

EQUINE ASSISTED CONSTRUCTIVIST PSYCHOTHERAPY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Horses had been a primary resource for men since their domestication: at the beginning they helped in any kind of job and made possible travels and transport. Nowadays they are used in sports, free time activities and therapy and they still prove they can be great companions for human beings' enterprises. In the therapeutic field they are traditionally used in hippotherapy, in therapeutic riding and in riding for the disabled persons. More recently Eagala (Mandrell, 2006) developed a psychotherapeutic practice that uses horses as facilitators. Following a childhood dream I'm now trying to develop my own constructivist psychotherapeutic model involving horses as co-construers of the therapeutic experience. I'm trying to subsume the therapeutic approach developed by Eagala by means of PCT theoretical tools (Kelly, 1955). In this talk I will discuss my efforts in this direction especially through a case report.

Key-words: Constructivist psychotherapy, equine assisted psychotherapy, equine assisted constructivist psychotherapy

HORSES AND PSYCHOLOGY

Horses have long been a part of our society and have been 'man's help-mate' for generations. From a therapeutic point of view we know that the early Greeks used horses to encourage the terminally ill to live, and that the seeds of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) were sown more than two centuries ago, when German physicians suggested horseback riding to reduce attacks of hypochondria and hysteria (Riede, 1988). Nowadays horses are increasingly utilised as part of Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (AAT) (Fallasconi and Bochicchio, 2011; Favalli and Milton, 2010) both in disabled riding and as a part of psychological programmes addressing a variety of mental health, human development and behavioural issues (Hart, 1992; Schultz et al., 2007).

In 1982 the Fourth International Therapeutic Riding Congress defined three different forms of therapy where horses are used as co-therapists:

1. When speaking of hippotherapy the principal role is assigned to the horse, which is correlated to the movement of the rider, and all the movements of the horse reflect on the

posture of the rider.

2. In therapeutic riding the rider is active, he can collaborate using the reins, and conduct the horse by himself.
3. Riding can also be a sport for the handicapped: in this case the rider is able to ride and perform on his own, the tasks are cognitive-relational and the sessions can be in group.

Recently equine assisted therapies have been successfully directed to different groups, such as violent offenders, particularly youth offenders, psychiatric patients, children diagnosed with ADHD, adolescents with problems of drug and alcohol abuse (Rector, 1992; Thomas, 2002; Myers 2004; Levinson, 2004). In these cases the therapies take the form of group psychotherapy or family psychotherapy where activities with horses are performed together with verbal activities.

EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) is a non-profit organization founded in 1999 and devoted to the development of high standards and professionalism in the field of EAP (www.eagala.org). According to the EAGALA model, EAP (Equine Assisted

Psychotherapy) is a practice of psychotherapy that “incorporates horse experientially for emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a mental health professional and a horse professional working with the clients and horses to address treatment goals”. “This means that participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, and then processing (or discussing) thoughts, beliefs, behaviours and patterns” (EAGALA, 2012, p.13). Sessions are of an hour's duration on a regular basis and are conducted in an arena or a small field with several horses and a licensed mental health professional and an equine specialist. Activities are all groundwork activities between the client and the horses (i. e. getting acquainted with horses, leading horses with a rope through a path or simply from one place to another, trying to make the horse move without any rope or tool), and at the end or during the session the client is invited to reflect on what she experienced during the session. During the session the equine specialist makes comments on the horses' behaviour, to assist the client in becoming more aware, and the mental health professional assists the client to relate her experience to other aspects of her life .(Toms and Toms, n.d.).

The EAGALA model is based on the principles of experiential education practice (www.aee.org), some of them are:

- *Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis.*
- *Experiences are structured such as to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.*
- *Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.*
- *The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.*
- *Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large.*
- *The educator and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and*

uncertainty, because the outcomes of experience cannot totally be predicted.

- *The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.*
- *The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.*
- *Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgements and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner.*
- *The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.*

From a psychological point of view EAGALA aims at integrating contributions from cognitive-behavioural therapy, reality therapy, gestalt theory, brief therapy and systems theory. Moreover in EAP the use of metaphors is very important. Therapists are invited to favour the emergence of useful metaphors during processing, and to think of activities as metaphors of the patients' problems, difficulties, life situations and so on.

WHY HORSES?

Horses are prey animals and so they have a keen sense of anything predatory in their environment. This includes an acute perception of human emotional states and human intent. “The horse's ability to intuit fear in a distant herd member and act on this feeling without hesitation is a life saving skill; their innate aptitude for resonating with another being's trust, joy or confidence is a life enhancing skill” (Kohanov, 2001, p.105). In interactions with people, they offer immediate, non-verbal feedback. They don't lie: they don't separate how they feel from how they act and are very sensitive to the possible contradictions in human non-verbal signals because they mean danger. Being part of a herd is necessary for their survival and their behaviour demonstrates their need for trust and cooperation. They have defined roles within the herd. They have distinct personalities, attitudes and moods. They like to have fun but sometimes they seem stubborn and defiant. As humans do, they tend to be afraid of what they don't know, but are also very curious.

They are able to create relationships because they can recognize their owners and grooms, and develop friendships with other horses.

Horses are not judgemental, they don't have expectations or prejudices. They don't care what you look like, are not influenced by your station in life, and high qualifications do not impact upon their response to your presence (Vidrine et al, 2002; Frewin and Gardiner, 2005).

Their size demands respect, and can be intimidating for some people. Safety around these large animals requires some level of attentiveness, and clients become immediately more watchful around horses, more aware of their body, movements, and position in space.

People seem to identify with horses and horses quickly become representations of "self" or other people in their life.

In EAP horses are free to be themselves. They are not tethered and they choose how they will interact or move away.

LOOKING AT EAP FROM A PCP PERSPECTIVE

Seen from a PCP perspective the arena is a safe experimental laboratory in which the therapist, the patient and the horse can validate or invalidate the patient's old or new constructions. They can make revisions and develop new anticipations, thus finding new viable ways to relate and look at events or people. In the arena ...

"... behaviour presents itself as man's principal instrument of inquiry. Without it his questions are academic and he gets nowhere. When it is prescribed for him he runs around in dogmatic circles. But when he uses it boldly to ask questions, a flood of unexpected answers rises to tax his utmost capacity to understand" (Kelly, 1970, p. 260).

There is nothing too different from the traditional setting but the presence of the horse acts as a powerful facilitator and catalyst of experiences.

In relating to the horse the person tries to anticipate and construe the animal's behaviour and so her behaviour is the mirror of her anticipations. The horse does the same. We may hypothesize that the animal can begin with a very

loose question: can I do something interesting with this human? And so he can try to very quickly understand in his own terms that person: (using our labels) is she calm or nervous? Happy or sad? Fearful or adventurous? Dominant or ready to submit? Hostile or gentle? A danger or a friend? As we saw before, he uses the person's non verbal language to make these discriminations and behaves accordingly.

So we could see the horse's behaviours as mirrors or amplifiers of the emotional state of the patient.

On the other side, in order to understand what the horse does and in absence of horse-related constructs, the person may use with him the constructs she uses to interpret other people's behaviour.

So, the horse construes the situation from a horse point of view, the patient construes the situation from her own human point of view and the therapist can look at the scene from what she construes as the horse's perspective, the patient's perspective and from her professional perspective. Her professional interventions and invitations, questions or comments can shift from one perspective to the other, aiming at therapeutic efficacy. She can choose to underline a horse's behaviour and ask for the patient's constructions, she may ask for other possible constructions and invite the patient to act accordingly, she may favour the emergence of emotions the patient seems not aware of, thanks to horses signals and movements, and so on. What is unique in the EAP setting is that if the patient changes her construction, and this implies that at the same time she changes her mood, behaviour, and attitude, the horse quickly responds with a change in his own behaviour. The patient lives in that precise moment the experience that "if I behave differently the other will behave differently". This is important for many reasons: firstly the patient can see that changing is possible, secondly she can feel that she can change, and thirdly, perhaps more importantly, she can revise the idea that her behaviour is always and simply a reaction, a necessary consequence of the other's behaviour. In fact patients often tend not to see how their own behaviour can influence that of the other. In Watzlawick et al.'s words (1967), they punctuate interactions so as to depict their own actions only as 'consequences' and never also as 'causes'. Horses are very good

teachers in invalidating this assumption and in the arena patients can face safely this crucial invalidation (see also Toms, n.d.).

So the core of EAP is the relation between patient and horse, and while the two are experimenting together the therapist can play the role of the famous supervisor depicted in the Kellian metaphor: the expert in the how. In doing so she has to ‘trust the process’, trust the horse and trust the patient. She has to be creative in designing activities and useful experiments and she needs to be able “to stand back without intervening and allow the process to take power” (Mandrell, 2006). As Kelly wrote discussing about school:

Experience [...] must be the outcome of the child's own experimental efforts carried through to some point of conclusion [...] the teacher's role is to help, as best she can, to design and implement each child's own undertakings, as well as to assist in interpreting the outcomes and in devising more cogent behavioural inquiries. But usually she has to begin, as any apprentice begins, by implementing what others have designed; in this case, what her children have initiated (Kelly, 1970, p. 262).

Let's change some words...

*Experience [...] must be the outcome of the **patient's** own experimental efforts carried through to some point of conclusion [...] the **therapist's** role is to help, as best she can, to design and implement each **patient's** own undertakings, as well as to assist in interpreting the outcomes and in devising more cogent behavioural inquiries. But usually she has to begin, as any apprentice begins, by implementing what others have designed; in this case, what her **patients** have initiated.*

This is a perfect description of the therapist role, in the arena.

EQUINE ASSISTED CONSTRUCTIVIST PSYCHOTHERAPY IN ACTION: THE CASE OF CLEO

I attended the first part of EAGALA training in 2013. I appreciated EAGALA's effort to guaran-

tee an ethical approach to training, therapy and professionalism. I also valued the ‘phenomenological and humanistic approach’ to the relationship between horse and human being, and the deep respect for patients, their protagonism, and their constructions of the situation and of themselves. I liked very much the creative use of narrative tools, as metaphors, that, in my opinion, is another strength of the model.

My own therapeutic model is different from the EAGALA one in many aspects. The first is that I couldn't find an equine specialist eager to be my partner in this enterprise. The second is that, being alone in the arena with patients, for safety reasons I choose to work with only one horse. The third, more importantly, is that my approach is Kellian and so I subsume everything that happens under PCP professional constructions.

Cleo

Cleo's story

I met Cleo, a pretty woman of 41, in April 2014. She was desperate. Her husband had abandoned her in February, after the last of a long series of hard fights. They had met for the first time in 2010, had decided to live together in 2011 and had got married in 2012. Her husband, Henry was a 30 year old young man who was working as a receptionist in a hotel that is 30 km distant from their house. Cleo works as an accountant in a large auto parts resale business. She was dark haired and wore big glasses. She was always very well made up, neat and well dressed. She always coordinated the colours of her clothes, and often had a 50s look.

Telling their story, Cleo underlined that it was Henry who was the more passionate one at the beginning of the relationship. She wasn't in love with him but “he behaved as the charming prince” and little by little she had fallen in love with him. Soon after the wedding she had started to make what for her were “normal wife demands”, especially that he diminished his meetings with friends. From her side she was neglecting her friends and slowly concentrating all her energies and free time on Henry. Furthermore she couldn't understand his need to chat so often with friends and so she had started to check his

mobile. He had reacted to this behaviour with anger, and tried to escape her control, refusing to give her his mobile and going out with friends even more. This escalation had led to progressively more frequent and harder fights. During the last of these fights Henry had decided to go away, and had gone back to his parents' house. Cleo was shocked, she had not anticipated this decision and, more, she had not anticipated that it would be so conclusive: "The other men who had abandoned me in the past eventually came back, saying they were regretful. I thought Henry would have done the same." Henry instead had found a lawyer and had sought divorce. All her world had fallen apart and she had thought about suicide. Her family had persuaded her to go to the psychiatrist and she had started an antidepressant therapy. Currently she was feeling a little better but she couldn't accept what had happened, she felt deprived of her future, was angry with Henry and, at the same time, was missing him a lot. She was sure that he was wrong and that, despite of all that had happened, Henry was still in love with her.

My professional constructions

From my point of view Cleo was living some intense transitions: threat because she was losing the dependency relationship with Henry, anxiety because she was living a moment she had never anticipated before, and that she couldn't know how to cope with, guilt because she had suddenly discovered herself to be the weakest side of the couple, while she had thought she was the strongest. She was guilty and ashamed also, because she used to be the one in control and this wasn't true anymore. Constriction and hostility were her solutions: Henry was still in love with her but was negatively influenced by his friends and parents. She was right and he was wrong. Her demands were appropriate and his behaviour was suspect, her jealousy was well-founded and his need for privacy was only a way to hide his betrayals. She had no construction of Henry's point of view and she couldn't feel any empathy for his feelings. He was simply the one she couldn't live without and the one who destroyed all the projects she had made for her future life.

Even if she said with words that she knew she was a nice person, her behaviours told another

story: she was construing herself as a "transparent" person, someone the others would not spontaneously search for, so she felt she had to conquer the other's attention and love by means of beauty, perfection in dressing and doing things, sensuality and sex, and she had to carefully satisfy (enough but not too much) some of the other's important needs so as to create dependency on her.

The psychotherapeutic process

Here I'm not going to enter into the details of therapy, I'll give you just some hints about its main directions and steps. Being very careful in trying not to feed her hostility, I tried to favour:

- the construction of the construction *processes* of the people around her because I felt this could be a good way to cope with anxiety,
- the dispersion of her *dependencies*,
- self reflexivity and *awareness* about her ways of establishing and maintaining relationships,
- a new construction of *herself* as a person who can be interesting for the other, and who can be interested to the other as a person.

She did a lot in these directions and, elaborating her story with Henry she slowly began to be more aware of her processes and of her relational modalities. She was desperate for the loss of the relationship but felt more responsible and less "right" in what she did.

In the 12th session she told me that Henry had tried to contact her through Facebook messages. They decided to meet, and from this moment on, their messages, meetings, and phone calls became the main topics in our sessions. I could see her struggling with her old and strong constructions, wavering from aggression to hostility, from trust to control, alternatively feeling anger and confusion. So I decided to propose to her the arena as a relational laboratory in which we could try to face all of this. She readily accepted. We had two sessions with Otello and then I asked her to write something about her feelings and thoughts. This is what she wrote.

Telling what happened in the two session with the horse would be really difficult for me, a simple tale would not be able to express the emotions I lived and the awareness I achieved.

I will try.

First session

During the first session initially I got acquainted with Otello, it was easy to conduct him, it was very difficult to walk with his step. Trying to follow his rhythm I often stopped and he stopped too... and I experienced these stops as if he wouldn't follow me... actually I understood that he perceived that I was not clear and so he stopped, and this was not a refusal but a question for me or a desire to understand.

The following exercise was more difficult. I had to construe a path in the arena, a path representing the way I imagined my future for the following six months. I positioned some pins so as to create a wavy line that represented my ups and downs, and then a straight line that represented the road of serenity. When I walked through it with Otello for the first time I felt I was really anxious... I was so afraid of not being able to do it well that I felt awkward, clumsy. The second time was much better and I realized that the less strength I put the easier and more spontaneous everything was.

The next step was to pass again through the path with Otello but without headcollar... I believed it was impossible... I started completely discouraged... but all the same I tried. With my great amazement he followed me and I found a way to communicate with him: I ducked my head so that my eyes were at the same level of his ... in this way he joined me ...

I can't describe the emotions I felt during this session... it was moving.

Another thing that impressed me was that I explained the fact that he followed me saying that Otello was a very good horse... diminishing my role in the relationship... Francesca pointed out that the strength of a horse is much more than mine and that if Otello had decided not to follow me he wouldn't have followed me.

Second session

The second session was different. This time I had

to divide the arena into two parts. In the first part I had to position the aspects of my relationship I wanted to take in the future and in the second the bad things I wanted to leave in the past. In the first part I positioned two big structures: one was our wedding, our life together and our happiness together, the other represented Henry's negative part (his inconstancy, his superficiality and all the evil he'd done to me). In the second part of the arena I put 4 bars: our arguments, his and my jealousy, the evenings spent at home alone questioning where he had been and with whom, and the evenings out with his friends when I didn't enjoy myself at all. Otello followed me around the structure that represented the happy part of our relationship but he didn't want to follow me around the structure representing Henry's limitations. In the second part of the arena we had no problems in turning around the negative things.

Francesca asked me to think how those negative things could transform into positive things:

- *our arguments became moments of constructive conversation*
- *jealousy became trust*
- *the evenings spent alone at home became the evenings in which I could see my own friends and dedicate to my hobbies*
- *the boring meetings with Henry's friends became moments in which I could meet new people*

With these four bars we built a diamond on the floor and I went into it... Otello followed me and stood there beside me... after a while he went out but then he came back. It wasn't me that convinced him to enter... having him beside me without any effort was touching...

Conclusions

- *I really don't know how Otello can understand me so well and relate with me in this way but it is really amazing.*
- *In both sessions I understood that relationships depend on both the persons involved and not only on one of them.*
- *I understood that some attitudes of mine can be not so clear and that I sometimes interpret in a distort (often negative) way the signals the other sends to me.*

- *I saw that often if I put too much strength into things they are less spontaneous and more laborious.*
- *Trying always to force things to go well at all costs is tiring, little enjoyable and above all unproductive.*
- *That relationships are complex and that in order to relate with someone you have to stay at the same level not above or below. You have to search for different ways to connect because sometimes the one which is better for you is not the only one nor the most effective.*
- *I understood that people look for us because they want to and not because they feel sorry for us or because they feel they have to and if they keep close to us it is because they feel welcomed by us.*

After those two sessions we continued our path in the normal setting. She continued shifting from old constructions to new constructions for a while, but with a very high level of awareness which allowed her to understand what she was doing, to see her contribution in the relationship and sometimes to choose to do something different. She began to systematically try to construe Henry's construing processes, especially the ways in which probably he had construed and was construing her behaviours, words, and attitudes. As a consequence of her lessening demands and growing interest in understanding, Henry began to express openly all his anger towards her controlling behaviours. This led to frequent fights followed by reconciliation. Cleo began to feel that she could trust Henry more, that if she let him free to choose what to do without trying to force him into the space she had prepared for him, he would choose to be with her, as Otello did in the second session, and as she often remembered. In January 2015 they decided to try to live together again, and in February they definitely gave up the idea of divorce.

CONCLUSIONS

In the arena Cleo had the opportunity to experience with her constructions, to be invalidated and to revise her anticipations. Then she could try the new constructions and see the way they changed what was happening with the horse.

Everything was there, in front of her eyes. All her constructions were emerging as tools she was using to interpret the animal's behaviour. In this way she deeply felt that what she saw depended on her, and only in small part on the other. In front of her was a non-judgemental creature, apparently eager to cooperate, not a difficult, superficial, cruel husband. She felt understood by Otello and appreciated the warmth and benevolence of his presence. I think that this had a great importance in the difficult process of going through threat, anxiety and guilt. The experience lived with this big animal changed her, and long after the arena sessions she used to remember moments, episodes, and emotions, and to use them as tools to understand her current relational experience.

I think that horses in the therapeutic setting can be powerful facilitators of experience and experiments. The whole arena context can be seen as a metaphor and a potential source of new metaphors for the people involved. As Miller Mair stated: Through metaphors "new meanings could be explored without overwhelming guilt or threat" (1976, p. 262).

Of course you need to be prepared, as a therapist and as an equine specialist at the same time. You have to allow patients and horses to experience together, completing the experience cycle, in a safe environment. You have to trust them, patients and horses, and foster their creativity, believing deeply in the fact that they will choose, always, the better for themselves.

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EAGALA: www.eagala.org

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