Mental health practitioners’ strategies in equine-assisted psychotherapy: implications for social work

Ping-Tzu Lee and Carole Makela

ABSTRACT
Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), in this study, which included a mental health practitioner, an equine specialist, at least one horse, and a client in therapy sessions, is emerging in social work practice, education, and research. The purpose of this paper was to explore experienced EAP mental health practitioners’ cognitive activities and strategies to inform the social work profession.

Utilizing a constructive narrative approach, eight experienced EAP mental health practitioners participated. Two semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews were used to gain their perspectives. Qualitative software assisted thematic analysis. The findings included a main theme identified as participants’ concrete strategies used in EAP with two subthemes. The second main theme identified abstract strategies with six subthemes.

EAP provides a holistic framework as social workers incorporate horses and natural environments in practice, which is consistent with systems theory. The findings inform experienced mental health practitioners to be effective therapists and educators, as well as to instill confidence in novices. Recommendations for the application of the findings in social work practice, education, and research are explained.

Introduction
Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is a collaborative team approach between a mental health professional and an equine specialist incorporating horse(s) to work with clients for the purpose of reaching treatment goals (EAGALA, 2012). EAP has been developing for over 15 years and practiced in 50 countries (EAGALA, 2015). It is an innovative and growing mental health therapeutic approach and an emerging area in social work practice, education, and research. For instance, Carlsson, Ranta, and Traeen (2014) used the terminology of Equine Assisted Social Work in their research paper and explored how horses affect client and staff relationships in a residential treatment program in Sweden. Several studies explored the benefits of incorporating horses into psychotherapy sessions with clients, which distinguish EAP from other traditional talk-based therapeutic approaches (Abrams, 2013; Devon,
These studies found that horses teach clients assertiveness and boundaries in an immediate and interactive way; horses’ playfulness helps clients decrease distress and relax; horses’ issues and characteristics are often similar to clients’ issues and characteristics, which enhance therapeutic rapport and reciprocal healing between clients and horses. For instance, clients with traumatic histories often relate to horses with traumatic backgrounds; horses’ body shapes might inspire clients to work on their body image and eating issues.

According to McConnell’s (2010) and Notgrass (2011) survey studies, social workers were the first or second largest professional group of respondents conducting EAP and other equine-assisted therapeutic approaches. McConnell (2010) conducted an online survey of Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) and the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) members. The most frequently represented professional affiliations were counseling (n = 57), social work (n = 48) and psychology (n = 20). Notgrass (2011) conducted an online survey to gather information regarding the roles, activities, beliefs, and professional development of EAP professionals. The survey was sent to the EAGALA members’ email list. The professional distribution in Notgrass’ study was similar to McConnell’s: licensed professional counselors (n = 47), licensed clinical social workers (n = 32), and licensed psychologists (n = 13).

Acri, Hoagwood, Morrissey, and Zhang (2016) reviewed various training and certifications in EAP and in other equine-assisted therapeutic approaches, which are available for social work students and practitioners. They found that programs and instructors vary in quality and rigor. Acri et al. (2016) further discussed how to incorporate this promising therapeutic approach into social work curricula.

The first author has attended an EAGALA practitioners’ group in Colorado for the purpose of peer support and supervision since 2014. Novice EAP practitioners have often shared that they could not find helpful resources to inform and enhance their practices even if they had received training and became EAP certified. This suggests a gap between thoroughness of training in EAP and practicing EAP with clients. Several practitioners have written or edited books that focus on describing clinical experiences, as well as developing EAP curricula and activities for practitioners to use with clients (Keeler & Russell, 2010; Mandrell & Mandrell, 2008; Trotter, 2012). These books often present factual knowledge and formulas with little attention to helping novice practitioners learn how to practice EAP or develop the best practices in dynamic settings.

Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) suggested there are several key components that differentiate experts from novices. Experts recognize meaningful patterns of information and display a deep and thorough understanding of their specialty that novices lack. Further, experts retrieve important knowledge relatively effortlessly from memory, which means solving problems demands less conscious attention. Although experts have the ability to retrieve information effortlessly, it does not ensure they use this information when teaching others, which indicates that experts who teach or train others may not share their cognitive activities. Therefore, experienced practitioners’ abilities to decode their metacognition are important when they present training for others.

Many curriculum and activity designs used in EAP fail to emphasize the importance of trainers’ metacognition. Flavell (1979) defined metacognition as knowledge about one’s cognitive activities in learning processes. Utilizing knowledge in real-world situations allows for flexible applications. In other words, individuals know why, when, and where to apply
knowledge in practice. In participating in typical EAP training sessions, one of the authors experienced role-play as an experiential approach with trainers acting as therapists and trainees as clients. Trainers often did not explain their strategies to trainees. Instead, they focused on trainees’ self-reflection for self-discovery.

In this study, metacognition refers to practitioners’ examination of their cognitive activities and awareness when practicing EAP. In EAP sessions, recognizing patterns is one of the most important skills of experienced practitioners because observed patterns tend to parallel other patterns in clients’ lives (Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015). If the behavior of a horse or client occurs repeatedly, EAP practitioners generally assume there is a meaning behind the behaviors (EAGALA, 2012). For instance, if a horse keeps stepping into a client’s personal space and the client does not do anything to keep himself/herself safe, it may reflect that the client has a boundary issue in interpersonal relationships. In an EAP session, practitioners encourage a client to gain insights and make his/her own interpretations when processing the observed pattern (Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015). When mentoring or teaching others, experienced EAP practitioners need to be able to translate their effortless retrieval into understandable language. For novice EAP practitioners, learning how to recognize nuanced patterns with the guidance of experienced EAP practitioners is a gradual learning process.

The authors conducted a thorough literature review in EAP, which included the narrative synthesis of EAP literature conducted by Lee, Dakin, and McLure (2016). Several empirical studies (Abrams, 2013; Chardonnens, 2009; Dell et al., 2011; Devon, 2011; Esbjörn, 2006; Frame, 2006; Pugh, 2010; Stiltner, 2013) examined major benefits and clinical outcomes of EAP from clients’ and practitioners’ perspectives. Studies that explore EAP practitioners’ metacognition are rare.

In this study, participants shared their therapeutic strategies and decoded their thought processes in response to interview questions that explored what they do and how they adapt when working with clients. The research question was ‘What are practitioners’ strategies when they practice EAP?’ The purposes of this paper were to explore the findings from experienced practitioners’ strategies with EAP, examine their self-awareness and attention in their effortless retrieval, and decode their knowledge in a manner that novices can understand. Decoded knowledge serves to help experienced EAP practitioners effectively share their knowledge with students in social work programs and novices in EAP training settings (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model exploring EAP strategies.


**Study design**

A narrative approach with a fundamental interest in making sense of experiences and constructing meaning (Chase, 1995) served as the foundation of the study. The constructivist narrative approach gives a deep understanding of experienced therapists’ cognitive activities and strategies when they practice EAP. In-depth interviews were the primary data collection method; with each participant interviewed twice, lasting one to two hours. Two interviews were conducted to establish rapport with each participant, to enable the questions to be answered in depth, to gain further insights that could be explored in the second interview, and to avoid fatigue from one long interview. To prepare and initiate thinking, the participants received the interview guide (Table 1) prior to the first interview, which was conducted to establish rapport with each participant and to gain in-depth responses. The second interview was to explore further insights and patterns in metacognition. The Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study for the protection of human subjects (Protocol Number: 13-4273H). From here on, the term, ‘participants’ (in the study) replaces ‘experienced EAP practitioners.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Guide for interviews.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview session</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Life story interview</td>
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<td>Perspectives and experiences on EAP</td>
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**Participants**

To identify those who were willing to share their experiences in EAP, three inclusive criteria were set. The criteria were at least two years of experience practicing EAP (internship experiences were included in the two years), a graduate professional degree relevant to mental health, and certification as an EAP practitioner. The eight participants self-identified as social workers (four) and counselors (four). Participants with counseling backgrounds were included as varied mental health practitioners who practice EAP. Further, social workers often receive EAP training from experienced EAP counselors and vice versa.

Recruitment included three methods. First, EAP mental health practitioners who the first author knew were invited. Second, a recruitment email went to attendees of the 2011, 2012, 2013 annual EAGALA conferences who were certified EAP mental health practitioners living in Colorado. Third, an Internet search identified EAP practitioners. Potential participants received an email invitation, which included a consent form. When they agreed to take part in the study, they signed and returned the consent form at the first interview. All of the interviews took place at the participants’ therapy location, which were quiet and provided privacy for the discussion and its recording.

Table 2 profiles the participants’ years of practicing EAP, which ranged from 2 to 14 years and their ages ranged from 47 to 65 years. Four of the eight provided EAP training as demonstrations or workshops for mental health practitioners and students. Some participants chose to use their names in this study; other participants chose to be identified by pseudonyms.

**Table 2. Participants’ profiles—eight practitioners.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Professional background</th>
<th>Educational background</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Practice traditional psychotherapy (years)</th>
<th>Practice EAP (years)</th>
<th>Theoretical orientation(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kriss</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Counseling psychology</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; transpersonal psychotherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Client-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Social work; child and family study</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Client-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Social work; human service</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Transpersonal psychotherapy; mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Jacque</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Counseling; political science</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Transpersonal psychotherapy; mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Social work; psychology</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Structural family psychotherapy; system theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Anne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Counseling; zoology</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gestalt theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thom</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Social work; animal husbandry</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gestalt theory</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Analysis

The first step of data analysis was to transcribe the recorded interviews. Transcripts were sent to each participant to gain further insights and enhance validity. After getting feedback from participants, inductive and deductive thematic analyses served to develop codes and a codebook. The qualitative software NVivo 10 helped sort and organize the data. The first coding, deductive analysis, was driven by the interview questions and the research question. The second coding, inductive analysis, was data-driven meaning the themes identified strongly linked to the data itself. Inductive analysis is the process of analyzing the data without fitting it into a pre-existing coding frame, such as answering a specific interview question or research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the inductive analysis, the authors developed additional codes and added them to the codebook.

After generating codes, the next step involved categorizing the codes into potential sub-themes and collating the coded data within the identified subthemes. By analyzing and combining different subthemes, two main themes were discovered. Instead of primarily depending on frequency of codes, ‘keyness’ was the guide to develop sub-themes and main themes. In qualitative analysis, crucial character (keyness), instead of frequency, can identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If a participant’s response describing an experience captured an important element to answer the research question, the authors identified a theme for it. At the same time, the authors indicated how many participants shared the same element to gain a perspective of the prevalence of themes. After discovering and reviewing the themes to examine the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, the authors started to define and name the strategies described by the EAP practitioners. Figure 2 represented and summarized the research process and the accomplishments in each step.

![Figure 2. Research process.](image-url)
**Authenticities**

The concepts of ontological authenticity and educative authenticity are criteria for judging the processes and outcomes of constructivist inquiry (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Ontological authenticity means that participants are more aware of their experiences and their perspectives become more sophisticated after the study. This includes a more complete and complex understanding of themselves and others (Lincoln et al., 2011) and occurs as the participants address questions in their second interview and review their transcripts. Educative authenticity means participants become more understanding and respectful of the values of others, and they understand how others’ values frame their own perspectives. Participants may agree or disagree with others’ constructions, but they appreciate their diversity and complexity (Lincoln et al., 2011; Rodwell, 1998). The authors used both authenticities to examine the processes and outcomes of this study.

**Findings**

The research question explores participants’ strategies when they practiced EAP. Two main themes and eight sub-themes (Table 3) describe their strategies. Participants’ quotes and context are as complete as possible so readers may understand the cognitive activities.

**Concrete strategies (theme 1)**

Concrete strategies involve physical or material resources that can be touched, observed, or felt, such as settings and horses. Participants used these physical or material forms to meet clients’ needs in EAP sessions. There are two sub-themes under this theme.

**Choose an appropriate setting**

Different settings influenced client–therapist–horse interactions; seven participants described these, and five reflected that sometimes clients needed a smaller space to feel safe. For example, Julie Anne reflected on how the settings influence the dynamics between clients and horses and between the clients and herself. If the area is very large, she loses some connections with clients.

The container is too big and the person doesn’t feel held. I think it is important for them to have a sense of safety … I don’t like the space to be too big. One weakness is I feel like I lose a little bit of connection with the client … And I think the person feels like it is just too much space. (Julie Anne)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Participants’ strategies in EAP.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Main themes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Concrete strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract strategies</td>
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Jean-Jacques decoded that a client’s age and functional level (e.g. a client working on basic needs or working on the higher level of self-exploration) guide him on how to choose a setting.

With children, teenagers and people in a very unstable condition, I will try to find a more structure and contained space … Smaller container. No pasture. It is just the round pen. The larger arena will be too large, it depends, but not the pasture, not the corral with children. (Jean-Jacques)

Michael and Jean-Jacques reflected on their observations that horses are likely to focus on eating when in a pasture. Michael said, ‘When they (clients) walk into a pasture, sometimes I don’t think they always feel that presence of the horses. They may feel like it is harder to engage horses.’ Similarly, Jean-Jacques said, ‘In the pasture, horses graze. That is the main focus, and connection with humans becomes secondary.

**Incorporate specific horses to provide different levels of challenges**

In decoding therapeutic strategies, four participants described various considerations such as horses’ size and personality, which presented different levels of challenges to clients. These challenges encourage clients to start to build self-confidence or work on their issues.

Jean-Jacques described using horses’ physical size incrementally to challenge participants.

If a child is afraid of picking up the hoof of a horse, we will start from a small, not a challenging horse … It is a very small and sweet one so you can start with that. And the satisfaction of having mastered his or her fear in doing that activity, then we move on to a bigger horse. So they can measure simply. Before I cannot pick any horses’ hoof; now I can pick that pony’s hoof. Well, maybe next time I can try that big grey horse. So their self-esteem and confidence grows and it is measureable. (Jean-Jacques)

Horses’ sizes symbolize different levels of challenges. A horse's size, which can be seen and touched, makes it easy for children to begin to gain confidence when beginning with a smaller horse.

Julie Anne reflected on working with a different aspect of challenge with horses’ personalities. Julie Anne sometimes picked a horse who challenged clients because she believes some clients need specific horses’ reactions to work on their issues.

We have this one pony for a while. … He is just biting and pushing. … We want a pushy horse for some of the sessions, but we would not pick him if he is in a bad mood that day. (Julie Anne)

**Abstract strategies (theme 2)**

Abstract strategies are cognitive thoughts or ideas. Participants use themselves as tools to apply these strategies. There are six sub-themes under this strategy theme.

**Notice synchronicities**

Carl Jung proposed the concept of synchronicity in psychotherapy, which refers to a meaningful coincidence unexplained by causality-based science (Jung, 1955). In reflecting, three participants shared that synchronicities often happen in EAP, and they learn to observe and listen to the messages horses convey. A participant reflected on this experience:

This man was coming for his first session. … I thought I am gonna take my grey mare because she is sensitive and sweet sweet. … I said, ‘When he comes, you will be the perfect horse for him.’ And she put her ears back, and she walked away from me, … All that time, I was followed
by my horse. But I did not trust that horse because he can be intrusive, and that client was suffering from severe depression. I thought 'I do not think you are a good match.' That horse did not leave me. That was my agenda. I said, 'Ok. I will take you.'

My client arrived. The horse was waiting at the gate, looking at my client. My client stopped and started crying, and said, 'I feel that I am seen by this horse like I have never been seen before.' I told this man, 'Please create a space in the arena. With the poles and cones and chairs create a space for us to be together and name that space.' He said, 'This is the space of my depression, and this is where I need to be witnessed by you.' The horse comes, takes this cone with his mouth, throws it, takes this cone, and throws it. Throw the four cones. [The space became chaotic because the horse dismantled the objects that client built in the arena.] This man said, 'Well, I guess there must be something in my life that I do not see. Could I just be with that horse for a while and I continue to talk with you at the next session? I just feel being with that horse.' That session was transformative for him. He went back to his house and he started doing things that he likes. (Jean-Jacques)

When Jean-Jacques recalled his therapeutic strategies, he found that the horses communicated with him and that his interpretation of their body language was important. If he had kept to his plan without paying attention to the synchronicity, the transformation would not have happened so fast in the first session.

By noticing a synchronicity and an anthropomorphic interpretation, Thom was able to help his client gain insights.

He was a veteran. He had a difficult time. He was with a horse and he started crying. He is a big guy. He was embarrassed because he was crying. I said, 'Tell me what is going on?' He just started talking about the stuff that he had been through and how he was hurting. When he got through, the horse defecated and I just said to him, 'What did the horse do?' He said, 'He took a shit.' I said, 'What if he held that in?' He said, 'Well, he cannot do that. He would get sick.' I said, 'Do you think he is embarrassed because he did this?' 'No, he didn't care. It is healthy, right?' I said, 'Yep.' He said, 'Oh, yep, same thing I did. Yep. Maybe I need to do more that.' 'Maybe so.' (Thom)

Through noticing the synchronicity, Thom helped the client find the analogy between forcing the horse to hold his feces and constraining himself from crying. Both are related to health issues—not having a bowel movement is relevant to physical health and holding in tears is related to emotional health.

Adapt EAP to meet clients’ needs in the moment

Adapting activities to meet clients’ needs was reflected in the descriptions of seven participants. Most of the participants said each client is individual and different, and that they need to meet each client where they are. As reflected in 'Adjustments happen in the moment.' (Julie Anne) and 'Wherever they are, is where we go.' (Pia). Participants described making adjustments to their approach based on each client's issues. Thom incorporated horsemanship into EAP to work with adolescent boys. Where Thom teaches boys how to lunge a horse, it depends on the boy's self-efficacy.

They (clients) were just very lethargic, and so what I did with them is … taught them how to lunge a horse. A horse is not going to lunge unless you push them a little bit. And when they are able to see the horse actually respond and they have the control to tell the horse when to stop, turn around, and do the opposite direction it gives them some more of sense of control over their life … Whereas for other guys, that is the last thing they need. They are already running over everybody. That gives them even more power; so I won't do that with them. (Thom)
Thom's experience implies lunging a horse is beneficial to clients who are lethargic. Clients need to raise their energy level to move a horse. When clients control a horse's movement, they build a sense of efficacy. Further, Thom believes that overpowering clients require different activities to help them temper their energy and dominance.

Provide different levels of structure

Five participants examined matching different levels of structure within sessions to individual clients by age, functional level, and level of rapport. Sessions with young clients were described as needing more structure.

For the first session with a little kid, he is never been around a horse. We might do a more structured thing, like how to brush a horse, make it like 'how do you like your hair brushed?' 'How do you like to be touched?' (Julie Anne)

Julie Anne was aware that young clients were limited by cognitive development level and unable to see things from other's point of view. She structurally taught young clients how to brush a horse by connecting to personal experiences.

Clients who need more explanation and more structure are those who have lower functioning levels. Functioning levels refer to the needs that clients must fulfill before progressing to a higher level. The concept has its origins in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), and is illustrated here.

If you work with clients who are at the first level--people who are completely either dysfunctional, or working with extreme distress, or whose life is completely hectic, you want to create and bring structure and clarify your expectations so that they feel held … The second level … have reached a certain level of stability and safety in their life, a certain measure of predictability … They may be profoundly unhappy, but there is some stability in their life … We can open a little bit, have a session with less structure. In the third category, people are working on further personal development, or insights, or transitions, who generally are living a fulfilling life, but would like to deepen their understanding of certain aspects, improve some aspects in the relationship, intimacy or whatever. Then you can have very unstructured sessions. And let things unfold and see where it is that this person's awareness goes …. (Jean-Jacques)

Clients who have a higher level of rapport with mental health practitioners need less structure as described here.

The more comfortable and safer they feel with the therapist, the more willing they are to explore, to step outside of their comfort zone. … Because they have that safety, they know that I am not there to judge them. They can feel safe with me. So, they can venture to that uncertain world with horses and do things more challenging. (Jean-Jacques)

Jean-Jacques’ reflection implied that relationships between clients and EAP therapists play an essential role in EAP.

Manage risk

The potential physical risks when incorporating horses into sessions elicited concern from six participants. Methods for managing risks were unique to each participant. For instance, Pia said, 'Young children only work with the smallest horse who is 40 inches (1.02 m).’ Kriss shared an important reflection, which is how to balance managing risks and giving clients space.

When I work with three year olds, I stand between the horse and the three year old. … I will let the little girl lead the horse and she may think and sense she is completely in charge of the
Kriss tried to be aware of her risk management decisions with individual clients. By reflecting on her strategies, Kriss shared that if she is overly sensitive about safety, she might interrupt the therapeutic flow, or if she does not pay much attention to safety, she might put clients at undue risk.

Provide objective observation to restructure clients’ beliefs

Working with horses helped participants understand clients’ maladaptive beliefs and restructure those beliefs as a strategy. Four participants shared these experiences.

Julie Anne reflected, ‘I think our ability to just describe and observe what is happening without putting any meanings, interpretations, or analysis on it is important.’ Further, she said:

We are trained not even to say, ‘The horse is licking and chewing.’ We just say, ‘We notice the horse is moving his mouth in a certain way.’ We don’t want to say licking and chewing because we are labeling it in that way. We want the client to figure out what that means … Sometimes we are trained to not even say: ‘it is yawning’ because that has a certain meaning already. (Julie Anne)

Jean-Jacques tried to be an objective observer and shared what he has observed with his clients.

With depression and anxiety, I might direct my attention on cognitive styles and have people regularly conduct reality checks between what they think, they saw, and what is truly happening right there … I mean raw perception, bare awareness, and interpretation. ‘That horse doesn’t like me because he walks away from me.’ ‘Well, look again, there is another horse come in, behind. So, is that horse walking away from you or is that horse walking away from another horse?’ People start having, gaining awareness of their interpretation styles. … They will become aware that they produce a certain interpretation and, thanks to that awareness, they have the possibility of questioning the validity of that interpretation. (Jean-Jacques)

Through providing objective observation, clients learn to observe and interpret horses’ behaviors in an objective way. When clients have an opportunity to find discrepancies between their interpretations based on horses’ behaviors and participants’ descriptions, clients restructured their beliefs.

Julie Anne’s and Jean-Jacques’ reflections emphasized that EAP therapists serve as a ‘reflector.’ They described what horses were doing to help clients see discrepancies between their attributional patterns and participants’ objective reflections. They tried not to interpret what horses are doing for clients. When clients are aware of how their attributional styles influence their emotions and behaviors, clients have an option to change how they think and construct adaptive beliefs.

Ask important questions

Asking important questions helps clients gain insights or move forward during EAP sessions (five participants). Kriss shared how a client got out of being stuck in a job search after she asked important questions.
She lost her job … we were walking. We were literally walking in a circle. … I am sort of like, ‘I am just going with it.’ … pretty soon, she (client) said, ‘This is sort of stupid. Why we are walking in a circle? Is this what EAP is? Is Harmony (horse’s name) always doing this?’ I go, ‘No, she has never done this.’ … I go, ‘Is there anything in your life that makes you sort of feel like you are walking in a circle?’ She starts to cry cause that is what she’s doing [meaning, that she is going in circles in her life, and not progressing toward her goals]. Literally for some reasons she didn’t stop Harmony walking in a circle. I said, ‘What do you want to do?’ She goes, ‘Well, I can go anywhere in this pasture. I can go this way, that way, you know. I can go outside of the pasture.’ And she said: ‘I want to go over there.” … We started to walk again, and she was walking in circles. I let her explore how she could get centered and confident so they can go in straight line, and lo and behold, she changed her job search method and she got a job in three weeks. (Kriss)

Kriss’ interpretation of the client walking in a circle with the horse was that the client was acting out something happening in her life. Kriss asked, ‘Is there anything in your life that makes you sort of feel like you are walking in a circle?’ Kriss’ question helped the client bring her subconscious into a conscious level. Kriss further asked, ‘What do you want to do?’ This question helped the client break the pattern and find a new way to move forward. The client had an insight and made a connection between walking in a circle and searching for a job.

Discussion

The purposes of this paper were to explore findings from experienced practitioners’ strategies with EAP, examine their self-awareness and attention in their effortless retrieval, and decode their knowledge in a manner that novices can understand. In this section, the authors examine ontological authenticity and educative authenticity for judging the quality of the constructivist study. The authors further explore how the findings, relevant to experienced practitioners’ strategies and self-awareness, tie into social work practice, education, and research to help novices/students gain in their confidence to practice EAP.

Ontological and educative authenticities

Ontological authenticity

All of the participants confirmed the positive value of sharing their experiences and cognitive activities. For instance, Julie Anne and Thom reflected on how the interviews helped them integrate their verbal expressions and complexity of thinking in a way they had not done before.

Putting these things into words is just so hard … it is really forcing me to think about and put together my thoughts into words. And I have not done that really aloud or on paper about what it is. So it just got me to think about a lot of things. ‘What do I think about this? How does it impact me? How does it impact therapy?’ (Julie Anne)

It is being reflective because people may ask me questions, but not to this depth that we are going to. It has been good for me to be able to think about what is really going on and put some order to it and put words to it. (Thom)

Ontological authenticity was achieved as participants reflected on their cognitive activities and became more aware of their effortless retrieval. Being more aware of their own experiences and expressing sophisticated metacognition in an integrated way are key components to a successful approach for those who do EAP training. When experienced EAP
practitioners read this article, they may learn to reflect on their cognitive activities at a deeper level than before. They may learn how to share their sophisticated metacognition to become effective trainers.

**Educative authenticity**

As participants became more understanding of therapeutic strategies of others, educative authenticity was achieved. For instance, participation opened Becky’s and Thom’s curiosities; they expressed their intention of learning other participants’ therapeutic strategies. Becky expressed, ‘I would love to see what your conclusion is from all the research you have done.’ Thom said, ‘Whenever this project is completed that I may have an opportunity to read, I love to read it cause I can learn a lot from it, because we were all asked the same questions …’ The authors shared the findings with each participant striving for educative authenticity. The findings may further help novice readers become more aware of the diverse and complex strategies practiced by experienced EAP practitioners, increase novices’ confidence and decrease their anxiety levels when they practice EAP.

**Applications of EAP to social work**

EAP is an experiential therapy putting emphasis on non-verbal communication, which presents challenges for novices learning this approach and for experienced EAP practitioners decoding their cognitive activities. EAP is emerging in social work practice, education, and research. The findings, indicative of experienced practitioners’ strategies, may be applied to social work practice, education, and research to help novices/students increase their levels of confidence. Social work students may do internships in EAP and/or equine-assisted programs even if these approaches are not included in their social work curriculums. Several associations and universities in the United States have developed EAP and equine-assisted program certifications for practitioners and students in social work and other mental health programs (Acri et al., 2016).

**Social work practice in EAP**

The strategies ‘choose an appropriate setting’, ‘notice synchronicities’, and ‘manage risk’ represent the uniqueness of EAP, which distinguishes it from traditional talk therapy. In EAP, clients’ interactions with horses in natural settings potentially raise physical and emotional risks while opening up opportunities for synchronicities to happen. According to the EAGALA Code of Ethics (2017), EAP practitioners carry the responsibility to protect the safety, welfare, and best interests of clients and horses, which include incorporating horses safely in sessions and maintaining a safe facility. In training, EAP practitioners learn how to choose an appropriate setting for clients, which is a skill that therapists do not necessarily need when they conduct therapy sessions in traditional office settings. The uniqueness of EAP expands a systems perspective in social work. Traditional social work is primarily concerned with human issues; the intrinsic anthropocentrism of theoretical foundations often focus on human systems (Legge, 2016). In EAP, social workers incorporate horses and a natural environment into therapy by using a systems perspective, which provides a holistic framework to view ‘person in environment.’

Social workers are to engage in research-informed practice according to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of Council on Social Work Education (2015). ‘Social
workers use and translate research evidence to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery’ (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 8). The findings of this study have the potential to inform social work practice using EAP.

**Social work education in EAP**

The strategies ‘provide different levels of structure’ and ‘provide objective observation to restructure clients’ beliefs’ fit with different theories in social work education. The participant, Julie Anne, provided different levels of structure by clients’ ages. This approach is based on Piaget’s cognitive development theory, which guides EAP practitioners to design age-appropriated activities for children who are in the different stages of development (e.g. egocentrism). Participant, Jean-Jacques, gives different levels of structure by clients’ functional level, which is the concept originating from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which help prioritize clients’ issues or problems. Four of the participants in the study provided objective observations to restructure clients’ beliefs as well as help them to be aware of their maladaptive beliefs and attributional styles; it is the concept stemming from cognitive therapy theory.

In conclusion, theories taught in social work education can be creatively applied to EAP. Creative applications help novices/students learn to use their fundamental knowledge to develop relevant strategies in EAP practice.

‘Social workers continuing education and staff development should address current knowledge and emerging developments related to social work practice and ethics’ (NASW, 2016, p. 17), and ‘Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice …’ (NASW, 2016, p. 18). As one of the professional groups identified as most frequently practicing EAP (McConnell, 2010; Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015), social workers have ethical responsibilities to continue enhancing their competencies and exploring emerging developments. Trainers and educators have the ethical responsibility to provide quality EAP training for novices. The two main themes and eight subthemes discovered in the analysis were decoded to inform experienced practitioners to be effective and creative educators and to inform novices.

**Social work research in EAP**

Social workers engage in practice-informed research. ‘Social workers understand that evidence that informs practice derives from multi-disciplinary sources and multiple ways of knowing’ (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 8). EAP, conducted with a multi-disciplinary team, includes a mental health practitioner and an equine specialist. Equine specialists co-facilitate EAP sessions and have in-depth knowledge about horses’ behaviors and psychology (EAGALA, 2012). ‘Manage risk’, ‘choose an appropriate setting’, and ‘incorporate specific horse to provide different levels of challenges for clients’ are three strategies that equine specialists would share in EAP. Though equine specialists’ metacognition was not in the scope of this study, future research may explore their cognitive activities to understand and enhance collaborative relationships. By knowing equine specialists’ metacognition, ‘social workers–equine specialist matching’ will further develop and enhance EAP (Abrams, 2013; Gilbert, 2013; Lee et al., 2016). Further, findings in the current study, based on participants’ recollections of cognitive activities through interviews, may exclude some important
information, which could be attained by direct observation of highly dynamic EAP sessions. Future studies may video record EAP sessions for in-depth analysis of enhanced observation and decoding of nuanced therapeutic strategies to inform researchers and practitioners.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to the understanding of EAP strategies by examining experienced practitioners’ and their varied cognitive activities. Social workers have the ethical responsibility to keep current with innovative knowledge relevant to their practice. In addition, the findings contribute valuable knowledge to enhance clinical social workers’ professional development. Lacking empirical research about EAP practitioners’ therapeutic strategies, the study informs social work educators to recognize this newer intervention. Therefore, being open to referring their students to EAP field placement agencies potentially expands career options and professional development in the field of social work.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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