

# The Potential of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy for Treating Trauma in Australian Aboriginal Peoples

Bindi Bennett<sup>1,\*</sup> and Elise Woodman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs Queensland 4556, Australia*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Allied Health, Australian Catholic University, ACT 2602, Australia*

\*Correspondence to Bindi Bennett, 90 Sippy Downs Drive, Sippy Downs Queensland 4556, Australia. E-mail: [bbennet1@usc.edu.au](mailto:bbennet1@usc.edu.au)

## Abstract

Colonisation and subsequent policies targeting Aboriginal peoples in Australia have had devastating consequences, including trauma, disadvantage and marginalisation. These effects have passed from generation to generation and continue to manifest in poor health and well-being outcomes, particularly mental health disorders. Innovative and culturally relevant techniques are needed to remedy inequality and address inter-generational trauma. Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP)—an experiential therapy involving horses—is a new and increasingly evidence-based treatment approach, which offers potential for working with Aboriginal peoples. This article reviews the literature on outcomes of EAP to consider its potential as a culturally responsive therapy to treat trauma and increase well-being for Aboriginal people in Australia.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, equine-assisted therapy, trauma, Australia, well-being

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## Introduction

Aboriginal people in Australia experience seemingly insurmountable health and social disparities, including high rates of mental health disorders and suicide, intergenerational trauma, and disproportionate representation in out-of-home care and the justice system (Baldry and Dowse, 2013; Bennett, 2015). Identifying and investing in culturally responsive

interventions that address disadvantage and improve well-being are vital for Aboriginal peoples and are consistent with social work's commitment to social justice and human rights (AASW, 2010). One innovative approach that may improve Aboriginal well-being is equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP). EAP, an experiential therapy involving horses, has been used in several social intervention programs with Indigenous peoples internationally (NARHA, n.d.). In Australia, EAP is yet to be widely used with Aboriginal people (Cohen *et al.*, 2001; Kemp *et al.*, 2014). This article reviews the current literature on EAP and its outcomes to address the research question: does EAP have potential as a culturally responsive intervention for social work with Aboriginal people? The experiences of Aboriginal people are outlined to establish the need for more culturally relevant approaches to address the well-being and trauma of Aboriginal people in Australia. The literature on EAP is then considered to assess its compatibility with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

## Aboriginal peoples and trauma

Aboriginal people in Australia were unjustly dispossessed of their land during colonisation. The Australian government has never formally acknowledged the sovereignty of Aboriginal people (Green and Baldry, 2008). Between 1910 and 1970, tens of thousands of Aboriginal children, known as the Stolen Generations, were forcibly removed from their families under the government policies of assimilation. Assimilation, which was based on a belief of Aboriginal inferiority, and aimed to integrate Aboriginal children into the white community, has contributed to Aboriginal people experiencing a range of health and social disparities today (Bennett, 2015).

Despite evidence of strength, deep resilience, collective resistance and survival, Aboriginal peoples continue to be marginalised and disadvantaged (Bennett, 2013). The grief and loss caused by colonisation (Herring *et al.*, 2013, p. 107) and past policies enacted upon Aboriginal peoples have contributed to high levels of individual, family and community trauma that in many cases has caused intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma is historical trauma that is transmitted across generations and is 'the subjective experiencing and remembering of events in the mind of an individual or the life of a community, passed from adults to children in cyclic processes' (Atkinson *et al.*, 2010, p. 138). For Aboriginal Australians, this trauma is linked to negative outcomes, including grief, suicide, mental health issues, substance misuse, obesity and other physical health concerns (Atkinson *et al.*, 2010; O'Loughlin, 2009). It is essential to find effective therapy options that respond to the well-being and trauma of Aboriginal people in culturally appropriate ways.

## Current trauma treatment approaches

The long-term well-being of children and young people, and their physical, physiological, emotional and intellectual development, can be affected by traumatic experiences (Van der Kolk, 2005, 2007). Early intervention to support the well-being of young people and their families and communities plays an important role in reducing the trauma passed on to future generations.

When responding to trauma experienced by Aboriginal people, there are limited preventative and therapeutic interventions available (Westerman, 2010). The monocultural approach of service delivery and the paucity of appropriate cultural models are partly responsible for the lack of engagement and effective outcomes with Aboriginal people. Westerman (2010) argues that mental health services and clinicians have failed to conceptualise Aboriginal views of health and well-being and recommends cultural involvement as one way of combatting these disadvantages. Aboriginal holistic health is understood as:

not just the physical well-being of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total well-being of their Community. (NACCHO, 2018, paragraph 6)

Currently, the most commonly recommended treatment for many mental health disorders is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) (Signal *et al.*, 2013). CBT explores how thoughts, feelings and behaviours are interrelated, and is a relatively individually focused and short-term approach for the treatment of emotional, behavioural and psychiatric problems (Australian Association for Cognitive and Behaviour Therapy, n.d.).

Despite its popularity in Australia, there is limited evidence for CBT's effectiveness with non-European clients (Signal *et al.*, 2013). A narrative therapy approach may be more effective when working with Aboriginal peoples as it enables them to tell their stories, builds communication and provides the therapist with a better understanding of the richness and complexity of their lived experiences (Wingard and Lester, 2001).

In Canada, the blended approach to Western and Aboriginal knowledge translation has been named as 'two eyed seeing' (Marsh *et al.*, 2015). This refers to seeing (with one eye) the Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being (Martin, 2008) and (with the other eye) the strengths of Western knowledges. In Australia, Aboriginal peoples adopt many forms of traditional therapy, including the use of traditional food and plants, art, dance, yarning and weaving (Panzironi, 2013).

In the Northern Territory, the Anangu Ngangkari Tjutaku Aboriginal Corporation (ANTAC) currently employs twenty Ngangkari healers who help with emotional, physical and spiritual issues as part of a two-way approach to positive change in health for Aboriginal peoples (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, n.d.). Integration of Aboriginal traditional healing with the Western biomedical model is critical in the success of healing programs to increase well-being outcomes (Maar and Shawande, 2010).

The wellness of an Aboriginal community can only be adequately measured from within an Indigenous knowledge framework that is holistic, inclusive and respectful of the balance between the spiritual, emotional, physical and social realms of life (Castellano, 2004; Iwama *et al.*, 2009; Iwasaki *et al.*, 2009). Treatment interventions must honour the history of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, strengthening cultural identity, community integration and political empowerment can enhance and improve well-being for Aboriginal populations.

## The need for culturally responsive interventions

The AASW Code of Ethics (2010) highlights the importance of cultural responsiveness and 'culturally competent, safe and sensitive practice' (p. 17) within social work. Culturally responsive practice refers to the development of 'collaborative and respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in order to respond to the issues and needs of communities in ways that promote social justice and uphold human rights' (Zubrzycki *et al.*, 2014, p. 21).

Despite this professional commitment to culturally responsive practice, many social workers apply inappropriate and predominantly Western-developed techniques when working with Aboriginal peoples, such as using assessment tools with little or no cross-cultural validity, and using non-Indigenous conceptualisations of health, ill health, healing and helping (Westerman, 2010). Westerman (2010) argues that this lack of culturally relevant approaches is the fundamental reason many Aboriginal people fail to access services. Culturally grounded, valid understandings with tailored interventions and strategies must shape service assessment, care and management of Aboriginal health (Purdie *et al.*, 2010). Cultural interventions offer hope, promise and healing (Rowan *et al.*, 2014). These interventions, however, need to be led by individuals who are sanctioned and recognised by community members. In contrast to Western biomedical approaches, interventions need to address wellness in a holistic sense and emphasise balance between traditions, culture, language and community (Rowan *et al.*, 2014).

EAP shows promise to meet both the therapeutic and cultural needs of Aboriginal peoples. To consider EAP's potential, this article reviews

current literature on EAP practice and outcomes. Key search terms included: 'equine-assisted therapy/learning, equine therapy, equine-facilitated therapy/learning, animal-assisted therapy, horses in therapy', and 'horses and healing'. While EAP is the primary focus of the article, there are several related practices that encompass the full picture of how horses are used in therapy. These terms were combined with 'First Nations, Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' to locate articles that were specific to EAP with First Nations people. Searches were conducted in 2017 and 2018 through the academic databases available through the Australian Catholic University and the University of the Sunshine Coast, Google Scholar and Google.

The experiential and hands-on learning of EAP fits with Aboriginal ways of learning and teaching, such as showing people how to hunt and gather. EAP's integration of horses reduces the therapy's reliance on the client-therapist relationship, which is important given Aboriginal people's conflicted relationship with social work and its role in the Stolen Generation (Bennett, 2013). The presence of the horse reduces the perceived dominance of the therapist (Legge, 2016). EAP does not require the client to talk for extended periods and they may choose to interact with the horses before inviting the involvement of the therapist. The experiential nature of EAP reduces the reliance on language and can appeal to tactile learners and clients with less developed verbal communication skills (Legge, 2016). Using horses can be particularly effective in the treatment of traumatised adolescents because they provide the practitioner with an opportunity to teach adolescents control and responsiveness (Masini, 2010; Tyler, 1994). The use of horses in therapy will often involve outdoor activities and this may prove to be a more relaxing and effective environment than traditional therapy settings (Legge, 2016; Masini, 2010; Sue and Sue, 2016). EAP encapsulates some of the holistic philosophies found to be effective in interventions targeting Aboriginal peoples. Furthermore, as a relatively new therapy, there is no established prejudice against EAP, rather a willingness to engage (Legge, 2016). In general, EAP is a way to engage those who may be reluctant to participate in more traditional forms of therapy (Tyler, 1994).

## Animal-assisted therapy

Since the 1960s, many writers have documented anecdotal testimonies to the various benefits of animals in therapeutic settings (Ford, 2013; Harper *et al.*, 2015; Marcus *et al.*, 2012; O'Haire, 2010). The relationship between humans and animals is considered to have the potential to positively influence an individual's health and well-being. For example, therapy animals can reduce pain levels, help clients cope with distress and depressed mood, and increase positive social behaviours in children with

autism spectrum disorder (Harper *et al.*, 2015; Marcus *et al.*, 2012; O'Haire, 2010).

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) can help develop rapport and empathy, instil a feeling of acceptance in the community, reduce stress and increase socialisation (Ford, 2013). AAT has also shown significant benefit for patients living with depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorders, dissociative disorders and other chronic mental health issues, and is increasingly used in a variety of social work contexts (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). When animals are used in therapy, individuals are generally more motivated to attend and participate in therapy (Chandler, 2017). People may also receive nurturance and affection through physical contact with the animal, experience acceptance, enjoyment and entertainment, and form a trusting relationship with the animal which may then extend to the therapist, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving success (Chandler, 2017).

Horses are increasingly used in therapy given the learning opportunities that come from their size and herd instincts. They are large, dynamic mammals, who live moment by moment to necessitate their survival (Chandler, 2017). Horses are perceptive, sensitive, social and intelligent creatures, and need contact with others (the herd) to survive and for recognition, validation, reassurance, comfort and a sense of belonging (Ford, 2013). Horses are perceptive to human emotions because of their sensitivity to their environment and ability to read non-verbal cues (Chandler, 2017; EAGALA, 2018; Ford, 2013; Signal *et al.*, 2013). As a result, horses may pick up and respond to incongruence between the way people act and their underlying feelings; some horses may do this easily. Numerous researchers write about horses being more likely to engage and connect with clients when they achieve physical, mental and emotional congruence (Cody *et al.*, 2011; Ford, 2013; Tyler, 1994). The horses' ability to mirror human emotions and change their interaction with clients according to the feelings expressed offers opportunities for feedback and learning (Plume, 2016).

## EAP

EAP is an experiential therapy that facilitates interactions between horses and humans, in sessions designed to obtain therapy goals (Klontz *et al.*, 2007; Notgrass and Pettinelli, 2015). EAP has been defined as 'an interactive process in which a licensed mental health professional work[s] with ... an equine professional [and] suitable [horses] to address psychotherapeutic goals' (Ford, 2013, p. 94). Therapists require training in a profession such as social work or psychology and additional certification in EAP. Participants are involved in on-ground activities that are interpreted by discussing the emotions, behaviours, thoughts, feelings

and actions that arise from the interactions between the horses and people (Frederick *et al.*, 2015). In the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) model of EAP, the certification training teaches therapists about giving feedback to clients about shifts, patterns, unique movements and discrepancies in the behaviour of the horses (Thomas and Lytle, 2016). The externalisation of client experiences on to the behaviour of the horses allows clients to better understand the issues in their lives (Klontz *et al.*, 2007). Practitioners draw on their professional knowledge, skills, theory and experience but deliver different interventions to more traditional sit-and-talk therapies.

The reactions of a horse to human moods can often reflect the current emotional energy of an individual and serve as a powerful means of transference learning (Ford, 2013; Klontz *et al.*, 2007). The interaction with a horse encourages people to discover, acknowledge and possibly share their deep and previously hidden feelings. Observing the behaviour of the horses can also help individuals to explore issues in a manner that is: more creative; less verbally reliant than traditional talk therapy; less intrusive; and provides stronger metaphors and visual reminders of the learning and insights that occur (Ford, 2013; Waite and Bourke, 2013). Tyler (1994) noted that clients who are initially reluctant to express their vulnerable feelings to the therapist can do so in the presence of a horse.

Each horse has a unique personality, which allows individuals to choose a horse that may remind them of themselves or a person in their life. In therapy sessions, this empathy towards the horse may help the client to process experientially what is happening in their life and to become more understanding of their interactions with other people (Webb, 2002). The client's changing perception of these interactions is explored by the practitioner during sessions (Henry, 2008). Within the safety of the EAP environment, clients are more likely to confront unhealthy patterns of interaction, reduce psychological distress, work through unresolved issues and focus on goals (Klontz *et al.*, 2007). In research conducted by Ford (2013), EAP participants highlighted the ways horses assisted them during the therapy sessions. These included greater intuition, a greater focus on the present, ability to hold non-judgemental attitudes and a more balanced response to emotional changes. Participants also identified how horses helped them to self-reflect and give them confidence during therapy. They felt the horse could be trusted as, unlike humans, their responses were not socially conditioned (Ford, 2013).

The imposing size of horses and their capacity to evoke fear can, perhaps counter-intuitively, allow the participant to conquer fear, gain a sense of mastery and build self-efficacy (Ford, 2013; Waite and Bourke, 2013; Yorke *et al.*, 2008). The horse's hypervigilance to its surroundings and tendency to run and escape when scared or threatened are emotions

and responses that are familiar to many clients (Klontz *et al.*, 2007). Watching a horse react to an unexpected noise by running away may help a client to externalise and safely explore their own analogous emotional responses and behaviours.

Horses can contribute significantly to the healing of psychological trauma (Yorke *et al.*, 2008). The bond that is formed between individual and horse can be as valuable as the bond between individual and therapist and may provide added intimacy and nurturing factors. For example, the physical affection that can be shown to a horse is often impossible in therapy with a human due to professional ethical boundaries (Ford, 2013). With a horse, touch can be used in safe, therapeutic, reciprocal and appropriate ways. In the study of Ford (2013), participants with a history of trauma commented on the safety and comfort provided by horses in contrast to potentially threatening human relationships. Other positive therapeutic aspects of the horse–human relationship include trust, respect, acceptance, confidentiality and warmth, as well as collaboration and a sense of mastery (Waite and Bourke, 2013; Yorke *et al.*, 2008).

EAP is similar to conventional therapy in that it allows practitioners to set goals, guide interaction between client and horse, measure progress and evaluate the process of healing (Geist, 2011). EAP can be a valuable supplement to conventional therapies, but it is essential that both the practitioner and client are clear about why horses are being used and what are the potential benefits (Masini, 2010; Tyler, 1994).

Hallberg (2018) conducted a comprehensive literature review of 227 articles involving EAP research. Her review provides an important canvas of findings related to EAP and a summary of her findings is provided here to capture the existing literature on EAP. The reviewed literature included twenty-three literature or systemic reviews, ten of which were on equine programs used in mental health. The other thirteen reviews focused on cerebral palsy, musculoskeletal disorders, multiple sclerosis, prison populations and the positive outcomes of therapeutic interactions with horses more broadly. Most of these reviews were cautiously hopeful about equine therapy but without methodological rigour, could not conclusively attest to its benefits (Hallberg, 2018).

Hallberg (2018) found twenty-four published research articles on autism and equine-assisted interactions. This research shows some benefits of equine programs in reducing autism symptoms and increasing self-regulation and social skills. Sixteen studies were focused on ‘at risk’ youth. Increases in trust, empathy and social interactions have been reported in this research (Hallberg, 2018). Fourteen studies investigated trauma of some kind. From the limited research in this area, equine-assisted activities and therapies show potential and indicate increased quality of life and reduced symptoms of anxiety and emotional distress for individuals seeking treatment for trauma. Ten studies investigated

mental illness in general with nine showing positive change in the areas of improved well-being and with positive change in depression and self-esteem symptoms. Kendall *et al.* (2015) report that the 'current state of literature does not allow us to definitively conclude that equine assisted interactions are efficacious' (p. 57). In addition, Indigenous methodologies have not yet been applied to research of EAP.

Benefits of EAP have been reported in observations from the field and client statements. These benefits include effective treatment of substance abuse, eating disorders, poor self-esteem, anger, fear, dissociation, behavioural concerns, depression, anxiety, and communication and relationships issues (Frederick *et al.*, 2015; Tyler, 1994). Other studies have shown improvement in self-care, self-concept, confidence, empowerment, reduced isolation, increased openness, improved social skills, healthy relationships, conflict resolution, communication, impulse control, boundaries, spiritual growth and psychological well-being (Ford, 2013; Frederick *et al.*, 2015; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; Signal *et al.*, 2013; Yorke *et al.*, 2008). EAP has also been found to reduce distress, fear, depressive symptoms, aggression and other negative social behaviours (Ford, 2013).

EAP has recently been successful in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in returning war veterans from a number of countries, including Australia (Baker, 2017). Lancia (2008) documented the treatment of war veterans and asserted that 'EAP requires immediate solutions to problems at hand, which, when practiced on a regular basis nurtures an ability to adapt and the development of problem solving skills' (p. 12). The EAGALA evaluated treatment of members of the Georgia National Guard where deployments averaged two years or more, and found all soldiers who completed EAP reported dramatically reduced PTSD symptoms and lower stress levels (Calico Junction, n.d.).

EAP has also shown success as a treatment in drug and alcohol rehabilitation in America. Moore *et al.* (2009) described a pilot program at a drug and alcohol residential treatment centre where clients reported outcomes, including having set and then met goals; being better connected with their feelings and having enhanced problem-solving and coping strategies.

Many studies suggest that clients who do not respond to more traditional forms of counselling do well in EAP (Frederick *et al.*, 2015; Trotter *et al.*, 2008; Waite and Bourke, 2013). An American study found that at-risk adolescents were more likely to have increased hope and decreased depression levels if their treatment program included the use of therapeutic horses (Frederick *et al.*, 2015). In a study with Canadian juvenile offenders, Chandler (2005) reported that young people in EAP exhibited increased positive behaviours, mutual support and communication, skills in managing anxiety and stress, and a reduction in less desirable behaviours such as manipulation. Another Canadian study by Trotter *et al.* (2008) which, for twelve weeks, compared equine-assisted

counselling to classroom-based counselling for youth at risk of academic or social difficulties, showed statistically significant improvements from the equine program in seventeen areas, compared to just five for the classroom program.

Prolonged benefits of EAP have also been documented. In research by Klontz *et al.* (2007), thirty-one people in the USA took part in an equine-assisted experiential therapy program, with psychological measures used to track changes directly after treatment and six months post-treatment. The measures showed reduced distress and increased well-being immediately after treatment, and six months later participants reported being more able to live in the present, feeling less weighed down by regrets, less focused on future fears, and more independent and self-supportive (Klontz *et al.*, 2007).

## The potential of EAP for Australian Aboriginal peoples

AATs are regarded as a valuable method of treatment for Indigenous groups due to their flexibility and applicability to cultural diversity (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). Below are some examples of how EAP is being used with First Nations people and the outcomes it is already achieving.

### USA

The Tiwahe Glu Kini Pi (Bringing the Family back to Life) mental health program based with the Sinte Gleska University, South Dakota provides EAP to Native American peoples with mental health issues. They have treated hundreds of Native American peoples with issues, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, anxiety and PTSD, and report EAP is gaining popularity in local communities. One Lakota man, Grey Cloud, has used the inspiration of his healing with horses to co-found Wica Agli (Bringing back men), which is a 'modern version of traditional Lakota men's societies' that incorporates the use of horses (Brave Heart and Cortez, 2014; Pember, 2017, paragraph 37). They build on cultural teachings to address trauma, strengthening both individuals and communities (Pember, 2017).

Within Indian Country—self-governed Native American communities in the USA—horse culture is also seen as medicine. The community's historical connection to horses is so important that involvement with horses is seen as a valid intervention to promote wellness (Plume, 2016). There is also one organisation, the Medicine Wheel Model of Horsemanship, which offers training and certification in horse-based therapy grounded in 'traditional Native understandings and spirituality' (Plume, 2016, paragraph 10).

## Canada

First Nation Canadian peoples view horses as sacred and believe horses can help humans to understand their place in the circle of life (Dell *et al.*, 2008; Equine Assisted Therapy Institute, n.d.). The horse is considered to have strong spiritual power and seen as a ‘teller of truth’ (Dell *et al.*, 2008). First Nation Canadians believe that the horse will guide them in the right direction and has a vital role in assisting them to become better people (Dell *et al.*, 2008). Chief Dwayne of One Arrow First Nation explains the significance of horses to Cree culture—‘The horse is considered a powerful spiritual entity ... the horse gives us strength and symbolizes freedom’ (Badger Heit, 2012, paragraph 4).

A study of Canadian Indigenous youths who participated in an equine-assisted learning program found the young people had an affinity with the horse that fostered positive communication with wider society (Dell, 2011). Further, the study found equine-assisted learning provided a culturally relevant space for Indigenous youth (Dell, 2011).

The Equine Assisted Therapy Institute (EATI) in Canada has been successfully integrating First Nation traditions with EAP. EATI combines EAP with the idea of the four ‘blankets’ of resilience created by Gray Smith (2012). The four blankets—a strong sense of self, and connection to family, community and culture—are needed to metaphorically cover individuals and protect them from the effects of colonisation. Through this approach, the service provides a culturally relevant way of delivering EAP to Canadian Aboriginal people struggling with trauma-related issues (Equine Assisted Therapy Institute, n.d.).

## Australia

Australian Aboriginals also have a long history with horses. Horses arrived in Australia with the first fleet in 1788. Initially, the relationship between Aboriginal people and horses arose from limited employment opportunities; they used horses in the cattle industry or as native policemen and this gave them some social status. Records show more than 150 years of Aboriginal involvement with stock horses on Australian cattle and sheep stations (Brasch, 2014). Aboriginal men were also part of the Australian Light Horse fighting for Australia in World War 1. Today Aboriginal people interact with horses in numerous ways, including occupational requirements, leisure, riding for pleasure, and participating in rodeos and horse racing (Maynard, 2013). Furthermore, a connection to all animals is inherent to Aboriginal spirituality, which is defined as:

at the core of Aboriginal being, their very identity. It gives meaning to all aspects of life including relationships with one another and the

environment. All objects are living and share the same soul and spirit as Aboriginals. (Grant, 2004)

There is some Australian research that documents outcomes of EAP with Aboriginal people. Signal *et al.* (2013) conducted research with survivors of child sexual abuse (including children, adolescents and adults), 25 per cent of whom identified as Aboriginal Australians. They found that EAP leads to more positive responses and reduced depressive symptoms compared to clinical sessions alone. The authors attributed this to EAP being less reliant on person-to-person communication and cognitive abilities (Signal *et al.*, 2013). Kemp *et al.* (2014) found that EAP was as effective for Aboriginal children and adolescents who had survived sexual abuse as it was for non-Aboriginal children and adolescents. They also suggested that EAP may be more culturally effective than traditional therapy.

## **EAP and Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing**

Alongside international support for EAP as a culturally relevant therapy for First Nations people, it is important to consider how EAP might be compatible with Australian Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, and culturally responsive social work practice. Aboriginal ways of knowing are related to what Aboriginal people believe is real in the world and how they know about their beliefs. Ways of knowing encompass entities that can be thought of as spirits of Baiame ('Baiame (Baayami or Baayama) is the Creator God and Sky Father in the dreaming of several language groups (e.g. Kamilaroi, Eora, Darkinjung, and Wiradjuri) of south-east Australia.') and include all forms of life on the land, which include animals, plants, waterways, skies, climate and spiritual places (Martin, 2008). Including a horse as part of the therapy team accords with the importance of animals in Aboriginal culture. Therapists who wish to deliver culturally responsive therapy for Aboriginal clients must also understand their own cultural identity and background, including values, assumptions and expectations in therapy (Bennett *et al.*, 2018). It is also important to know how race and identity are situated in Australia, particularly the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and the value of Aboriginal knowledge and skills. This includes being aware of traditional protocols, Aboriginal Country and Aboriginal levels of governance. This requires the practitioner to engage with Aboriginal people, communities and culture in a way that is responsible and accountable. For social workers, this includes adopting and enacting a social justice and human rights approach that actively addresses the many inequalities experienced by Aboriginal peoples (AASW, 2010). EAP accommodates the importance of relationships, values relationships with all forms of

life, and promotes self-determination principles, where participants can control the direction of sessions and interaction with the human therapist much more actively than traditional therapy. These elements make EAP an important means to contribute to the vision of equitable health service provision for Aboriginal peoples.

Martin (2008) states that Aboriginal people believe they are as much a part of the world and everything within it as it is a part of them. Reciprocal and integrated relationships are developed with all animate and inanimate entities (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Within these relationships, Aboriginal people were taught roles and responsibilities towards care of each entity and what is called 'ways of being'. Being a social worker collaborating with Aboriginal peoples requires openness to learning about both your own and other cultural beliefs around ways of being (Bennett, 2015). Bennett *et al.* (2011) highlighted the importance of deep respectful listening, developing trust and earning respect, and displaying humility and genuineness when working with Aboriginal peoples. EAP encourages deep and respectful listening, in which the client can choose when they engage with the therapist throughout the session, and the involvement of horses helps foster an environment of trust, humility, respect and healing. These relationships promote ways of being.

For Aboriginal peoples, ways of doing are a way of expressing our ways of knowing and ways of being. They are expressed through languages, art, imagery, technology, traditions, ceremonies, land management practices, social organisation and social control (Martin, 2008). Within the EAGALA model of EAP, sessions may involve clients observing the horses, creating something using the objects in the space and focusing on the relationships and interactions between the horses (EAGALA, 2015). EAP is an alternative, creative, innovative and flexible way of approaching issues and has the potential to develop treatments that combines ways of knowing, doing and being into the therapy sessions.

The literature reviewed for this study suggests that EAP has potential as a culturally responsive intervention for social work with Aboriginal people. The review has covered a range of literature on the benefits and outcomes of using horses in therapy and positioned elements of EAP alongside Aboriginal history and ways of knowing, doing and being. The review is limited in a few key ways. The methodological rigour of the existing literature has not been critiqued in detail. It was also beyond the scope of this article to compare the various forms of equine therapy.

Further, due to limited direct research on the outcomes of EAP with Aboriginal Australians, more research in this area is needed to confirm the therapy's effectiveness with Indigenous Australians. This review has not addressed the access and affordability issues associated with EAP and the costs of establishing and running services. The high costs

associated with horse management are a barrier to further development and delivery of EAP.

## Conclusion

EAP's success with First Nations people internationally and in treating trauma suggests that it may be a useful therapy to support the well-being of Australian Aboriginal peoples. EAP is a flexible, engaging, culturally responsive and non-confrontational therapy. These attributes, together with its experiential nature, outdoor setting and less verbally-reliant approach may overcome the reluctance some Aboriginal people have when engaging with social workers.

Further research with Australian Aboriginal people is needed to confirm the efficacy of EAP. To develop EAP practice with Aboriginal people in Australia, a culturally responsive framework developed, planned and evaluated with Aboriginal people is recommended. Evaluating the outcomes of the therapy is important for future support and funding of EAP services.

EAP has the potential to weave innovation with Indigenous traditions to help social workers address disparate health outcomes and promote the physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being of Indigenous Australians.

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