read human's emotions alone cannot make a difference, but just as Pendry and Roeter (2013) highlight in their study, the staff needs to help the clients reflect on what they experience.

Analyzing the video gives us an opportunity to examine a broader perspective as compared to a mere assessment of the informants' subjective descriptions of EASW. The basic idea at the treatment center is that the work should primarily be about cognition and not emotion because their work is based on CBT. If the video-recorded observations had not been carried out, it is not certain that it would have been discovered that the essence of EASW is actually facilitated by social work, consistent with mentalizing and emotional labor theories. The possibility of controlling the analysis several times is also an advantage that can increase the overall reliability of the study. However, the study has limitations concerning generalizability or transferability, which could be perceived as a more adequate word considering it is a qualitative study. When it is a small sample it is not possible to provide an index of transferability but by providing rich description the reader has a possibility to make judgments about the findings' transferability to other settings. However, the results correspond with experiences from referees in practice that work both with similar and different clientgroups as well as students experiences acting as clients with horses undergoing training in EASW indicating transferability.

#### Implications for Clinical Work and Research

The empirical finding that the staff needs to hold a conversation about the clients, as well as the horses' needs and emotions, has implications for staff working with EASW. For example, the staff needs to consider not having too much focus on performance. They also need to regard the horse as a subject rather than an object, providing that they

want the horse to be an emotional mirror. Previous research has indicated that EASW can improve self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-image, but not consistently. The results from this study have significant implications for understanding this discrepancy. Depending on whether the staff and the clients focus on performance or on emotion, different positive or negative outcomes on self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-image will likely emerge.

The possibility of affecting these psychological factors with EASW will be enhanced by an implementation of both mentalizing and emotional labor theories. The staff needs to help the clients see themselves from the horse's perspective, in addition to carrying out cognitive labor to make them become less self-critical and not raise their defense mechanisms. This is where the horse's role comes into question, when its reflection of emotions is not perceived as threatening by the client. If the focus is on performance and the horse is regarded as an object, EASW is likely to be ineffective. This puts high demands on the staff to achieve the essence of EASW. They need to know considerably much about the client group they are working with, knowing the difficulties in opening up conversations about thoughts, needs, and feelings, according to emotional labor theory (Guy et al. 2010). Further, they need to be comfortable enough in their own profession to know how to wait for the right time to give feedback and ask questions, thus improving the overall therapy experience.

Self-harming is mainly associated with an inability to regulate emotions, leading scientists to the idea that the treatment and prevention primarily should focus on emotional regulation (Muehlenkamp et al. 2012). According to earlier studies (Carlsson et al. 2014) the esssens of EASW includes the possibility to be aware of emotions as well as getting motivated to regulate them when interacting with the horse. Additionally, the specific clients in the study, self-harming female clients have a tendency to regard their own bodies as objects. Could these particular settings were clients are helped seeing horses as subjects facilitate clients regarding their own bodies as subject? Earlier research indicates that when concern for the horse and humans are included in the therapy it can give an opportunity to teach those involved to take better care of themselves (Karol 2007). As Vidrin et al. (2002) highlights, horses get dirty and relieve themselves when they need to, yet clients can interact with them on a fairly intimate basis. Humans instead use the restroom on preassigned breaks, work late into the night when our bodies and mind are beyond tired (Porter-Wenzlaff 2007). This means according to Porter-Wenzlaff (2007) that we as humans are less and less accustomed to attend to our natural, authentic, experiences and feelings. And for humans it can cause mental illness when separated from their authentic experiences and feelings (Porter-Wenzlaff 2007), which could be perceived as

something the client in the study could recognize themselves in.

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**Ethical standard** The regional Ethical Review Board in Linköping, Sweden, approved this study for both humans and animals (Dnr 2011/264-31, Dnr 31-8051/11), and the experiment was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, both considering humans and horses. All the participants gave their informed written consent to participate prior to their inclusion in the study. The study has been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

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