

1. Introduction

In a world where the human race is working on paying more and more attention to the emotional state and well-being of individuals, therapy is becoming more normalized as well. Therapy can come in various forms and one of these different variations is Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). It is in this unique and interesting environment that the focus of this research will be. More specifically, this essay will look closely at a branch of animal therapy that works solely with horses. In this exploration of how care unfolds between horses and young individuals in an animal therapy environment, I will delve into the intricate dynamics that underpin this transformative journey. I will focus my research on a specific animal therapy business, and how they operate. I will join and observe the therapy sessions at Horse & Happiness, an equine therapy facility located in a riding school in Maastricht.

5.1.1 The Horses

At H&H, horses are not merely tools for therapy but active, sentient participants in a collaborative web of care. Their roles extend beyond passive involvement to being key actors that shape and respond to the therapeutic environment. Horses are perceived as co-therapists whose behaviors, interactions, and moods directly influence outcomes. This view aligns with theories that argue for the recognition of animals as dynamic participants in social interactions, capable of influencing and being influenced by their human counterparts (Haraway, 2008; Despret, 2013).

Three ponies are actively working with H&H; the two Shetland ponies Happy and Loulou, and the Welsh Cob Pino. The horses at H&H serve one way as mirrors of human emotion, reflection, and responding to the feelings of the children they interact with. This process provides feedback that helps the clients understand and manage their emotions. Pino is a somewhat bigger pony, and he can be described as a little jumpy. The horse quickly responds to whatever is happening in the environment around him, which includes the clients when they are in a session with him. In contrast, Happy is known for his calm and patient demeanor. As the original and first horse of the facility, Happy has been around children for a long time, and nothing surprises him anymore. Whenever I would see Happy participate in a therapy session,

he would usually either be half asleep or eating. His ability to remain still and relaxed even in the presence of an excited child, allows children to explore their emotions in a safe and non-judgmental space. Loulou, the third and final horse, is fairly new at H&H. She is very small and therefore is great at helping coach smaller children. The little horse still needs to learn a lot at the horse farm, as whenever I saw her, she was usually a little naughty. She has already made an image of herself at the riding school, that even though she is very little, she can stand up for herself and knows her boundaries.

Besides the horses actively participating at H&H, there are other horses around the place that should be considered when discussing the web of care. At the riding school, there are plenty of other horses, in the stables, in the paddocks, in the pasture, in the riding arenas. These horses, while not actively participating in the sessions, create a calming background that influences the overall mood and tone of the farm. The horses can help soothe and ground children, particularly those who benefit from routine and consistency in their therapeutic settings. Not only this but also watching how different horses communicate with each other through body language and behavior helps children draw parallels to their own social experiences, fostering empathy and social awareness.

7. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the following research question: “How do care relations unfold between horses and humans in the web of care for a Dutch equine therapy environment for a group of participants under the age of eighteen?” Through an in-depth multispecies ethnographic study at Horse & Happiness in Maastricht, it has become evident that care relations between horses and youth participants are dynamically constructed through interactions that are emotional, sensory, and responsive. They unfold through a complex play between the horses, professionals, and the environment. These interactions are characterized by mutual exchanges, such as Touching, Gazing, and Mirroring. Gazing was a theme used to describe the importance and relevance of eye contact between humans and non-humans. As a big part of almost every session, Touching can be seen as one of the most used ways of non-verbal communication between the different living actors in the web of care. Mirroring is seen as central to the therapeutic process, allowing the children to project and reflect their emotions

in a safe space. The human professionals also play a crucial role in enhancing these interactions. They adapt their therapeutic approaches based on their understanding of the horses' and children's cues. The physical settings at H&H, including the Vroendael and Eijsden locations, provide structured spaces that give the clients a sense of peace and belonging. The empirical findings underscore the importance of recognizing horses as sentient beings with active roles in therapeutic settings. This perspective challenges the traditional views of animals as passive therapy tools and highlights the need for a relational and multispecies approach in therapy. By using an ethnographic method, and therefore being able to present field notes and interview extracts, it gives the reader a more detailed look into this environment, allowing a more personal touch on the research.

Despite its insights, the research has its limitations. It was conducted in a single equine therapy facility, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The ethnographic approach, while providing rich qualitative data, also introduced subjectivity, as the researcher's presence might have influenced participant behavior. While I have already used a lot of literal empirical findings (direct interview/field note quotes), I have found an abundance of findings still left unused, due to the word count. It would have been more practical for an increased word count, due to these large findings. Moreover, while this thesis focused on relational dynamics, and others have focused on the effectiveness of animal therapy, it could be insightful to combine the two. Future research should also consider a broader analysis across multiple facilities and incorporate mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of equine therapy.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to a deeper understanding of care relations in equine therapy by emphasizing the active roles of horses and the importance of a multispecies perspective. At Horse & Happiness, the intertwined relationships between horses and humans illustrate how genuine therapeutic progress is rooted in their shared, dynamic connections.

Horse & Happiness