

“IT’S LIKE BLUETOOTH. I FELT LIKE I WAS IN RHYTHM WITH HIM:” AN
INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA) OF THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF COMMERCIALY SEXUALLY EXPLOITED YOUTH (CSEY) IN A
RESIDENTIAL EQUINE ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY (EAP) PROGRAM

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

Human sex trafficking is a grave human rights violation that impacts the dignity of millions both globally and in the United States. The International Labor Organization estimates 4.5 million children are trafficked around the global at any given time (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Within the United States, approximately two in five human trafficking offenses reported to federally funded human trafficking task forces from 2008 to 2010 involved the sex trafficking of minors (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011). Childhood traumas, including childhood sexual abuse and rape, emotional abuse, running away from home, and family members' involvement in sex work or friends who bought sex, significantly associated individuals with sex trafficking victimization (Fedina et al., 2019). Although research related to sex trafficking has grown significantly over the past several decades (Haney et al., 2020), there is a dearth of literature regarding effective therapeutic interventions for the healing of survivors. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be utilized to capture the unique and shared experiences of Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth (CSEY) in an Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) program at a therapeutic working ranch (TWR) in the mid-western United States. A discussion of the relationship with existing literature regarding CSEY, sex trafficking survivors, and EAP as well as implications for residential programs will be addressed.

Keywords: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, Rhythmic Riding, Equine, Counseling, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Qualitative

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DEDICATION

To all survivors of trafficking and trauma.

To my future children.

A Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Statement of Purpose

Human sex trafficking is a grave human rights violation that impacts the dignity of millions both globally and in the United States. Sex trafficking is defined as commercial sex acts induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform the sex act has not attained 18 years of age (Trafficking and Victims Protection Act [TVPA], 2000). Although exact prevalence is difficult to determine due to the illegal and clandestine nature of trafficking, the International Labor Organization estimates roughly 4.5 million children are trafficked for sex globally at any given time (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Within the United States, cases involving the sex trafficking of minors accounted for approximately two in five human trafficking offenses reported to federally funded human trafficking task forces from 2008 to 2010 (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011). These statistics are noteworthy, particularly given that many children report being trafficked for sex for the first time at the young age of 12–14 years or younger (Annitto, 2011; Reid, 2016).

Individuals who are trafficked may suffer significant physical, sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual traumas (Rafferty, 2018). Sex trafficking risk factors have been particularly highlighted in existing literature, due in part to survivor testimony and service provider clinical reports (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014). Incorporating multidisciplinary perspectives, Fedina et al. (2019) found that child traumas including childhood sexual abuse and rape, emotional abuse, running away from home, and family members' involvement in sex work or friends who bought sex, significantly increased a minor's risk of sex trafficking victimization. Kenny et al. (2021) identified kidnapping and assault as well as sexual and physical abuse as key traumas experienced by sex trafficking survivors prior to

victimization. Although these research contributions are valuable, there is a dearth of literature regarding effective therapeutic interventions for the healing of Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth (CSEY).

Preliminary reports have cited culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices as key considerations when working with CSEY survivors (Rafferty, 2018; Ravi et al., 2017). However, little research has directly explored the therapeutic mechanisms of change in counseling CSEY survivors and no research has evaluated the use of animal assisted therapies, such as Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), with survivors. EAP programs have shown promise with individuals experiencing anxiety and depression (Acri et al., 2021; Alfonso et al., 2015; Earles et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2017), as well as veterans experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Johnson et al., 2018; Romaniuk et al., 2018; Shelef et al., 2019) and attachment concerns (Burgon et al., 2018; Kern-Godal et al., 2016). Similar to individuals in prior EAP studies, survivors of CSEY experience high rates of comorbid disorders, including complex PTSD, severe depression, personality disorders, anxiety (Ravi et al., 2017) and attachment difficulties due to their exploitation (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; O'Brien, 2018). Despite these mental health needs for CSEY, there is no known study that has investigated the use of an EAP program for the therapeutic healing of youth who have been trafficked for sex.

1.2. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Although survivor services have expanded in recent years, there remains a significant lack of research regarding the effectiveness of healing interventions for CSEY survivors (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2018; Lanctot et al., 2018). Many advertised services for survivors are lacking the research support that could provide rigorous review to inform survivor program (Lanctot et al., 2020) as well as EAP program development (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). At present,

measures for sex trafficking identification, aftercare, and support services tend to be scattered with no comprehensive, ecological measure evaluating survivor needs, including spiritual, emotional, and physical needs (Graham et al., 2020). In keeping with the proposed research methodology of this study, these research questions seek to explore the emotional, intellectual, and bodily experiences of participants to support trauma-informed practice and present rich, in-depth descriptions (Miller et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of CSEY both uniquely and as a group in an EAP Rhythmic Riding program at a TWR. Specifically, this study will explore CSEY experiences in the EAP program, including how these experiences influence their treatment process.

Additional research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the impacts of an EAP Rhythmic Riding program for CSEY?, and,
2. What are the implications for EAP programs for CSEY in residential treatment?

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study offers several benefits to CSEY. CSEY frequently experience high rates of complex PTSD (Lanctot et al., 2020; Ottisova et al., 2018; Palines et al., 2020), depression (Levine, 2017; Sprang & Cole, 2018), anxiety (Nodzinski et al., 2020; Ravi et al., 2017), and problematic attachment issues (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hargreaves-Cormany et al., 2016; O'Brien, 2018). Given that human relationships for survivors of sex trafficking have often been fraught with betrayal and trauma (O'Brien, 2018), the EAP program offers individuals the chance to experience safety within an equine-assisted context. Individuals in EAP programs frequently cite healing benefits including rebuilt trust, sense of empowerment, and reduction in problematic mental health symptoms (Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2018).

This study provides CSEY survivors an opportunity to begin addressing their needs for healing and wellness through reflection and experiential components within a trauma-informed model.

At present, the therapeutic literature has just begun to address treatment modalities that may be helpful for CSEY. Trauma-Focused therapies, including Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT) are frequently referenced as one possible avenue (Kinnish et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020). Creative arts therapies, including expressive and cultural dance (Bryant-Davis & Gobin, 2019), collage (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020), and mindfulness and spirituality (Rafferty, 2018) are also cited. Still, to date no research has explored the mechanisms of healing that equine programs may bring to CSEY survivors despite the growing use of EAP programs with populations displaying similar mental health concerns, such as PTSD (Johnson et al., 2018; Romaniuk et al., 2018; Shelef et al., 2019), and anxiety and depression (Acri et al., 2021; Alfonso et al., 2015; Earles et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2017). Inquiry into the application of EAP programs would assist counselors in learning how to apply and facilitate effective and trauma-informed interventions for CSEY survivors in an EAP program.

Beyond contributions to survivors and counselors who work with them, this study offers several benefits to society at large. CSEY survivors frequently endure repeated, severe traumas, in addition to medical, legal, economic, and mental health concerns (Mumey et al., 2020; Rajaram & Tidball, 2018; Rafferty, 2018; Ravi et al., 2017). Although it is difficult to approximate the financial and societal impacts of these traumas in terms of lost revenue, creativity, and human potential, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) has given some perspective regarding the rippling long-term impacts of traumas endured in childhood (Felitti et al., 1998). The ACES study highlighted how childhood traumas may be related to significant health risk factors later in life (Felitti et al., 1998). Given that CSEY survivors

experience significant challenges to their overall wellness with impacts in their ecosystemic spheres of influence, effective treatment is needed to address underlying issues and bring healing to survivors.

1.4. Need for the Study

The purpose of the study is multilayered: (a) to explore the experience of CSEY both uniquely and as a group in an EAP Rhythmic Riding program at a TWR, (b) to identify the impacts of an EAP Rhythmic Riding program for CSEY, and, (c) to develop implications for EAP programs to CSEY during residential treatment. This research is needed given that no study to date has explored the lived experiences of CSEY survivors in an EAP program, including potential therapeutic benefits. This study would provide qualitative information regarding the experiences of CSEY survivors in an EAP program. These qualitative perspectives could inform future study as well as quantitative approaches to provide rigorous support for survivor programming.

In addition, this study would add to overall understanding of the therapeutic mechanisms at play within EAP programs for survivors. Despite research involving individuals with a variety of presenting concerns, including Autism (Anderson & Meints, 2016; Borgi et al., 2016; Trzmiel et al., 2019); Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Arnold et al., 1985); Substance use (Dell et al., 2011); and various other mental health diagnoses (Chardonens, 2009; Schultz et al., 2006), inquiry is needed to explore the experiences of CSEY survivors in an EAP program. Although several theoretical frameworks have been proposed, including play, object-relations, and person-centered therapies as the sources of positive change for clients in EAP programs (Burgon 2018), little data has revealed how these theories work in practice. Further research is needed to understand and increase the therapeutic benefits of EAP programs for CSEY survivors.

1.5. Definition of Major Terms

This section is dedicated to reviewing key terminology that will be used to describe important aspects of this study. Providing definitions of terms is important to contextualize the study and demonstrate respect for the experiences of survivors. Moreover, research regarding sex trafficking is frequently a multidisciplinary venture, and terms are often defined differently among varying fields, including the legal, medical, and mental health fields. Similarly, terminology related to the EAP field is diverse, with variability among the various therapeutic approaches and theoretical foundations. The section below will provide operational definitions of terms for this study.

Sex Trafficking is defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 as: “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act...in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” (TVPA, 2000). It is important to note that in the case of minors, inducement to sex acts by force, fraud, or coercion are not necessary conditions to qualify as sex trafficking; in the case of minors, the law maintains that children cannot freely consent to sex acts (TVPA, 2000).

Sex Act is defined by the TVPA (2000) to broadly include “any sexual act for which something of value is given or received.” This may include object, digital, anal, or vaginal penetration among other sex acts (Sprang & Cole, 2018).

Commercial sex is defined as sexual performances that are exchanged for money, drugs, food, clothing, or shelter (Cole and Sprang, 2015). Common types of commercial sex include prostitution, production of pornography, strip dancing, and (sexual) massage parlors, as well as survival sex (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2013).

Survival sex is defined as engaging in sex acts in exchange for basic needs, including food, clothing, and housing (Gerassi, 2015; Kattari & Begun, 2017).

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEY) is defined as “a range of crimes of a sexual nature committed against children and adolescents, including (1) recruiting, enticing, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, and/or maintaining (acts that constitute trafficking) a minor for the purpose of sexual exploitation; (2) exploiting a minor through prostitution; (3) exploiting a minor through survival sex (exchanging sex/sexual acts for money or something of value, such as shelter, food or drugs); (4) using a minor in pornography; (5) exploiting a minor through sex tourism, mail order bride trade and early marriage; and (6) exploiting a minor by having them perform in sexual venues (e.g., peep shows or strip clubs)” (IOM, 2013).

Trafficker is legally defined as an individual who engages in “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (TVPA, 2000). Traffickers may include “boyfriends,” romantic partners, family, “pimps,” and gang members, among other individuals (Jordan et al., 2013).

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is defined by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) as an intervention that “incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a mental health professional and a horse specialist working with clients and horses to address treatment goals” (p. 13). EAP involves both an experiential and processing component that may be used with individuals, couples, families, or groups (Masini, 2010).

Rhythmic Riding is defined as a riding experience that seeks to increase participant connection with both themselves and their horse. The Natural Lifemanship (2018) organization identifies several mechanisms in Rhythmic Riding:

Bottom up regulation is promoted by engaging the brainstem with rhythmic, patterned, repetitive, bilateral movement that the client does not have to produce for themselves. With the lower regions regulated and organized the client is better able to access the midbrain regions responsible for connection.

Therapeutic Working Ranch (TWR) is defined for the purposes of this study as a residential setting in which participants engage in therapeutic programming, including mental health treatment, education, recreation, and work activities. Residential ranches may vary in terms of participant expectations and opportunities (Lawson, 2018).

1.6. Overview

The following research study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One provided a broad overview of the prevalence and characteristics of CSEY as well as the need for more research informing therapeutic programming for the healing of survivors. In light of this overview, Chapter One also established current gaps in the literature related to the use of equine therapies for CSEY survivors, positioned this study to address these gaps, and argued for the benefits of this research for survivors, counselors who work with survivors, and society at large. In Chapter Two, historical context, unique challenges presented by CSEY survivor group membership, current treatment approaches, and suitability of equine therapies for CSEY survivors will be presented and synthesized. The study methodology, including research design, participants, conceptual considerations, and practical steps will be outlined in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, the findings of the study will be identified and described. Finally, in Chapter Five, limitations, implications, and directions for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Historical Context of Sex Trafficking

This chapter provides context for historical and conceptual facets of the present study. Both sex trafficking and the therapeutic benefits of equines display varied histories. Although social understanding of human sex trafficking has evolved over time, the exchange of goods or services for sex acts is an ubiquitous element of human history. In the United States, a convergence of social movements, including feminism and social reform during the Progressive era, led to increased awareness of human trafficking and influenced legislation (Bromfield, 2016). In 1910, Congress passed the Mann Act, prohibiting transportation of “any girl or woman for immoral purposes” between countries or across state lines (Addams, 1912). The Mann Act, or “White Slave Traffic Act,” was problematic in that it ignored the trafficking of diverse populations, including people of color (Nelson Bulter, 2015). The Mann Act was frequently used to punish interracial relationships, including that of US boxing champion Jack Johnson (Nelson Butler, 2015).

On the international scene, the International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade was ratified by 13 nations, including the United States in 1904 (Bromfield, 2016). Later, the League of Nations adopted the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children in 1921 (Bromfield, 2016). After the development of the United Nations, The Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others was adopted by the body in 1949 (Bromfield, 2016). This would be the last legislative move for roughly 50 years until the United Nations adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, also known as the “Palermo Protocol” in 2000, motivated by a desire to combat both organized crime and violence

against women (Bromfield, 2016). The Palermo Protocol was significant in that it provided impetus for nations to draft their own legislative policies regarding trafficking, including the United States in the Trafficking and Victims Protection Act (TVPA) (Nichols, 2016).

The passage of the TVPA by Congress in 2000 produced a shift in trafficking legislation that had not been seen for approximately 100 years since the passage of the Mann Act. The TVPA marked a change in US trafficking legislation in that it recognized three forms of trafficking (a) sex trafficking of individuals under the age of 18 (b) sex trafficking of adults by means of force, fraud, or coercion, and, (c) labor trafficking of individuals of any age (TVPA, 2000). This legislative shift was significant because those being trafficked, including children, were frequently misidentified as criminals rather than victims under prior legislation (Nichols, 2016). The TVPA also made provision for those involved in the recruitment, harboring, transporting, or provision of individuals who are being trafficked for sex to be implicated in trafficking charges (TVPA, 2000). This means that individuals in addition to the “pimp” or trafficker can be prosecuted under the TVPA.

The more recent Nordic response, or “Swedish” response, has been hailed as a major advancement in legislation aimed at ending demand (Gunderson, 2012; Hartjen, 2021; Kingston & Thomas, 2018). The Nordic Policy, which criminalizes the purchase of sex acts rather than the solicitation of sex acts, has been viewed by some as a step toward gender equality (Gunderson, 2012). The new model has been implemented by several nations, including Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Canada, Ireland, France, and Israel (Gunderson, 2012). Major aspects of the Nordic model also include providing services for those exiting trafficking and public education campaigns to raise awareness and reduce demand (Nichols, 2016).

Although the ways to effectively address trafficking remain a source of debate nationally and globally, the need for survivor services is significant today. Estimates suggest that

approximately 300,000 youths become vulnerable to trafficking each year in the United States (Estes & Weiner, 2001). The United States National Human Trafficking Hotline received over 48,326 calls in 2019, with 22,326 victims and survivors identified (Polaris, 2019). In addition, 11,500 trafficking situations were identified in the United States alone, including 4,384 traffickers, and 1,912 suspicious businesses (Polaris, 2019). A review of survivor services in the United States indicates that although there has been significant growth in the past decade, more services are needed to adequately address immediate aftercare, recovery, and reintegration for CSEY survivors (Muraya & Fry, 2016).

2.2. Sex Trafficking Risk Factors

Much of the sex trafficking research has sought to identify risk factors indicative of potential future victimization (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014). Multiple experiences of abuse, including childhood sexual abuse, rape, and emotional abuse (Fedina et al., 2019), as well as kidnapping, physical abuse, or assault (Kenny et al., 2021) are frequently cited in survivor and clinical reports as predictors of future sex trafficking victimization. Panlilio et al. (2018) indicated that four behavioral items were particularly strong indicators of risk for sex trafficking, including running-away from home, using drugs and alcohol, engaging in sexual activity before the age of 14, and hitchhiking. Familial involvement in trafficking and friends who buy sex also significantly associated individuals with risk of being trafficked for sex in the future (Fedina et al., 2019). These risk factors may leave individuals vulnerable to the charismatic and manipulative influences of sex traffickers (Hargreaves-Cormany et al., 2016; Miccio-Fonseca, 2017). Research also suggests that technology is increasingly used by traffickers to befriend, recruit, and advertise victims (O'Brien & Li, 2020; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Tidball et al., 2016).

In addition, some suggest gender and sexuality issues may impact risk for trafficking, with transgender individuals having a lower age of entry at 11-13 years old (Estes & Weiner, 2001) and potential for greater risk with little research on this population (Martinez & Kelle, 2013; Miko & Park, 2002). More broadly, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer individuals may experience vulnerabilities and ostracism that leads to exploitation by traffickers (Hopper, 2017). At the same time, some research suggests law enforcement may struggle to identify exploitation of boys due to gender stereotypes (Cole, 2018). When boys are identified, they may struggle to admit exploitation for fear of being labeled as “homosexual” (Cole, 2018) or face greater stigma in seeking help as well as experience greater hopelessness when exiting trafficking (Ausubel, 2019). Being male increased the likelihood of endorsing four items indicating higher sex trafficking risk severity, including having previously run away, any drug or alcohol use, suicidality, and exposure to severe violence (Panlilio et al., 2019). This finding regarding gender is noteworthy given that much research on sex trafficking tends to emphasize female victimization. Other significant risk categories identified include suicidality and experiencing or witnessing severe violence (Panlilio et al., 2019). These risk factors frequently contribute to significant mental health and medical realities.

2.3. Mental Health and Medical Considerations in Service Provision

Survivors of sex trafficking experience high rates of comorbid disorders, including PTSD, severe depression, personality disorders, and anxiety (Ravi et al., 2017). Non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and attempts are also common among survivors of trafficking and can impact the counselors who work with them (Barnert et al., 2020; Frey et al., 2019). These mental health realities are responses to the complex trauma that can impact every aspect of their lives. Courtois and Ford (2013) understand complex trauma as repeated traumatization that

fundamentally shifts survivors' view of themselves, others, and society. Complex trauma may lead to a complex PTSD response, including self-destructive tendencies, severe dissociation, deep shame, relational disconnection, bodily manifestations of trauma, and hopelessness (Herman, 1992).

Given these realities, it is not surprising that research suggests CSEY survivors may experience higher levels of mental health need and acuity. One study of CSEY girls in a residential facility indicates that these survivors presented with additional needs and case complexity than their non-sexually exploited peers in terms of number and kinds of trauma, propensity to risk-taking behavior, as well as higher rates of substance abuse (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2018). Similarly, Cole et al., (2016) found greater levels of avoidance, hyperarousal, intrusive thoughts, and overall trauma symptoms in CSEY female youth than their counterparts who had experienced child sexual abuse and not commercial sexual exploitation. Shaw et al., (2017) found greater barriers to positive therapeutic outcomes in CSEY girls than in girls who had experienced childhood sexual abuse. Contributing factors for the CSEY girls included greater levels of substance abuse, significantly more aggressive and antisocial behaviors, running away, legal charges, as well as severe mood and behavioral diagnoses (Shaw et al., 2017).

Given that qualitative interviews have shown that survivors exiting the life are frequently met with a lack of awareness and attunement to their unique needs, including medical, legal, and mental health needs (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018; Ravi et al., 2017), it is essential counselors working with the population have awareness of a comprehensive list of medical and healthcare identifiers of trafficking, including physical symptoms of injuries from assault, insomnia, migraines, dental issues, malnutrition, abdominal pain, chest pain, and respiratory difficulty. Among reproductive complaints, survivors report sexual violence, unwanted pregnancy,

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), miscarriages, and forced abortions (Bohnert et al., 2017). Psychological impacts of trafficking, include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, shame, guilt, nightmares, flashbacks, and drug and alcohol dependence among others (Bohnert et al., 2017).

Work with traumatized individuals may lead to trauma exposure response for counselors, including nightmares, distrust of society, hypervigilance, exhaustion, and dissociation (Pearlman & Maclan, 1995; van der Kolk, 2014). Given the high rates of complex trauma experienced by survivors, vicarious trauma is a significant factor in propensity to counselor burnout and compassion fatigue (Hampton 2020; Kometiani & Farmer, 2020). Despite the risks of vicarious traumatization, counselors must bear in mind that survivors of sex trafficking report that it is crucial they feel their mental health providers can sit with them in difficult narratives of their trafficking experiences, which may extend through their past, childhood, and present. One survivor explained, “One time I went and saw a therapist like, ‘I need help!’ Ya know? Like, what do you do with all this stuff? And I was tellin’ her some stories and she started crying! I was just like, ‘This is crazy!’ Like, I am not even crying!” (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Counselors must have awareness of not only their client’s triggers, but also their own emotional, psychological, and physical triggers. Given that survivors of sex trafficking have experienced institutional betrayal, it is essential that counselors working with survivors maintain a supportive, non-pathologizing, and trauma-informed stance (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Survivors frequently recount dismissal and disbelief of their experiences from professionals within a wide variety of professions, including legal, law enforcement, healthcare, and mental health fields (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Rajaram & Tidball, 2018; Ravi et al., 2017).

In addition, research suggests mental health service providers may struggle to recognize victims of sex trafficking among the clients of their organization (Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020; Thompson & Haley, 2018). Counselors may be unwilling to admit oversight of client characteristics suggesting an individual is being trafficked. Bourke et al. (2016) affirm that most incidents of sexual exploitation go unreported. It is important to note that measures for sex trafficking identification, aftercare, and support services tend to be scattered with no comprehensive, ecological measure evaluating survivor needs, including spiritual, emotional, and physical needs (Graham et al., 2020).

2.4. Exposing and Addressing Myths

Sex trafficking myths continue to perpetuate the cycle of multilayered marginalization experienced by those that are trafficked. Burt (1980) was the first to highlight the role of rape myth acceptance in the psychological literature. Collings (1997) and Cromer & Goldsmith (2010) similarly highlighted child sexual abuse myths in the role of ongoing victimization. Sex buyers frequently endorse beliefs that engaging in trafficking amounts to “guys being guys,” “taking care of needs,” and a “victimless crime,” as well as that those involved in trafficking “enjoy sex” and “chose it” as a profession (Farley et al., 2015; Menaker & Franklin, 2018). Related behaviors enacted by sex buyers include having engaged in an affair, use of pornography in the past 12 months, contraction of an STI, and lack of impulse control (Farley et al., 2015, Menaker & Franklin, 2018). Traffickers and buyers implicitly and explicitly enforce trafficking myths through repeated verbal, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse. Sex buyers speak of “renting an organ for 10 minutes” (Farley, 2013, p. 168) and traffickers frequently engage in physical and psychological humiliation of those being trafficked (Crocker, 2017). Survivors often internalize these myths believing, “someone would have helped me if I

had not been so reprehensible; therefore, I am at fault and I am deserving of the blame and criticism” (Courtois & Ford, 2013, p. 37).

Herrington & McEachern (2018) discuss how the objectification and fragmentation of the body depicted in pornography is linked to the practice of sex trafficking. Given the prevalence of pornography, as well as various music and other related media depictions, counselors and other service providers may have internalized beliefs that do not correspond to the realities of trafficking. Moreover, counseling research has identified that counselors who endorse higher levels of rape myth acceptance also endorse lower empathy scores toward survivors of sex trafficking (Litam, 2019). Male gender in counselors has also been identified as a significant predictor of trafficking myth acceptance and lower levels of empathy or helping attitudes toward survivors (Litam & Lam, 2020). This research aligns with a study of undergraduate students, in which male gender endorsement and human trafficking myth acceptance were correlated with victim blaming and victim responsibility for exploitation (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). Deficits in self-control, male gender and sexist attitude endorsement as well as frequency of pornography consumption have predicted myth endorsement (Menaker & Franklin, 2018). Counselors working with CSEY survivors must practice critical awareness regarding attitudes toward sex trafficking, victim blaming, and other related beliefs.

2.5. Understanding Relationships in Sex Trafficking

The life and world of survivors of sex trafficking has often been characterized by significant relational trauma. Relational pathways into sex trafficking include friends, those who pose as “rescuers” but later exploit victims, as well as romantic partners and intergenerational familial practices (Hotaling et al., 2006; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016). Traffickers will use language that creates a false sense of connection and belonging by being called “daddy” in the

trafficking “family/folks” (Smith & Coloma, 2013). “Wifeys,” “wifeys-in-law,” and “sister-wives,” or trafficked persons, are expected to meet a quota of 10-40 “tricks” per night and live in the “stable” (Miccio-Fonseca, 2017; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014). Neurobiological, emotional, and physical needs are manipulated by traffickers to coerce victims.

The primary mechanism by which the sex trafficker keeps victims subjugated may be understood as the trauma bond. Within “the life” the trafficker “seasons” victims through a variety of means, including violence, threats, presence of perceived kindness, control of perspective, and the perception that one is unable to escape (Herrington & McEachern, 2018). Traffickers frequently create a new persona for victims, through forced ownership tattoos with the trafficker’s name or logo, bodily brands, new nicknames and the destruction of identifying documentation (Jordan et al., 2013). Forced pornography exposure and production, sexual grooming, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, and repeated public and private humiliation are common tactics used by traffickers within the life (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Reid, 2016). The constant relational unpredictability within the life results in what Courtois and Ford (2013) have termed, “complex trauma,” given the repeated, severe traumas over time. Similarly, “Stockholm syndrome,” often displays during survivors’ recovery in attempts to protect and defend their former traffickers (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

Although counseling scholarly literature continues to assert the difference between working with survivors of sex trafficking and those who have experienced sexual abuse or other relational traumas, these differences are often not explicated. It is critical counselors understand that survivors of sex trafficking often must process a two-part trauma narrative, including both what was experienced by them and what was perpetrated by them. For example, the role of “madam,” “bottom,” or “bottom-bitch,” includes both being trafficked as well as trafficking and

enacting violence upon other victims within the life of trafficking (Johnson, 2020). A madam may be required by their pimp to recruit, witness or engage in punishment, torture, or traumatization of another trafficked person (Johnson, 2020). Given these realities, it is important counselors recognize human sex trafficking shares key similarities and differences from sexual abuse and domestic violence paradigms (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014).

Those involved in sex trafficking also experience relational trauma at other societal levels. Nichols & Heil (2015) cite the frequent misidentification of victims of sex trafficking as criminals by law enforcement and society, often resulting in victims being arrested and charged at rates much higher than traffickers and sex buyers. Traffickers use of online solicitation and “fronts” or hidden venues such as massage parlors, spas, and clubs, frequently allow victimization of individuals to occur in plain sight, contributing to victims’ sense of powerlessness and hopelessness (Nichols & Heil, 2017). Societal marginalization forms a cyclical pattern in the prevalence of minorities that are trafficked. Over half of minor victims of sex trafficking are Black (Nelson Butler, 2015). Whereas the trafficking of racial minorities, including Asian, Latino, and Native Americans is difficult to number precisely, it can be understood as the continuation of historical, racial, and sexual marginalization (Nelson Butler, 2015).

2.6. Healing Interventions

A number of healing interventions have been proposed for work with CSEY survivors; however, no single treatment modality has been identified as best-practice for use with this population. Current approaches recommended in work with CSEY survivors have drawn on trauma-informed frameworks. Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT) (Cohen et al., 2017; O’Callaghan et al., 2013; Salami et al., 2018), Dialectical Trauma-Focused

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (DTFCBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Family Therapy (Lapp & Overmann, 2013) have been proposed as possible avenues for healing. To address the multi-layered and ecological needs of survivors, Multimodal Social Ecological (MSE) has been proposed to provide wrap-around services within a trauma-informed context (Hopper, 2017). Group therapy settings with other survivors may provide an opportunity for survivors to connect, process shaming experiences, and receive resources or psychoeducation (Lapp & Overmann, 2013).

Calls for culturally responsive, relational, and creative interventions have also been made in literature discussing work with survivors of sex trafficking (Hershberger, 2020; Rafferty, 2018). The use of ritual to facilitate healing, including mindfulness, meditation, acupuncture, and spirituality have also been proposed (Rafferty, 2018). In work with African American survivors of trafficking, cultural dance, peer-support practices, and culturally expressive arts have been discussed (Bryant-Davis & Gobin, 2019). Other creative interventions, including music, sand tray, and animal-assisted therapies have been recommended (Lapp & Overmann, 2013); however, no studies are available regarding the application of these options for survivors and no empirical support has been demonstrated.

In addition, a limited number of qualitative studies outline the lived experiences of survivors as they engage in treatment. Numerous studies have investigated the experiences of survivors of trafficking prior to coming to treatment and have highlighted potential risk factors (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Duncan & DeHart, 2019; Kenny et al., 2020). However, it is necessary to expand understanding of survivor experiences as they are engaged in treatment to better facilitate therapeutic intervention for this distinct population. Given that this study is proposing the use of an EAP program for CSEY survivors, the historical context of human-animal interaction,

theoretical underpinnings of EAP, and its application will be overviewed in the following sections.

2.7. Historical Context of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI)

Some suggest that not only have humans and animals lived in close contact for the duration of evolutionary history, but also interdependently (McCardle et al., 2011). Artwork depicting animals and their spiritual significance to humans dates back to 5500 BC (McCardle et al., 2011). Skeletal remains in Israel of a boy cradling a puppy date back 12,000 years ago (Morrison, 2007). Horses were domesticated by humans later than other species, with special attention toward selection that increased horse docility and calm temperament (Jansen et al., 2002). The earliest undisputed finding of horse domestication is evidenced in chariot burial remains dating to 2,000 BC (Jansen et al., 2002).

In addition to these historical findings, others have further argued that human propensity to delight in animals and nature, or what is termed *biophilia*, is an innate need reflective of shared life processes (Wilson et al., 1984). Modern psychological frameworks may draw on the many benefits of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI). For example, the biopsychosocial model of wellness recognizes and incorporates animals into the social-interpersonal realm as a means of support for humans (Lindau et al., 2003). Research supports models such as these, with findings that suggest animals may positively influence overall wellness as well as reduce depression, anxiety, blood pressure and physiological stress responses (Ein & Vickers, 2018). Today, approximately 57% of American households have at least one animal as a household pet (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA], 2018).

Levinson (1969) was the first to report the therapeutic benefits of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) in his counseling sessions. Based on field notes and observations, Levinson

reported the perceived benefits of his dog, Jingles, in counseling sessions with children and youth (1969). Levinson's work spurred greater interest in AAI, and in the 1970's the Delta Society was formed to provide empirical support for AAI (Trotter, 2012). Presently, the organization outlines several benefits of AAI in mental health outcomes, including emotional safety, boundaries, attachment, and play (Trotter, 2012). In 1999, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) was founded in recognition of the therapeutic benefits of horses to individuals of many ages with various mental health needs (EAGALA, 2009). Today, there are more than 600 EAP programs worldwide designed in the hopes of addressing varied physical and psychological needs (Russell, 2013).

2.8. The Human-Horse Connection

Like humans, horses are social herd creatures who also communicate as prey animals (Trotter & Baggerly, 2019). Some have suggested that the nature of horses as prey animals makes them uniquely attuned to therapeutic work with humans (Trotter & Baggerly, 2019). Horses cooperate within herds and are vigilant for any threat to safety, communicating non-verbally through the limbic region of their brains (Trotter & Baggerly, 2019). From subtle cues, including the adjustment of their ears or widening of pupils, to more overt indicators, such as flaring of nostrils, whinnying, or kicking, horses may mirror and signal danger to those around them (Waring, 1983).

This attunement also means horses have highly adapted means of non-verbal communication that can mirror human emotion and behavior back to clients, providing them direct and immediate feedback (Trotter & Baggerly, 2019). In a study of domesticated horses, Maros et al. (2008) found that the equines quickly read human hand gestures and visual cues. McGreevy (2004) suggests that horses are able to recognize and respond to their handler's body

language and vocal tone. Horses may provide real-time, accurate feedback to individuals who struggle with emotion regulation or social cues. The mirrored response from horses helps clients to recognize their own presentation and recalibrate their approach or experience difficulty in relationship with the equines and others. For example, clients report being better able to identify their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors when they see them mirrored in horses (Burgon, 2011).

The literature reflects varying views of the theoretical underpinnings of EAP; however, Burgon et al. (2018) elucidates the philosophies of non-violent communication, person-centered approach, object-relations theory, play and dramatherapy, mindfulness practice, and attachment theory as key aspects. Multiple researchers have suggested that incorporation of the horse into therapy creates space for healthy attachments to form (Bachi et al, 2011; Chardonnens, 2009; Kern-Godal, 2016; Trotter & Baggerly, 2019; Yorke et al., 2013). There is overlap in the tenets of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) and core aspects of EAP, including the importance of establishing safety, mirroring, and physiological co-regulation (Bachi, 2013). Researchers Kern-Godal et al., (2016) also cite several qualitative themes from participants in an equine program as evidence of the role of attachment, such as feelings of understanding, security, calm, affirmation, trust, empowerment, and its ability to facilitate treatment goals with horses. These findings have led some researchers to suggest that equine interventions may be best termed “equine partnered therapy” (Earles et al., 2015, p. 151). Others have suggested that horses in equine therapy actually become co-therapists and sources of healing attachment for participants engaged with them (Klontz et al., 2007; Sheade, 2021).

2.9. Benefits and Considerations in EAP

There are some general recommendations for horses who are part of EAP programs. Although involvement in EAP may be a second career for equines, it is important they remain relatively healthy, docile, and even-tempered in their work with clients (Chandler, 2005). Given that individuals are frequently enamored with horses despite infrequent access to them, horses may prove a powerfully motivating force for engagement in therapy (Chandler, 2005; Masini, 2010). In addition, the size and trainability of horses makes them ideal for clients to gain experiential knowledge and self-confidence they may be unable to develop with smaller animals (Chandler, 2005). Some have suggested partnering with horses in therapeutic programming may facilitate a culturally sensitive space for clients, including First Nations and Inuit youth (Dell et al., 2011).

Despite these benefits to engaging in therapy with horses, EAP does entail further considerations than traditional talk-therapies. For example, horses require considerable care, grooming, space, and cleanup in ways other animals do not (Chandler, 2005). Just as some clients may be motivated by horses, others may find them intimidating (Chandler, 2005). Considerations related to participants may indicate EAP is not a good therapeutic fit, including a history of animal abuse, fire setting, seizure disorder uncontrolled by medication, or other relevant medical conditions (Hallberg, 2018). In addition, specific training is required for counselors utilizing EAP (Hallberg, 2018; Trotter & Baggerly, 2019). Several professional competencies are outlined for counselors engaging in EAP, including knowledge of horses, risk management, equine specific training, as well as advocacy for the wellness of both equines and clients (Hallberg, 2018). Personal competencies for counselors include the importance of self-awareness, authenticity, and social intelligence (Hallberg, 2018). The American Counseling

Association's (ACA) Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling Competencies highlight the importance of clinical intentionality and ethical obligations when choosing equine interventions (ACA, 2016); it is not enough for the counselor to simply enjoy working with horses.

2.10. Equine Interventions with Specific Populations

There are hundreds of EAP programs worldwide designed in the hopes of addressing varied physical and psychological needs (Russell, 2013). Physical and occupational therapy incorporating equine movement has been used to address the needs of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), cerebral palsy, developmental delays, older adult needs, stroke, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and other learning needs (Hallberg, 2018). Partnering with equines for interventions in mental health have been used widely, including use with substance use concerns, ADHD, anxiety, "At Risk" youth, ASD, Bipolar Disorder, Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), depression, eating disorders, mood disorders, personality disorders such as narcissistic and borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and stress related concerns, as well as marriage, family, and parenting concerns (Hallberg, 2018).

A narrative synthesis of 24 quantitative or qualitative articles involving EAP programs by Lee et al. (2016) highlights the social-emotional benefits of children and adolescents interacting with horses. In work with at-risk youth, Burgon (2011) found that participants cited increased confidence and self-esteem, sense of mastery and self-efficacy, empathy and sense of opportunity as a result of engaging in an EAP program. All prior interventions and residential treatments had proven ineffective for a youth who gradually developed respect for the horses,

limits, and himself (Chardonnens, 2009). Increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy may also be benefits for adults engaged with horses (Bizub et al., 2003).

Severe mental health considerations may also be positively influenced by equine interventions. Ewing et al., 2007 found that youth with severe emotional disorders reported increases in self-confidence, self-esteem, and psychosocial functioning as well as decreases in problematic behaviors as a result of engagement in an equine assisted program at an alternative school setting. Similarly, Chardonnens (2009) found that a youth with severe mental health diagnoses who engaged in equine assisted interventions reported increased sense of responsibility and self-esteem as a result of working with a horse. Finally, a systematic review suggests that equine intervention may be beneficial to adults who experience schizophrenia or schizophrenia-like symptoms (Jormfeldt & Carlsson, 2018).

Mental health issues including anxiety, depression, non-combat trauma, and barriers to overall functioning have been addressed with equine intervention. Klontz et al. (2007) found that participants at a treatment center experiencing difficulties related to unfinished business reported improvements in psychological functioning and reductions in distress on the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) and Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) at post-intervention as well as six-month follow-up. Likewise, a cross-sectional study found statistically significant increases in the number of EAP sessions and Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) scores in youth who had experienced intrafamilial violence (Schultz et al., 2006). Short-term gains were also found with participants who had experienced a traumatic event with reported reductions in depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms on the PTSD checklist (PCL-S) at completion of a 6-week equine assisted therapy (Earles et al., 2015). Acri et al., (2021) found excellent fidelity and high inter-

rater reliability when utilizing a manualized intervention called Reigning in Anxiety, consisting of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Equine Assisted Psychotherapy for youth with anxiety.

Researchers and clinicians have investigated the helpfulness of equine intervention in addressing substance use concerns (Buzel, 2016; Filippides, 2019; Green et al., 2019). Kern-Godal et al., (2016) found that young adults in a substance use program reported their relationship with horses provided them numerous therapeutic benefits, including lack of judgment, empathic understanding, emotional validation, understanding, and education. First Nations and Inuit youth with prior solvent abuse in a residential equine assisted learning program reported deeper spiritual understanding, emotional and behavioral congruence, and nurturing qualities as a result of working with horses (Dell et al., 2011). Participants responding to alcohol use concerns reported that forming a relationship with a horse in an equine program helped them address relationship concerns and competencies as well as identify negative relational patterns (Buzel, 2016). These findings are significant given that survivors experience high rates of substance use concerns (Cole et al., 2016).

There are a number of studies that indicate equine assisted interventions can be therapeutic for military veterans experiencing PTSD. The findings below are significant given that like CSEY survivors, military veterans frequently experience life-threatening and dual-trauma experiences that contribute to PTSD and feelings of guilt. Military veterans with PTSD who were engaged in a six-week therapeutic riding program reported a statistically and clinically significant decrease in post-traumatic symptoms at the conclusion of the program (Johnson et al., 2018). Similarly, combat veterans in an 8-week therapeutic riding program reported a clinically significant decrease in PTSD symptoms, with improvements in social functioning, emotion regulation, daily activities, confidence, and trust (Lanning et al., 2017).

Longer term studies suggest that equine intervention may have lasting effects for PTSD. In a study of US army veterans experiencing PTSD, Shelef et al. (2019) found a statistically significant improvement in PTSD symptoms and decrease in days of inefficiency at the conclusion of the equine program and also at six-month follow-up. The program included therapeutic riding as well as care for the horses in the form of grooming and saddling (Shelef et al., 2019). Veterans who engaged in equine intervention with their partners reported significantly greater levels of happiness and quality of life in addition to significantly lower levels of depression, stress, and PTSD symptoms at post-intervention and three-month follow-up (Romaniuk et al., 2018).

2.11. Neurophysiological Benefits of Equine Intervention

Reports from the field suggest that therapy with equines facilitates participant emotion regulation to process difficult narratives and create a deeper sense of calm (Sheade, 2021). Beyond qualitative reports of healing benefits to participants in EAP, some research suggests that therapy with horses may impact neurophysiology. Yorke et al. (2013) suggest that equine therapy may contribute to lowered stress levels after finding a positive correlation between cortisol levels in children who had experienced trauma and the cortisol levels in their therapy horses. Utilizing a 12-day equine intervention including riding, the researchers found that each child-horse pair had correlated cortisol levels (Yorke et al., 2013). This finding is similar to the work of Odendall (2000) and Odendall and Mientjes (2003) that found increases in oxytocin and decreases in cortisol as a result of positive participant interactions with canines.

Neurophysiological benefits may be particularly therapeutic for survivors of sex trafficking who frequently experience significant traumas with corresponding changes in neurobiology. Levine (2017) highlights not only the physical implications of trafficking, but also

the neurobiological effects of trauma in terms of changes in hormones such as cortisol, GABA, norepinephrine, and human growth hormone. Often the impacts of trauma create a cyclical pattern in which individuals endure trauma that in turn creates brain changes, and these changes in neuroplasticity make individuals even more susceptible to the impacts of further abuse (Levine, 2017). At present, research regarding neurophysiological changes in therapy with equines is very limited. Further research capturing the biomarkers of positive change would assist in clarifying the ways in which equine intervention is therapeutic, including changes in cortisol (Pendry et al., 2018) and brain scan imaging as a result of rhythmic riding and other EAP interventions (Arnold et al., 1985; Arnold, 2015).

2.12. Summary

In summary, CSEY survivors face significant challenges to receiving healing and engaging in effective treatment. Survivors frequently experience repeated traumas prior to entry and further traumas during and after engagement in trafficking. Issues related to awareness and identification, as well as lack of survivor services are key considerations. Mental and medical health realities in service provision also add complexity to work with survivors. Moreover, trafficking myths continue to perpetuate the victimization and marginalization of individuals experiencing vulnerabilities related to age, race, gender, sexual identity, ability, socioeconomic status, housing, legal issues, trauma history, as well as mental health and substance use concerns. Finally, lack of research regarding effective outcomes for treatment modalities, including EAP, continues to remain a barrier.

Equine interventions have grown considerably in recent years, expanding the use of EAP for various mental health needs, including concerns faced by CSEY survivors such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, mood disorders, and substance use concerns. At the same time, research

regarding the use of EAP for CSEY survivors has not been explored to date. Counselors working with survivors of sex trafficking have a duty to facilitate effective interventions for this unique population. This study will inform how residential programs might utilize EAP as a trauma-informed and culturally appropriate healing intervention in work with CSEY survivors.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

In Chapter One, the researcher described the purpose of the study, current gaps in the literature as well as provided definitions of major terms and constructs related to the study. The purpose of this study is to deeply explore the lived experiences of CSEY survivors both uniquely as individuals and collectively as a group in an EAP Rhythmic Riding program at a TWR. The broad question of this study is, “How do CSEY survivors perceive an EAP Rhythmic Riding program?” Specifically, this study will explore CSEY survivors’ experiences in the EAP program, including how these experiences influence their treatment process. Additional research questions for this study include (a) what are the impacts of an EAP Rhythmic Riding program for CSEY?, and, (b) what are the implications for EAP programs for CSEY in residential treatment? In Chapter Two, the researcher laid out the research related to Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), and the ways in which these areas of study might intersect. In this chapter, the researcher outlines the proposed methodology for the study including the study framework, participant recruitment and selection, procedures related to data collection and confidentiality, as well as a priori limitations.

3.2. Participants

Participants involved in this study were recruited via convenience sampling and through an established research relationship between the Animal Sciences Department at North Dakota State University and the Therapeutic Working Ranch (TWR) where participants reside. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) assent to participation in an Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) program at a Therapeutic Working Ranch (TWR), (b) be identified as Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth (CSEY), (c) be between the ages of 12-18, (d) assent to engage in an

interview with the researcher, (e) assent to journal about their lived experiences in the EAP program, (f) assent to allow the researcher to observe EAP group sessions and take observational field notes, and (g) engage in one focus group at the conclusion of the program. A total of six individual participants were recruited. Smith et al., (2012) recommend between three to eight participants to reach saturation for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

3.3. Procedures

Prior to conducting this study, the researcher had obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (HE3356) at North Dakota State University. Upon initiating the research process, the researcher verbally reviewed informed consent/youth assent thoroughly with participants. Prior to engaging in the 45-minute semi-structured face-to-face interview, participants were provided a copy of the informed consent/youth assent form (Appendices B and C) and interview questions (Appendix E). Interviews are recommended in IPA methodology to build rapport and elicit rich data (Miller et al., 2018).

To model trauma-informed practice, the researcher invited participants to share any questions or concerns they had about the interview and the informed consent/assent process. Participants were informed they have the choice to decline to take part in the study even if their parent(s) or guardian(s) gave consent. All interviews occurred in a private, comfortable room at the Therapeutic Working Ranch (TWR). Interviews commenced when participants verbally reported understanding and agreement to the informed consent/youth assent. Interview questions were related to the lived experiences of CSEY survivors in the EAP program at the TWR. The interview was composed of open-ended, exploratory questions regarding survivor perceptions of the EAP Rhythmic Riding program, and the themes they identify in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during the EAP Rhythmic Riding program.

Interviews were audio recorded using an audio recording device. The researcher also used a notebook for field notes before, during, and after the interviews to record observations and reflect on the research process. Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transferred to a password protected electronic file storage maintained by NDSU, OneDrive, and the recordings were deleted from the audio recording device. The interviews were de-identified prior to being transcribed by REV.com. Digital interview transcripts were electronically saved to the same password protected electronic file storage as the audio recordings. Journals remained with participants during the course of the study and copies of the journal responses were made at the conclusion of the study. The copies of the journal prompt responses, the field notes, and the printed transcripts were stored in a locked container in a locked office. Data was collected from six individuals over the course of three months.

3.4. Research Design

This qualitative study utilizes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA has grown in use relatively recently since the mid 1990's with its advent in health psychology research (Smith et al., 2012). IPA aims to deeply explore the lived experiences of individuals in particular circumstances or events (Smith et al., 2012). A homogenous sample will be used in this study to describe experiences of participants in-depth (Patton, 2002). In a method of double analysis, IPA privileges the unique experiences of individuals as well as the shared experiences of those individuals collectively within a given group (Smith et al., 2012). In this way, IPA can be understood to stand in contrast to nomothetic methods of defining group membership; IPA is concerned with speaking both to group dynamics as well as the convergence and divergence of individual experience within that group (Smith et al., 2012). Additionally, IPA requires

thoughtful analysis of researchers' perceptions and their particular relationship to what is being studied (Smith et al., 2012).

Theoretically, IPA has layered foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2012). In relation to IPA, phenomenology contributes a focus on understanding experience and how individuals make sense of their contact with the world (Smith et al., 2012). An emphasis on interpretation is drawn from IPA's foundation in hermeneutics, with special prominence given to the context of data as parts within a whole (Smith et al., 2012). The "double hermeneutic" of interpreting both individual participant experience and researcher experience may be understood as one of the distinguishing features of IPA from other qualitative methodologies (Smith et al., 2012, p. 3). In contrast to broad claims of interpretation, idiography is focused on layers of particulars, including studying specific participant data regarding a phenomenon within a uniquely situated setting (Smith et al., 2012). The framework of idiography requires detailed analysis of each participant case within a sample (Smith, 2004). The theoretical foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography coalesce to create a space in which individual experience is to be understood not in light of an existing theory or pre-defined terms, but rather, on its own constructed terms (Smith et al., 2012).

3.5. Data Analysis

The researcher utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify, analyze, and synthesize themes. The researcher de-identified all data prior to transcribing the interviews through the transcription service, REV.com. The researcher also de-identified journal prompt responses from participants. The researcher listened to each audio recorded interview, read each transcribed interview, read all field notes, and read all journal prompt responses a minimum of three times prior to analysis. In keeping with the layered analysis process required

by IPA, the researcher analyzed themes from individuals uniquely and also across the entire data set. Primary analysis entailed identification of themes for each individual participant, which entailed six participant cases in the present study. Secondary analysis entailed identification of themes across all six participants as a group. Following the primary and secondary analyses, themes were collectively analyzed to explore convergent and divergent themes.

Broadly speaking, IPA includes two phases of analysis, a descriptive and an interpretive phase (Miller et al., 2018). In the initial descriptive work with data, the researcher is encouraged to write exploratory notes, with attention toward participant description, informational data, and linguistic features (Miller et al., 2018). Moving to the interpretive phase, the researcher explores the meaning-making of the participants and considers influences on participants at the social and cultural levels (Miller et al., 2018). As a part of developing the interpretive phase, the researcher engages in the double hermeneutic by exploring aspects of participant experience that may be more readily apparent to the researcher than the participants themselves (Miller et al., 2018).

Six steps were utilized in the IPA framework to identify themes (Smith et al., 2012). The first step involves careful reading and re-reading of the participant data to move the researcher from general impressions, to intricate details, to summary of a case (Smith et al., 2012). The second strategy involves the creation of exploratory comments, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, and noting rich aspects of interviews (Smith et al., 2012). The third strategy involves development of emergent themes, carefully preserving rich detail as it appears chronologically in the transcript while also looking for convergent patterns within exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2012). Charting, mapping, or otherwise organizing the emergent themes in categories with superordinate and subthemes is the fourth and next step in the IPA framework (Smith et al., 2012). From here, the researcher begins step five by moving on to the next

participant case and commencing the process for each additional case in the group (Smith et al., 2012). The sixth step involves grappling with the emergent themes from each of the participant cases and looking for patterns of convergence and divergence across cases (Smith et al., 2012).

In practice, the researcher implemented this framework by writing notes within the password-protected, electronic file for each participant. The researcher recorded possible superordinate themes for each participant on electronic pages and then recorded possible subthemes below the major themes. The researcher initially recorded all possible themes, then drew lines through subthemes that were misplaced or erased subthemes that were deemed unnecessary. To aid this themes analysis, the researcher consulted notes taken on the transcripts and journal prompt responses. The researcher reviewed each theme's location within the context of the participant data to determine if each theme was adequately represented. Following this analysis, the researcher named themes and recorded related definitions for each participant. The researcher further analyzed similarities and differences in themes among individuals in the participant group. As a final step, the researcher identified and analyzed similarities and differences in themes between the individual participants and the group as a whole.

3.6. Reflexivity Statement

Within IPA, reflexivity entails attention to the affective and cognitive reactions researchers may have to participant data and the research process in general (Miller et al., 2018). Reflexivity is a necessary component in promoting trustworthiness and involves curiosity, mindfulness, and appropriate personal disclosure (Patton, 2002). Given that in qualitative analyses the researcher is the primary instrument, it is necessary the researcher describe personal experiences and influences on the present study (Patton, 2002). During data collection, the researcher was a Licensed Associate Professional Counselor in a midwestern state and was

recently granted Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor status while writing the findings and discussion of the study. The researcher is a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision completing her dissertation. In clinical practice, the researcher has worked with trafficked individuals as well as former traffickers. The researcher has experience in crisis, family, couple, group, and individual counseling with specialties in trauma and sexual abuse. The researcher possesses certification in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) and crisis management. The researcher has been mentored by and collaborated with members of the North Dakota Human Trafficking Task Force (NDHTTF) and has experience presenting on sex trafficking topics in local, national, and international settings.

The researcher also possesses a trauma background and has done counseling to heal and explore personal traumas. The researcher has also experienced sexual harassment and sexism based on gender on multiple occasions. One of the assumptions this researcher holds is that trafficked individuals frequently experience marginalization based on the intersection of various identities, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, and more. Homogeneity is assumed in this sample, given that the participants are all female CSEY individuals who have been placed in a residential mental health setting. Given this particular set of identities, these intersectional issues will be highlighted and discussed in the study.

The researcher also aligns with a relational-cultural approach that views zest, productivity, clarity, sense of worth, and desire for more connection as the hallmarks of growth-fostering relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The researcher acknowledges that bias influences perception, and one of the ways the researcher seeks to work with existing bias is through the process of self-reflection and continued personal work and exploration. The researcher understands that a relational-cultural understanding of connection may influence researcher

perceptions of participant experience in the equine program. In light of existing biases, the researcher seeks to engage in the double hermeneutic proposed by Smith et al., (2012) to not only evaluate participant experience, but also reflexively evaluate the researcher's experience of participant experience, illuminating areas discernible from an outside perspective.

3.7. Trustworthiness and Credibility

The committee supporting the researcher in this project includes the project chair, an Associate Professor from the field of Counselor Education and Supervision who has research emphases in multicultural, supervisory, and relational competencies. The committee also includes a Professor Emeritus from the field of Counselor Education and Supervision who has utilized a relational-cultural approach in clinical practice and research over the course of her career. A final member from field of Counselor Education and Supervision, who is an Assistant professor contributes research experience in IPA methodology as well as feminist, gender identity, social justice, and multicultural emphases. An Associate professor from the field of Equine Sciences who has researched the therapeutic benefits of animal and equine assisted therapies informed the conceptual frame of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) and Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). A committee member and Associate professor from the field of Philosophy informed the theoretical underpinnings of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design.

Additionally, methods utilized in the study support trustworthiness. For example, reflexive field notes were utilized before, during, and after the interviews and observations of the equine rhythmic riding group sessions to report thoughts and process as well as explore areas researcher bias may influence perception. Triangulation of qualitative methods in this study included the use of interviews, field notes, and journal prompt responses. Within this framework

of triangulation, observations from field notes, interviews, and journals were analyzed for patterns of convergence and divergence. One aspect of analysis paid attention to similarities and differences between what participants share privately in their journals versus during interviews with the researcher. The triangulation of qualitative sources within the same method is useful to check for consistency in addition to strengthening quality and credibility (Patton, 2002). Reflexive journaling was additionally used to model authenticity and support researcher credibility for this study.

Strategies utilizing the researcher's committee were also utilized to ensure trustworthiness. An audit record was used along with reflexive journaling to keep notes regarding data collection and analysis processes. This audit record was provided to the researcher's committee to model transparency. Additionally, triangulation of investigators was utilized to review themes. The researcher's committee members engaged in analyzing themes presented by the researcher to provide feedback and critique. As a final note, thick descriptions were used to support transferability of themes. Bracketing of researcher assumptions was used to support confirmability.

3.8. Limitations

There are several a priori limitations for this proposed study. Several of these limitations are related to the particular sample utilized in this study. For example, although homogenous, this sample is relatively small and geographically limited to individuals in the Midwest at a particular residential therapeutic setting. The sample is also reflective of female experiences and does not include the experiences of male survivors in the same context.

Some researchers have voiced concern that use of IPA with children may pose limitations (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). Smith (2004) suggests that researchers utilizing IPA with children

may need to utilize more guiding skills during the semi-structured interview process than with adult participants. In addition, researchers suggest that investing in time with child participants prior to the semi-structured interviews, including play and introductions, is essential to fostering in-depth participation in sharing experiences in interviews or other forms of data collection (Smith, 2004; Smith & Dunworth, 2003). This researcher was somewhat limited in terms of the amount of time she was able to share with the youth prior to the interviews due to the geographic distance between where the researcher resides and the location of the TWR.

Additional limitations may be related to the unique nature of the CSEY survivor population. For example, it is critical the researcher demonstrate sensitivity within a trauma-informed, culturally humble framework (Rothman et al., 2018). Over-interrogation of survivors has been discussed in the trafficking research literature (Rothman et al., 2018). In addition, those involved in trafficking research need to remain mindful of the boundaries between the role of advocate and the role of researcher (Rothman et al., 2018). Although it may be tempting to move into the role of advocate, the researcher had to adhere to IRB protocol when concerns arose for participants (Rothman, et al., 2018). Finally, while the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout are well established in the literature for counselors who work with survivors (Hampton, 2020; Kometiani & Farmer, 2020; Ramirez et al., 2020), those who engage in research with the CSEY survivor population must also attend to the realities of vicarious traumatization as a result of engagement with participants and the research processes (Rothman et al., 2018). It was essential the researcher engaged in self-care throughout the research process (Rothman et al., 2018).

3.9. Summary

Chapter Three has detailed the components of the present study's methodology, including participant selection, data analysis, and study design as well as supports toward reflexivity,

trustworthiness, credibility, and a priori limitations. Specifically, the researcher outlined a qualitative study utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the in-depth, lived experiences of six CSEY survivors in an EAP program at a TWR. The researcher employed convenience sampling to invite participants, female youths, to participate in the study which included semi-structured interviews. Additional sources of data included observational field notes to be recorded by the researcher and journal prompt responses recorded by the participants. The researcher audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. Qualitative data was analyzed for themes. In Chapter Four, the researcher builds on this methodology by reporting the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

In Chapter One, the researcher broadly explored the need for more research related to therapies for CSEY, in addition to emphasizing the ways in which equine therapies may provide beneficial therapeutic outcomes for this population. In Chapter Two, the researcher shared the historical context and special considerations related to work with survivors of sex trafficking and equine therapies. Chapter Three outlined an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology for a study to examine CSEY experiences when receiving EAP during residential treatment. The results of this study will be presented in this chapter.

4.2. Research Questions

In this study, the overarching question guiding data collection and analysis is “How do CSEY survivors perceive an EAP Rhythmic Riding program?” In addition, the following questions were secondary inquiries that aided in data collection and analysis process:

1. What are the impacts of an EAP Rhythmic Riding program for CSEY?
2. What are the implications for EAP programs for CSEY in residential treatment?

The researcher addressed these questions through triangulation of data in semi-structured interviews with participants evidenced by the interview questions (Appendix E) as well as through journal prompts (Appendix C) and observational field notes.

4.3. Participants

Participants were recruited via an established research relationship between North Dakota State University and a Therapeutic Working Ranch (TWR) in western North Dakota. The TWR is a residential facility with equine programming among other therapeutic program options, including mental health treatment, recreation, and work opportunities. During the intake process

at the TWR, informed consent from parent/guardian(s) and participant assent were obtained by trained mental health professionals for interested participants who met inclusion criteria. In addition, standard intake procedures at the TWR included assessment of resident's Adverse Childhood Experiences Score (ACES) by trained mental health professionals. These scores were provided to the researcher through permission obtained from the TWR during the IRB process and approval. Informed consent and participant assent were reviewed by the researcher before the beginning of the study with each individual participant.

All individuals in the EAP Rhythmic Riding programming at the TWR elected to participate in the study. A total of six individuals who met inclusion criteria participated in the study. All the participants identified as females within the age range of 13 to 16 years and had been identified by the TWR as CSEY. None of the participants had engaged in EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions in the past. Participants chose their own pseudonyms to be used in the study. Due to legal processes requiring discharge, two participants only completed four sessions of the seven session study; however, because these individuals completed an individual interview, as well as four weeks of journaling and equine sessions, their data were included in analysis.

Les. At the time of data collection, Les had been at the TWR for approximately two months. Les was 15-years old and identified as a Native American female who reported her cultural heritage was an important value. Les had a history of abuse and neglect, running away, and sexual exploitation as a runaway, as well as sexual abuse in her home prior to foster care. She presented to the TWR under emergency placement with a history of self-harm, alcohol and marijuana use, in addition to historical diagnoses of PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Les' self-reported Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score is 10 out of 10. Les was only able to complete four weeks of the study due to legal processes.

Mary. Mary arrived at the TWR the day prior to the start of the Rhythmic Riding EAP program. Mary was 13-years old and identified as a Caucasian female. She presented to the TWR voluntarily with reports of abuse and neglect, forced substance use by adults, and commercial sexual exploitation currently under investigation, as well as oppositional and aggressive behavior. Mary is reported to experience cognitive and learning barriers. Her self-reported ACE score is a 7 out of 10.

Jas. At the time of data collection, Jas had been at the TWR for approximately five months. Jas was 16-years old and identified as a Caucasian female. Jas presented to the TWR under emergency placement and with a history of abuse and neglect, sexual assault, and sex trafficking. Jas reported abuse of prescription drugs as well as use of street drugs. Her self-reported ACE score is 7 out of 10. Les was only able to complete four weeks of the study due to legal processes.

Alice. Alice has been placed at the TWR on two occasions. She had been at the TWR for approximately three months prior to the Rhythmic Riding EAP program under emergency placement. Alice was 13-years old and identified as a Caucasian female. Alice presented with a history of abuse and neglect, sex trafficking, running away, street drug use and prescription drug abuse, as well as self-harm and multiple suicide attempts. She also has a legal history related to truancy, criminal mischief, burglary, and disorderly conduct. Alice's self-reported ACE score is 7 out of 10.

Jackie. At the time of data collection, Jackie had been a the TWR for approximately one month. Jackie was 14-years old and identified as a Caucasian female. Jackie presented with a history of abuse and neglect, running away for extended periods, sex trafficking, and street drug use. Her self-reported ACE score is 6 out of 10.

Jay. At the time of data collection, Jay had been at the TWR for approximately four months. Jay was 16-years old and identified as a Native American female who reported her cultural heritage was an important value. Jay presented with a history of abuse and neglect, running away for extended periods, sex trafficking, forced pornography creation, street drug use and prescription drug abuse, miscarriage, self-harm, and multiple suicide attempts. Her self-reported ACE score is 10 out of 10.

4.4. Procedures and Findings

4.4.1. Procedures

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2012) was utilized to conduct this study (Smith et al., 2012). Six steps were followed within the IPA framework to identify sub- and super- ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2012). First the researcher attentively read and re-read data and then took notes at the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual levels of the texts (Smith et al., 2012). Next, emergent themes were derived from the first case (Smith et al., 2012). The fourth step involved charting emergent themes across cases, with the researcher commencing the process for each additional case in the group as step five. The sixth step involved identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across cases (Smith et al., 2012). Data sources were collected from one group over a span of three months, including semi-structured interviews, field observations of the Rhythmic Riding EAP program sessions, participant journal entries, and a focus group at the conclusion of the study.

4.4.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In-person individual interviews (Appendix B) occurred in a private room, away from the rest of the group, with only the researcher and participant present. Interview lengths varied between 10 and 36 minutes. Each interview produced a digital recording that was captured by a

recording device and then transferred to a password-protected file storage maintained by NDSU. The recordings were deleted from the audio recording device. Interviews were de-identified prior to being transcribed by REV.com. Interview transcripts were saved to the same password protected file storage maintained by NDSU as the audio recordings.

4.4.3. Reflective Journals

Each participant received a journal with six prompts (Appendix C) at the beginning the Rhythmic Riding EAP program. Participants were given 15 minutes to respond to each prompt after each weekly session. Journals remained with participants during the course of the study, and participants were allowed to keep the journals at the conclusion of the study. Copies of the journal entry responses were made at the conclusion of the study and stored in a locked container in a locked office before they were destroyed. Due to unexpected discharge, both Les' and Jas' journal entries were copied and collected after they had completed four entries and their journals were returned to them.

4.4.4. Observational Field Notes

Observational field notes were taken on seven different occasions, including before and after Rhythmic Riding EAP sessions, semi-structured interviews, and the concluding focus group. The researcher observed seven Rhythmic Riding EAP sessions, with each lasting approximately 90-120 minutes. The facilitator of the group was a trained social worker. The horse handler had extensive experience with horses as well as training in equine and trauma-informed mental health intervention. The horses involved in the group included six quarter horses named Spook, Bear, Hollywood, Big Sam, Moose, and Blue. The horses had been purchased for the TWR by the horse handler from various locations and used in equine

programming at the TWR. The horses chose the participants and remained with their paired participant for the duration of the program.

During the groups, the participants caught, groomed, bridled, and mounted the horses. In addition, the participants rode the horses bareback around the oval-shaped arena while following therapeutic prompts from the facilitator. The participants chose songs that were used for the playlist during the riding portion of the session, and these songs were played over speakers in the arena. The only stated goal of the group was for participants to match the rhythm of the music, to the rhythm of their bodies, to the rhythm of their horses. The researcher was instructed to stand in the middle of the arena with the horse handler while taking notes as a safety precaution and to minimize distraction for the horses and participants. The facilitator rode a horse with the participants during the group sessions.

4.4.5. Focus Group

One focus group was conducted at the conclusion of the program. During the focus group the researcher asked the participants six open-ended prompts (Appendix D) to gather data related to their experiences in the program. The focus group produced a recording that was captured using a recording device and transferred to the file storage maintained by NDSU. The recording was deleted from the audio recording device and de-identified prior to being transcribed by REV.com. The focus group transcript was saved to the same password protected file storage as the other interview audio recordings.

4.5. Interpretation

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of CSEY in a residential EAP program, explore the impacts of an EAP Rhythmic Riding program for CSEY, and identify potential implications for EAP programs for CSEY in residential treatment. There is no current

research regarding the use of equine therapies for this population. This researcher identified emerging themes for each participant initially and superordinate themes across all participants in the group. Table 1 provides an outline of the participant sub and superordinate themes. Each participant identified components of the superordinate themes; however, there was some variation in the subthemes. Les, Jas, and Jay identified aspects of all nine of the subthemes. Mary identified aspects of five subthemes, including Self-Confidence and Sense of Worth, Sense of Family and Belonging, Equine Competence, Increased Distress Tolerance, and Increased Emotion Regulation. Alice identified aspects of six subthemes, including Self-Confidence and Sense of Worth, Mirroring and Identification, Understanding, Equine Competence, Increased Distress Tolerance, and Increased Emotion Regulation. Finally, Jackie identified aspects of eight subthemes, including Self-Confidence and Sense of Worth, Interpersonal Empathy, Mirroring and Identification, Understanding, Trust, Equine Competence, Increased Distress Tolerance, and Increased Emotion Regulation. Superordinate and subthemes will be introduced with examples from corresponding participants.

Table 1*Individual Themes and Superordinate Themes*

Participant	Individual Themes	Superordinate Themes
Les	Self-confidence and Sense of Worth. Interpersonal Empathy. Mirroring and Identification. Understanding. Sense of Family and Belonging. Trust. Equine Competence. Increased Distress Tolerance. Increased Emotion Regulation.	Shifting Relationship with Self and Others. Equine Therapeutic Factors. Learning New Skills.
Mary	Self-confidence & Sense of Worth. Sense of Family and Belonging. Equine Competence. Increased Distress Tolerance. Increased Emotion Regulation.	Shifting Relationship with Self and Others. Equine Therapeutic Factors. Learning New Skills.
Jas	Self-confidence & Sense of Worth. Interpersonal Empathy. Mirroring and Identification. Understanding. Sense of Family and Belonging. Trust. Equine Competence. Increased Distress Tolerance. Increased Emotion Regulation.	Shifting Relationship with Self and Others. Equine Therapeutic Factors. Learning New Skills.
Alice	Self-confidence & Sense of Worth. Mirroring and Identification. Understanding. Equine Competence. Increased Distress Tolerance. Increased Emotion Regulation.	Shifting Relationship with Self & Others. Equine Therapeutic Factors. Learning New Skills.
Jackie	Self-confidence & Sense of Worth. Interpersonal Empathy Mirroring and Identification. Understanding. Trust. Equine Competence. Increased Distress Tolerance. Increased Emotion Regulation.	Shifting Relationship with Self & Others. Equine Therapeutic Factors. Learning New Skills.
Jay	Self-confidence & Sense of Worth. Interpersonal Empathy. Mirroring and Identification. Understanding. Sense of Family and Belonging. Trust. Equine Competence. Increased Distress Tolerance. Increased Emotion Regulation.	Shifting Relationship with Self & Others. Equine Therapeutic Factors. Learning New Skills.

4.5.1. Superordinate Theme 1: Shifting Relationship with Self and Others

All six participants throughout the course of the program spoke about changes related to their relationship with themselves and others. Each participant spoke about how they noticed changes in how they relate to themselves and growth in their sense of self. The researcher also observed and noted shifts in participants' ways of experiencing and relating to others. Four of the participants spoke about how they began to develop a sense of mutual empathy for participants. Within this superordinate theme, two subthemes were identified: (a) Self-confidence and Sense of Worth, and (b) Interpersonal Empathy.

4.5.1.1. Self-Confidence and Sense of Worth

Each participant highlighted a growth experience related to their sense of confidence and worth as a result of engagement in the Rhythmic Riding sessions. Participants spoke about feeling accomplished, more connected and at ease with themselves and others, as well as gaining back aspects of themselves they felt were lost due to their trauma experiences. Some participants described this growth as a largely internal process, while others spoke directly about how the process of engagement with others in the Rhythmic Riding sessions impacted their growing sense of worth. Below are excerpts and examples that demonstrate how each participant displayed a growing self-confidence and sense of worth.

Initially, Les demonstrated a lack of confidence in her ability to engage in the sessions and interact with the horses, calling herself "skittish" and refusing to mount Big Sam. When asked how the Rhythmic Riding experience influenced her relationship with herself or how she thinks of herself after engagement in the program, Les shared: "I feel like I trust myself more in situations like that. I feel like it's definitely challenging to overcome it, but I did it and I'm proud for doing it." Les' growing sense of pride in herself was also observable in her progressively

more relaxed posture and natural, rather than stiff, body movement while she rode Big Sam over her weeks of Rhythmic Riding.

Alice identified another aspect of a growing self-confidence by speaking to greater “ease” with herself as she participated in the sessions and connected with the horses:

I don't know. My relationship with myself...I don't know but it's helping. I don't know. I'm starting to feel more at ease with myself, dealing with the horses again because that's how it was last time when I was here, when I started dealing with the horses.

Alice further described a growing sense of connectedness with and value of herself in contrast to her prior self-deprecating descriptions of herself as “difficult” with others.

Jackie shared how observing the horses engage in the activities of the session strengthened her perceived ability to participate: “If [the horse is] like, I don't know, if he's doing something, we're like, ‘You know what? I can do that too.’” Jackie shared during her interview that despite initial hesitancy and fear of the reactions of others, the EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions gave her opportunity to participate in ways that expanded her sense of worth. At the end of an emotionally and physically challenging session, Jackie shared, “I feel proud of myself.”

During Mary’s interview, her eyes lighted up and she smiled as she explained her growth related to feeling more at ease with herself and with the horses. She shared, “Maybe like, I'm comfortable with the horses.” The researcher observed a growing confidence in Mary’s sense of touch as she stroked and interacted with the horses as more natural and less rigid in her muscle movement. Mary also began to speak more confidently with other participants and staff as she progressed through the group, asking for help and chatting with others. Although Mary had initially described herself as “shy” at the beginning to the group, she grew in her ability to connect confidently with others and appreciate herself.

Jas' growing self-confidence and sense of worth was articulated as an ability to influence those around her for the better. Despite reporting in earlier sessions, "I don't like people," Jas shifted into valuing her positive potential:

[Rhythmic Riding] just makes an impact on me and my heart...I just want to make my mark on the world and make something better, because you can make a good impact and you can make a bad impact. And I want my positivity to impact on the world.

Recognizing her own potential for negative or positive outcomes, Jas began to more deeply value herself and the ways she was empowered through Rhythmic Riding to impact the world around her.

The ways in which Jay's self-confidence shifted might be most clearly articulated out of all the participants. She shared that Rhythmic Riding made deep impacts on her sense of self:

I never really liked myself. I never loved myself. I didn't care about myself and then let other people show me that's really what I was like. They treated me, not like a person. They treated me like something you find on the floor and throw it away. Now, today, I love myself and I care for myself. I care about my future and the people that come into my life.

Jay references the ways in which her sense of self had been betrayed through experiences of exploitation. However, Rhythmic Riding shifted the ways she learned to value herself and her future. In addition, Jay highlighted another aspect of her sense of worth that had been restored as a result of Rhythmic Riding despite being lost due to sexual trauma:

What Moose has taught me, what he's brought back, I didn't know I could get back. There's one big thing that he's brought back, and that's my pureness within myself. Because I'm pretty sure there's other girls like me out there that didn't get a chance to give away their pureness freely, and it was taken from them. Moose taught me that I still have it. I still have all of it. That's the biggest gift anybody could give to me.

4.5.1.2. Interpersonal Empathy

Four of the participants demonstrated a growing awareness of others and an empathetic stance. Participants spoke about a dynamic process of giving and receiving mutual empathy during the program. In addition, the researcher observed participants helping others in need

while they engaged in the therapeutic prompts of the sessions and with the horses. The quotes below are taken from participant data and describe their growing experience of interpersonal empathy.

Les shared, “I feel like just as much as I'm learning and experiencing, [other participants] are too, and so I shouldn't get frustrated with them or anxious around them. They don't know what they're doing too.” Les here highlights the anxieties related to encountering new experiences in the sessions as well as an empathetic understanding of other participants’ potential struggles.

Jas, who often described herself as having a difficult relational life, reported a growing awareness of other participants, their emotional experience, and a common humanity with others:

I learned all the girls have their own emotions and own feelings, and some of them try to hold it in and they don't really show it. But when they're doing it, they smile or just calm, they go to sleep on their horse. It just shows that we're all human in a way. Well, we are all human, but it shows that we're all human and we all have emotions and that nobody's the same. And that's kind of what it shows to me.

Through the experience of the Rhythmic Riding sessions, Jas was not only able to appreciate the differences between her and other participants but also empathically relate to others.

During her interview, Jackie shared awareness of her impact on others, “my mood affects other people's mood,” as a growing sense of interpersonal empathy. Furthermore, Jackie demonstrated empathy in her actions toward others. For example, Jackie assisted Alice in mounting her horse during a later equine session by repeatedly moving the large mounting block and helping Alice steady her horse. Jackie had not demonstrated this empathetic, collaborative attitude in previous sessions. During the next session, Jackie was able to ask for and receive help from others in ways she had not experienced before. Despite previously refusing to ask for help from others, Jackie asked the horse handler for assistance mounting her horse.

Jay described a relational shift from engaging in strategies of disconnection to authentically connecting with others as a result of the Rhythmic Riding sessions:

Everybody tried, and they succeeded at making a connection with me. My own parents couldn't even make a connection with me...I wasn't a kid that talked. I wasn't a kid that came out of my room. I don't know what kind of kid I was. I was just lost. As much as I didn't want any relationship with anybody and how much hate I carried for people, because of the other people in my life and what they did to me, it was really hard for staff and residents. But the more time they put into the relationship, and I saw the time that they were putting in, I started putting my time in. Because they were showing that they wanted a healthy person in their life and for me to become a healthy person, and I've grown so much from where I first was before I got here. I don't even, I barely remember who I was when I first got here. All I remember is this person that I am now because of the help I got and the people I had by my side.

Jay speaks to the painful isolation of disconnection and the ways in which others were able to connect with her through the program. In addition, Jay captures a dynamic process by which interpersonal empathy can both be experienced and returned within relationship, creating further connection.

4.5.2. Superordinate Theme 2: Equine Therapeutic Factors

Each participant described and demonstrated ways in which the horses uniquely contributed to their therapeutic experience in the program. Five of the participants spoke about how the horses enabled them to identify their own experiences and relational patterns as well as facilitated a sense of emotional validation and experiential understanding. Four of the participants described how greater trust and a sense of belonging were created by being with the horses. Within this superordinate theme, four subthemes were identified: (a) Mirroring and Identification, (b) Understanding, (c) Sense of Family and Belonging, and (d) Trust.

4.5.2.1. Mirroring and Identification

Horses' ability to mirror participants' behavior and mood has been noted in the equine therapeutic literature (Trotter & Baggerly, 2019; Waring, 1983). Participants spoke about how this mirroring allowed them to identify both with the horse and with their own experiences in

real-time. This mirroring allowed participants to identify relational patterns, recalibrate problematic behavior, and gain insight into their thoughts, moods, and actions. The researcher noted how the horses would take deep breaths with their paired participant during the equine sessions. This mirroring happened with each participant a number of times throughout nearly every session after participants were prompted to take deep breaths during Rhythmic Riding.

Les directly speaks to how the mirroring she experienced with her horse through deep breathing helped her feel a connection and bond of safety with her horse despite her fears related to riding. She explained:

And this was my first day ever riding a horse. And at first I felt wobbly, like I was going to fall off, and I wanted to get off...but I just, I really liked how the way that when I breathed, the horse took a deep breath. And so I just stayed on because I liked that, just being connected with the horse. And I feel like our thoughts were connected with because Big Sam is so gentle and I love animals, or just being gentle like that.

In addition to mirroring with Big Sam through deep breathing, Les also described other physical connections she experienced while riding at the end of one of the sessions: “He breathes with me. I move my hips with him. It’s like Bluetooth. I felt like I was in rhythm with him.” Despite the jarring experience of relational disconnection through traumatic life experiences, Rhythmic Riding enabled Les to feel a mirroring connection and safety with her horse.

Alice and her horse, Bear, may have demonstrated some of the most problematic mirroring. Bear tried to buck Alice off multiple times the course of Rhythmic Riding. During one session, the facilitator asked Alice what she thought Bear was trying to tell her when he attempted to buck her off. Alice responded, “I think he’s trying to tell me he’s sick of my shit.” In her journal that day, Alice similarly wrote, “he remindz me I need to quit my shit. he's probably annoyed of how touchy I am 😞.” Alice frequently displayed oppositional and contradictory behavior during the sessions. During the focus group at the conclusion of the program, Alice admitted that she would covertly and frequently kick Bear to make him bolt or

trot, but would then pull tight on the reins to hold him back. During her interview, Alice described how observing her horse helped her to identify her own problematic behavior and also become more accepting of Bear and his needs:

I don't know, Bear doesn't do what I would like him to do, but then it's okay because I don't do things that people like me to do all the time, so it's okay, I let it go. It's not that big of a deal.

Similarly, Jas shared in her interview how she recognized some of the more difficult aspects of herself in her horse: “Well, my horse is a dick. He's mean, but he's kind of like me, because I don't like people either.” In a journal entry, she described how her horse would often attempt to bully or bite other horses, adding that despite this behavior, “I love him he’s a lot like me.” In response to another prompt regarding how she thought the horses experienced her, Jas shared, “cause my horse fights with people and is a dick like me and I have to calm him down which I relate to a lot.” Jas was able to identify behaviors in herself that were problematic given the externalized behavior she observed in her horse. This mirroring and identification was one step for Jas in developing more helpful relational skills throughout the program.

In addition to behavior, Jackie highlighted the ways in which her emotional experience could be identified through mirroring with her horse:

I realized that my mood kind of affects my horse too. So today I was kind of grumpy this morning. So my horse, I think that's why he didn't like me today. And then I was tired, really everyone was tired, so the horses were tired. So my mood affects the horse.

During the session Jackie referenced in her interview, Blue had been particularly unwilling to cooperate with her, jerking on the reins and repeatedly making it difficult for her to mount him. Through identification and mirroring, Jackie was able to recognize how his behavior was related to her own mental and emotional state; thus, enabling her to make helpful behavioral changes and reconnect with her horse.

Jay shared a pivotal therapeutic moment from her experience of mirroring in the sessions. During this session, Moose was the only horse laying in the dirt. Moose refused to get up and let Jay groom or bridle him. Jay shared what she experienced in this moment:

They [the horses] both told me that giving up is an option. You could stay in the dirt, or you don't want to stay in the dirt. You could always pick yourself back up, because it's just another bump in the road. They've taught me the paths in life, which ones to take and which one's not... That's the part where you've got to be patient, and you ain't going to get on the horse right away. There's going to be time where they want to be stubborn, just like you. They want to act the way you do. You give that time, because nothing's easy in life. Sometimes you're just going to have to wait there until you are ready or whether the horse is ready.

According to Jay, her horse knew her internal conflict related to giving up or continuing in her program. Moose's ability to non-verbally mirror this reality in his behavior during session was deeply meaningful for Jay in considering and adapting her own internal processes and behavior.

4.5.2.2. Understanding

Participants frequently spoke about feeling understood by the horses, having their emotions validated, and how this understanding was different from prior engagement in other therapy formats. For most of the participants, there was a stated belief that the horses demonstrated a level of understanding that had not been felt in other therapy experiences or with other therapists. This understanding was sometimes described as a shared communication through body language. Les explained:

I feel like talking to the horse was the best because, yeah, talking to him through body language. I feel like that was very exciting because I feel like he just understood me, you know?... Like a lot of the times people don't understand you when you say something and that's why sometimes people try to do it through body language, whether it's anger or sadness or trying to control something. I felt like when I was speaking to him through his language, he just understood me. And I just felt heard kind of.

Les shared how communicating non-verbally with her horse through body language made her feel heard, understood, and engaged on a deep level she did not often experience with other

people. With Big Sam, Les felt accepted and spoken to; with others, she often felt that communication through body language was indicative of a break in communication.

For Alice, it was important to assert that the experience of being understood by the horses was facilitated without words. Alice shared in her interview:

I don't know. Okay, not saying it, like you're not expressing how you feel. Like in therapy, you express how you feel, you use your words. You don't have to use your words, you don't have to do really anything to let everything out because I don't know, the horses also understand your emotions and understand your feelings so that's a big... yeah.

During our focus group, she repeated, “You don't have to say anything. I already said this before. You don't have to say anything and the horses will understand how you feel.” Alice shared how this experience of being heard and understood helped her to accept, understand, and release her emotions as well as stay focused on the session activities. She also highlights how feeling understood by the horses required minimal disclosure from the participants.

Jas expressed a similar experience that was uniquely related to the sense of understanding she felt from the horses. The primary aspect she identified was feeling that her emotions were understood in ways that the horses uniquely facilitated in contrast to prior therapy experiences:

Well, equine therapy, it is more like you can let your feelings out with the horse. And you're not alone because you have the horse with you, because horses have feelings too. And when you're alone like therapy, you kind of just feel targeted. Well at least I feel targeted, and I feel like I'm alone. But when I'm with the horse I can just be calm and just chill.

The emotional understanding that Jas experienced helped her to feel connected and stay present to the non-judgmental, cooperative approach offered by her horse. This experience led her out of isolation and into acceptance of positive connection.

Jay's experience of understanding was related to not only emotional validation but also a sense that the horses knew about her trauma in ways that others did not. When asked about what she thinks about during the sessions, Jay shared:

My life, I don't even know why my life comes up. Because in therapy group with people, I don't want to talk about my life. I don't want to remember my life, anything. Working with the horses, it's a different type of listening. You don't have to say anything, but they already know.

Researcher: Would you feel comfortable giving me an example of one of the thoughts about your life that's come up for you?

Jay: The abuse I've endured from my family and my family's people.

Researcher: You feel like the horses already knew about that?

Jay: Yeah. They sensed the hurt and pain that I held in. I don't even know what I'm going to do when I leave.

Jay highlights the valuable quality of the horses to understand her abuse in ways that she had not experienced from other people. She felt that she did not have to disclose anything nor recount her trauma narrative for the horses to understand and treat her with acceptance and care.

4.5.2.3. Sense of Family and Belonging

Four of the participants highlighted how being part of the Rhythmic Riding EAP program gave them a sense of family and belonging that was deeply meaningful. Participants spoke about various forms of relationship and connection. Participants also described the ways in which they felt protective of and protected by their horses, much like a family unit. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the sense of family and belonging was that participants felt a sense of autonomy in choosing growth-fostering relationships with the horses.

In her journal, Les wrote, “Today in rhythmic ride I felt chill. My horse was calm until another horse bit my babies ass. I got mad at first and wanted my horse bite em back.” Les describes here a protective, even maternal, stance toward her “baby,” Big Sam. At the end of the session, the participants circled around the center of the arena and were processing their experiences in group. The researcher was standing near the horse handler and facilitator when Big Sam was bit from behind by Spook. The researcher observed Les move her horse away from

Spook and attempt to soothe him by petting his neck and telling him repeatedly, “You’re okay.” After this happened, the facilitator led a discussion of what had happened and how Les had responded to the situation by caring for her “baby” as well as how the other participants and horses were all connected as one big group. In other words, the impact to one of the horses impacted all the horses and participants, much like a family.

Jas expressed a similar sentiment as Les in that she described her relationship with Spook as maternal. Jas wrote in her journal, “I’ve always rode Spook and just always felt a connection with him. That’s why I call him my son.” Beyond this experience of familial connection with her horse, Jas also highlighted how the Rhythmic Riding group broadened her sense of belonging with other participants. She shared the sense of belonging she experienced after the Rhythmic Riding sessions:

And we just chill and everyone has a good week after that. Saturday, Sunday, we’re just all friends in all the group. We’re like a big family kind of. And when they’re calm and everything, we all get along because I think of them as like my sisters and it’s actually pretty cool.

Jas reported how the Rhythmic Riding sessions created group cohesion and a sense of familial belonging among participants in the days following the group. Additional benefits of this belonging led to greater interpersonal connection.

Mary, who was often reserved during the course of the program, wrote in her journal about how she felt a growing relationship with the horses. She shared, “I have a good relationship with the horses and I felt that Hollywood liked me more than last week.” In this disclosure, Mary also highlighted a growing sense of belonging with her horse, Hollywood. She shared how she felt more “liked” by her horse and how her relationship was positive.

In several journal entries and her interview, Jay described the experience of choosing and creating her own family as a result of Rhythmic Riding. In her interview response, she also

underlined an experience of feeling safe and protected by the horses in a way she had not experienced from other males in the past:

Now that I'm here, I'm doing really good. I'm happy. I created a family here, not just with people, but with the animals. The horses, to me, are human beings. That's why I call Big Sam and Moose my big brothers, because that's just the connection I feel. I could talk to them, and I could hear them say something. That's how strong the connection is with me and my brothers, because I've never had brothers growing up, older brothers. This is the first time that I ever feel a male person is trying to help me and not trying to do whatever else. That respect grew, the loyalty grew, the love, just everything. I don't think I'd be the same without Moose and Big Sam.

Not only did Jay feel like she could communicate with her chosen family, she also felt a deep sense of mutual respect and commitment from the horses. She further explains how she perceived her own role in the family she created with the horses:

[The horses were] treating me like a princess, like a little girl. Made me happy and gave me memories that I thought I'd never get to have. I never got to be a kid, but he let me be a kid around him.

Jay describes how the horses helped to re-pattern her life experience without a childhood and allowed her to experience herself as a beloved little sister within the family she created.

4.5.2.4. Trust

Four of the participants displayed and spoke of a growing sense of trust as a result of working with the horses. Participants frequently distinguished their ability to trust the horses as much easier and natural than learning to trust other people. At the same time, growing trust with the horses was often described as translating into more trusting relationships with others over time. Notably, some participants felt that regaining trust was the most important aspect of their program experience.

Les described how exciting it was to feel a sense of trust in the horses when it had been difficult to trust other people in the past: “Like it was too good to be true almost because the horses, you can just trust them and you don't even know them, you know?” In her interview, Les

shared that the ease with which she felt she could trust the horses almost seemed “unreal” to her. Les shared that as she grew to trust the horses, she was also able to trust other participants more deeply:

But I was just walking side by side with another pair, and I trusted the other horse that he wasn't going to do anything. And I trusted my horse and I trusted the peer that was on the other horse. And so neither of them was anxious, or it was me - I was the only one who was anxious, but not even really anxious because I was on the horse.

The trusting connection Les shared with her horse opened therapeutic opportunities to grow in trust with other participants and their horses. Les was able to set aside her anxiety due to the trust she felt toward her horse.

Jas’ experience of growing trust in Rhythmic Riding shared similarities with Les’ in that connection with the horses was fundamental to developing trust in other relationships. This experience of growing trust with the horses should be contextualized within the frequent relational betrayal experienced by sexually exploited youth, such as Jas. Jas spoke about how trusting a large and powerful animal was paradoxically easier than trusting other people.

The best part for me is getting to have trust, because I have a really big struggle with that and just being able to trust a horse out of everything, an animal, is really crazy because you don't know if he's going to buck you off or just do all that. So the big thing for me was trust. And bareback you're not in support. And that's just the main thing.

Despite concerns about her horse’s behavior, Jas was able to develop trust. Much like the experience of riding bareback, she further described the level of physical and emotional vulnerability she was able to experience within the trusting relationship with her horse: “And the trust is, he knows the path and he knows what he's doing. So then I can just close my eyes and let go of the ropes and just hold onto his back and just calm down.” Jas’ trust in Spook enabled her to engage more deeply in the therapeutic benefits of the Rhythmic Riding sessions.

In response to the journal prompt regarding her relationship with the horses, Jackie wrote, “It is good I love my horse we match and I just trust him.” During one session, the facilitator

asked Jackie how group had gone for her that week. Jackie shared, “Different. I had more trust.” When asked by the facilitator about how the trust was built, Jackie replied, “I listened to him.” Like Jas, Jackie’s willingness to demonstrate vulnerability by listening to her horse was key in developing trust and deriving therapeutic benefits from the sessions.

Jay’s experience highlighted the importance of distinguishing between those who are trustworthy from those who are not. Given her experiences of trauma, this distinction was significant in beginning to rebuild trust in others. Jay shared:

Well, I guess it taught me a bunch of things. It taught me a bunch of characteristics I didn't know I had and emotions that I didn't know I could still feel. Moose and Big Sam really taught me how to trust people, because not everybody's the same.

Jay discusses how the Rhythmic Riding sessions helped to experience trust again, first with her horses and then with others.

4.5.3. Superordinate Theme 3: Learning New Skills

All six participants displayed and spoke about the ways in which they learned new skills as a result of the Rhythmic Riding sessions. Each participant identified new and concrete skills related to working with the horses, including riding and caring for them. Data from all six participants also revealed the development of increased distress tolerance and emotion regulation skills. Within this superordinate theme, three subthemes were identified: (a) Equine Competence, (b) Increased Distress Tolerance, and (c) Increased Emotion Regulation.

4.5.3.1. Equine Competence

All six of the participants spoke about new abilities related to riding and caring for the horses. This equine competence was also observable in the sessions as participants developed new skill sets related working with the horses. Participants described behaviors related to guiding the horses as well as take safety considerations into account for themselves, others, and the horses. Oftentimes, the participants had to utilize assertiveness to successfully engage with the

horses in the sessions, opening up new opportunities and experiences. Equine competencies and safety guidelines were reviewed with the participants at the beginning of the Rhythmic Riding program by the horse handler and facilitator. The participants echo these new skills in the excerpts below.

In addition to the challenge presented by learning new skills, Les describes some of the mechanics of riding her horse and maneuvering in the arena:

The horse, at first when I wanted the horse to turn, it wouldn't turn, and then I was thinking I did something wrong. And so I was trying to experience with it and learn about their kind of signals. And so I bumped him with my right leg and pulled with my left hand. And so he turned right away and then we got back into the rhythm and he was on the track.

Although she felt concerned initially about riding the “right” or “wrong” way, Les learned how to implement her newly taught riding skills to successfully guide her horse. During the Rhythmic Riding sessions, the researcher observed Les grooming, guiding, riding, and mounting her horse with greater skill over time.

Mary highlighted one of the ways that equine competence led to new opportunities outside of the TWR. During her interview, Mary frequently stated that she was now more comfortable being around horses and riding them. Moreover, she shared, “Yeah, and now when I go to my aunt's farm, I can ride her horses.” In addition, Mary highlighted other aspects of equine competence. Mary spoke about her enjoyment of the grooming process, which the participants engaged in at the beginning and end of every session: “I like brushing around them, and I like petting them.” Not only did Mary enjoy these opportunities, she also learned how to care for the horses in ways that demonstrated equine competence.

Jackie spoke about how riding her horse was much easier than she originally anticipated, highlighting the importance of riding posture and mechanics:

I mean, I don't know. I always thought riding a horse would be really hard. But really it's just like, you sit on it and you don't like sit all stiff because that'll shock him. You feel like you're going to fall off and you'll be freaking out and stuff like that. But you really just like, you move with the horse, and you pull on the reins a little bit, if you want it to go left or right. So it's just really simple.

Jackie speaks to the experience of learning how to gently guide her horse rather than attempt to dominate him or passively avoid her riding responsibility. Jackie also displayed an observable and growing equine competence in the way she cared for her horse throughout the sessions.

Jas spoke to some of the safety concerns that participants needed to keep in mind related to their horses. She shared how she had learned to monitor her horse's body language for signs of distress:

Because if they're acting up, if his ears go back, he's going to attack somebody. And you got to know those things because he might bite another horse and then you might have to calm him down and stop him, take a few breaths so he could take breaths with you.

Jas simultaneously highlights the importance of knowing how to calm her horse during these moments as she references taking deep breaths.

Similarly, Alice described equine competence related to being aware of potential safety issues with the horses. Alice shared that during the sessions she thought about many aspects of safety, including the placement of horses in the arena:

All kinds of thoughts. Sometimes I think about... I'm only,...okay, "Spook's out of the barn now so I don't got to worry about somebody always trying to bite my horse" and that was something I always thought about. "Where is this horse?" It's like, "Where is he? I got to stay away from him."

Alice displays awareness of the ways in which horses might interact in negative ways and how to keep herself and others safe during the sessions.

When asked about the behaviors that Jay noticed herself engaging in throughout the Rhythmic Riding sessions, she shared:

Jay: I think guiding people and horses.

Interviewer: How did you guide them?

Jay: Today, as much as Moose wanted to go into the group of curiosity and trying to wander around and not really pay attention, he stuck with what I wanted him to do. There was times where I'd have to put my foot down and redirect him myself.

Jay describes one instance in which participants utilized assertiveness to guide the horses around the arena and away from potentially problematic interactions with other horses.

4.5.3.2. Increased Distress Tolerance

Distress tolerance facilitates change by helping individuals to accept the crises and unavoidable suffering of life through an empowered stance (Linehan, 2013). Distress tolerance may be fortified through exposure to difficult and trying situations. Rhythmic Riding provided a natural context within which participants were exposed to challenging situations in working with others and their horses. The participants often spoke about the experience of discomfort as they engaged in the Rhythmic Riding process. At the same time, they often described the reward of utilizing distress tolerance skills to enjoy the rewards of staying present.

The excerpt from Alice's interview below describes one of the frequent frustrations participants cited in working with the horses:

Alice: And right now me and Bear are like, I don't know... Bear is pretty okay but he's kind of an asshole. Yeah.

Researcher: Yeah.

Alice: And then...

Researcher: Tell me more about how he's an asshole.

Alice: I don't know. He's just like... he's very stubborn. He's very... I don't know. That's actually all and he just doesn't like to listen.

Participants frequently spoke about how their horses were uncooperative and unwilling to receive guidance from their rider. In these moments, participants engaged in observable behaviors, often calling their horses names, sighing deeply, and rolling their eyes. It often took

participants a few moments of silent recollection and sitting through the distress of the present moment before they could regroup and interact with the horses in productive ways.

Les reflected on grappling with discomfort or what she identified as the most challenging aspect of Rhythmic Riding during her interview,

I feel like the hardest part was dealing with being uncomfortable. And I know there's certain situations where, if you're uncomfortable, then you should get out of. But there's going to be sometimes in your life where you're uncomfortable...And so if you're just always comfortable in your life, you're going to stay the same, in the same spot.

In her response, Les displays knowledge of when to utilize distress tolerance skills versus when to leave an unsafe situation. Additionally, Les modeled an observable willingness to utilize her distress tolerance skills when riding Big Sam, creating a bond and connection with him, and gently guiding him when he was uncooperative.

Mary shared how engagement in the Rhythmic Riding sessions helped her to develop distress tolerance skills around the vulnerable experience of getting on the horse: “I feel more comfortable, and I'm acting like I'm not scared to get on the horse.” Mary’s statement reveals how she learned to grow in acceptance of her fear and discomfort. This growth increased her ability to tolerate the distress that was an inherent aspect of the Rhythmic Riding sessions.

Jas described a new understanding of the importance of acceptance and pivoting into more helpful behaviors when encountering distress. In her interview she shared, “And that's what Rhythmic Riding teaches you. So when you ride a horse or just in general in life, you'll learn how to take a breath and just chill.” Through her difficult experience, Jas was able to make a connection between the skills she developed in Rhythmic Riding and the ways she could use these outside the arena.

In one of her journal entries, Jackie shared how she learned to tolerate the distress of new and challenging situations with her horse:

I thought it was cool and there was a couple of times where I got nervous but I did deep breaths and I felt like I was about to fall off at some points but I was able to calm myself down and it was fun and I felt that created a bond with my horse.

In addition to identifying new distress tolerance skills related to deep breathing, Jackie was also able to recognize that her ability to accept present difficulties provided new ground for connection with her horse.

During her interview, Jay stated the importance of responding to challenging situations with distress tolerance skills. Her analogy of the crises and suffering of life to being “stuck” in the “dirt” provided context for her exploration of how to respond in ways that leads to empowerment. Jay shared:

I just hope that the kids around, the kids everywhere know that there's still time to revive from everything. There's still time to regrow, work through everything. You just got to tell yourself that you could do it. It's going to be hard for a little bit, but there's always a rainbow after every storm. It'll get bad before it gets better. I want them to know...that you could stay in the dirt for a little bit and take your time for the little bit that you're sitting in the dirt or laying in the dirt. You got to realize that time doesn't stop, and don't be stuck on that with the time that you're losing, cause you could be doing something else with. You're going to be pushed to the dirt for a little bit, but it's your choice to get back up.

Jay highlights the importance of personal empowerment as a result of utilizing distress tolerance skills in difficult situations. Distressing situations are bound to impact experience; however, Jay discusses the ways that individuals can productively respond to challenges.

4.5.3.3. Increased Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation skills involve identifying and responding to primary and secondary emotions in ways that do not increase suffering (Linehan, 2013). Participants named a number of often conflicting and challenging feelings as well as the ways they learned to respond to them with emotion regulation skills. In addition, the use of watches for research purposes during Rhythmic Riding was one aspect of participants' experience that was connected to, or provided a

challenge to, emotion regulation. The watches displayed heart rate in numeric format and changed from green to orange to red, dependent on increasing heart rate range.

Les described identifying negative emotions during Rhythmic Riding, such as anxiety and fear, related to working with the horses but also utilizing new emotion regulation skills. For example, Les described how she was able to replace her anxious thoughts with more positive ones, thereby helping her to regulate her emotions and reduce potential suffering:

Whenever subjects like horses come up, I always say, "Oh, I'm so nervous. I don't want to hurt the horse. I don't want to get bucked off," and stuff like that. And they say, they're like, "Well, if you have the mindset that you're going to get bucked off, you're going to get bucked off. That's what it's going to do. But if you're calm, the horse is going to be calm with you and you're going to have a smooth ride."

Les' ability to shift her fear to calm by adjusting her mindset enabled her to remain present in the Rhythmic Riding sessions. The watches also provided Les with an opportunity to grow in her ability to emotionally regulate. When asked during her interview how she experienced the watches, Les shared:

So the watches, I kept looking down at it because I thought I was so anxious. But I looked down at it, and I was at only 75. And I was on the horse, and I kept looking down, and I was at 66. When I looked down it was 85, but it was still in the same range. It was never over 100. And I just expected that it was going to be in red because I was nervous. But I guess I wasn't, I guess I was just calmer than I thought I'd be.

Les describes how the watches helped her identify her emotions, including feeling "anxious" and "nervous," as well as incorporate a different perspective when she assessed how she was feeling. Given that the watches indicated she was emotionally regulating "in the green," Les was able to reframe her experience from one that was anxiety-filled to a calming encounter.

Jas also shared ways in which she grew in her ability to identify and regulate emotions throughout the sessions as well as how she observed others developing these skills:

I learned that I'm a lot different from other people. I have different values and just different emotions. And during rhythmic riding, I just let my emotions out and it actually helps a lot...So I don't know, [Rhythmic Riding] just keeps me calm and it helps me let go

of my emotions...And then as I already know myself, I'm just learning about myself more and more.

Jas was able to draw distinctions between her emotions and others' feelings, as well as learn to experience her emotions more fully. Jas shared how she observed other participants growing in their ability to emotionally regulate with the horses. She reflected, "I feel like some of the girls are able to let go of their pain and just put it onto the horse, and they are a lot calmer once they get out, and they're not as bitchy." Jas speaks to both an experience and release of emotion she observed in herself and the other participants that led to therapeutic benefits.

Similarly, when asked about what feelings come up for her during Rhythmic Riding, Alice shared that the arena setting and work with the horses helped her to identify and understand her emotions more clearly:

I don't know. It kind of helps me with my emotions, and it helps me kind of recognize what's causing me to feel that emotion. Like it's easier to recognize my feelings in the barn than it is like when I'm outside of the barn, so that's how I feel. Yeah.

Alice describes how the context, setting, and activities of the Rhythmic Riding sessions bolstered her ability to engage in emotion regulation. Although she sometimes questioned the trustworthiness of the watches, Alice also shared during her interview how the watches reflected her feelings with corresponding colors, such as orange and red, related to her emotion regulation.

Mary also demonstrated that Rhythmic Riding helped her to identify emotions, including positive and negative feelings. When asked about what feelings came up for her during the sessions, Mary shared, "Happy," as well as feeling "scared that I was going to fall off the horse." As the researcher observed Mary throughout the sessions, it became clear that she grew in her ability to choose to emotionally regulate, accepting her fear along with her happiness and excitement. Mary did this by asking for help from staff when needed, continuing to try to connect with her horse, and taking deep breaths while experiencing difficult emotions.

Jackie also named a number of mixed emotions that came up for her during the sessions:

Mad, whenever [my horse] wouldn't listen to me. And calm too, I guess...I don't know. Whenever he would... Kind of excited too, and happy, whenever he would do what I wanted him to do. And then it was exciting, and I was happy.

Jackie speaks to the ways in which primary and secondary emotions impacted her during the Rhythmic Riding sessions. Although she largely describes her emotions as linked to her horse's behavior, she also highlights how choosing to regulate allowed her to move from more difficult emotions to positive ones during the sessions, thereby eliminating further personal pain.

Jackie also described she could observe the watches aligning with her emotional experience. She called the watches "cool," adding, "[the watch] can tell your heartbeat and tracks it. Then you have to look at times that it up and times it went down. You're kind of able to see it." During the focus group, Jackie talked about how the watches seemed to sync with her feelings, "Like, when I'm calm, it's down. But whenever I'm super anxious. It's higher."

In her journal, Jay discussed how learning emotion regulation skills is an ongoing practice. She shared how she had learned more about her feelings and a growing ability to be patient:

I can be calm to an extent. I know I still got learning to do & I see others do too. Some others need more learning, some need a little extent. Overall the rhythmic ride was beneficial to me because it taught me more patience.

In her interview, Jay also discussed how this growing patience was related to her emotion regulation by learning to "feel and not hide my emotions." Throughout the Rhythmic Riding experience, Jay became more connected with herself and her emotions, learning to eliminate further suffering.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Introduction

In Chapter One, the researcher reviewed gaps in the treatment of CSEY as well as proposed a study exploring the lived experiences of CSEY at a TWR in a Rhythmic Riding EAP program. In Chapter Two, the researcher reviewed the literature related to work with CSEY and relevant interventions of equine therapies. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology was proposed in Chapter Three to explore the lived experiences of CSEY in EAP during residential treatment. Chapter Four presented the findings of this study. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the findings in light of the current literature regarding CSEY and EAP, outlines the limitations of the study, and offers implications and suggestions for EAP programming.

5.2. Discussion of Findings

The findings are discussed with respect to each research question, including the overarching questions and two secondary questions. The researcher was primarily interested in capturing thick descriptions of the CSEY experiences in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program. Three superordinate themes, including (a) Shifting Relationships with Self and Others, (b) Equine Therapeutic Factors, and (c) Learning New Skills were identified. Within these superordinate themes, several subthemes were identified, including (a.1.) Self-confidence & Sense of Worth, (a.2.) Interpersonal Empathy, (b.1.) Mirroring and Identification, (b.2.) Understanding, (b.3.) Sense of Family and Belonging, (b.4.) Trust, (c.1.) Equine Competence, (c.2.) Increased Distress Tolerance, and (c.3.) Increased Emotion Regulation. The themes that emerged deepened descriptive experience and enlarged implications for CSEY therapeutic programming.

5.2.1. How Do CSEY Survivors Perceive an EAP Rhythmic Riding Program?

This study was particularly interested in exploring CSEY survivors' experiences in the EAP program, including how these experiences influenced their treatment process. To answer the overarching research question, the researcher asked interview and focus group questions that explored the participants' overall experience within the EAP Rhythmic Riding program and what they learned as a result of program participation, as well as what they considered the "best" and "hardest" parts of the EAP sessions. In addition, participants were encouraged to explore these topics in their journal prompts and were observed during the sessions to gather additional data. Participant data indicated an overall positive perception of the EAP program and described overcoming challenges, with identification of personal growth in a number of areas at the conclusion of the program.

This study is unique in that there is no known literature specifically investigating the use of EAP for CSEY. However, participant experiences and challenges to healing were consistent with literature from each of these research areas. More specifically, participants' experiences were consistent with the reported risk factors of CSEY, including multiple experiences of abuse, including childhood sexual abuse, rape, and emotional abuse (Fedina et al., 2019), as well as physical abuse or assault (Kenny et al., 2021), running-away from home, and using drugs and alcohol, Panlilio et al. (2018). Mental health realities, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Ravi et al., 2017) as well as non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and attempts were also consistent with participant experience prior to beginning the EAP program. These experiences are important to identify in participant experience as they were referenced by participants during data collection and contextualize their particular challenges and growth experiences in the EAP program.

In addition, participants reported that they perceived the EAP Rhythmic Riding program opening up new opportunities. One of the opportunities cited by participants, was the chance to develop equine competence. Participants frequently spoke about and demonstrated concrete skills related to caring for their horses, including catching, bridling, grooming, mounting, and riding the horses bareback. This finding is consistent with the existing literature related to equine therapies in that participants report development of new equine skills and a sense of responsibility for their horses (Burgon, 2011; Chardonens, 2009; Shelef et al., 2019).

All participants indicated that the EAP program was a positive, therapeutic experience uniquely facilitated by the horses. Despite the challenges presented by prior trauma and commercial sexual exploitation, participants frequently spoke about the healing shift that resulted from experiencing mirroring and identification, understanding, sense of family and belonging, as well as trust with the horses in the EAP sessions. Participants described the healing connection with the horses as the “best” part of their experience. These findings align with similar research that has highlighted the helpfulness of equine facilitated interventions in experiences of empathic understanding, emotional validation, and non-judgment (Buzel, 2016; Dell et al., 2011; Kern-Godal et al., 2016)..

5.2.2. What Are the Impacts of an EAP Rhythmic Riding Program for CSEY?

To answer this additional question, the perceptions of CSEY survivors regarding their relationships with themselves and others while in the EAP program were explored. Moreover, interview and focus group questions as well as observation sought to capture the thematic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of CSEY survivors while in the EAP program. Like individuals in other EAP programs, the participants in this study reported a shifting relationship with themselves and others. As in the available literature, participants spoke about growing ease with

themselves, as well as self-confidence and sense of worth (Bizub et al., 2003; Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2017; Ewing, 2007). Just as participants in this study spoke of regaining a sense of trust in others and in themselves, literature regarding participants in equine therapeutic programs highlighted the healing of betrayal and trauma (Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2017). Experiences of interpersonal empathy were also frequent in the participant responses and align with outcomes from other equine studies (Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2017; Lanning et al., 2017).

In addition, participants in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program described and demonstrated increased ability to respond to distress as well as emotionally regulate. These skills were frequently cited as positive changes in participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Moreover, increased distress tolerance and emotional regulation are crucial in responding to mental health needs. Like other individuals in EAP programs, the participants in this study cited therapeutic benefits related to reduction in problematic mental health symptoms (Burgon, 2011; Burgon et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2018), such as PTSD (Johnson et al., 2018; Romaniuk et al., 2018; Shelef et al., 2019), anxiety and depression (Acri et al., 2021; Alfonso et al., 2015; Earles et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2017), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Arnold et al., 1985) and substance use (Dell et al., 2011), among other diagnoses (Chardonnens, 2009; Schultz et al., 2006). Like other equine intervention research findings, participants spoke about feeling more calm as well as less anxious, fearful, and nervous when encountering challenges in the sessions (Sheade, 2021).

5.2.3. What Are the Implications for EAP Programs for CSEY in Residential Treatment?

To answer the final question, participants were asked to compare and contrast their experiences in other therapy programs with their experience in the EAP program. Participants spoke about the equine therapeutic factors and ways the horses uniquely facilitated their

treatment process. Overall, participants spoke more highly of the EAP program in contrast to other, more traditional therapies they had engaged in, such as talk therapy. Participants spoke about the ways in which the horses demonstrated understanding, patience, and collaboration in ways previously unexperienced by participants in other therapy formats. Given the findings of the study, residential treatment centers serving CSEY may benefit from continuing to explore the use of EAP for CSEY.

At the same time, participants frequently spoke about safety concerns related to riding the horses and problematic behavior from the horses. Although no participants experienced a critical incident with the horses during this study and frequently reframed uncooperative behavior from the horses as overcoming a challenge, real risks related to participant safety remain a consideration in the use of EAP. Some suggest that specific training and social competencies are required for counselors utilizing EAP (Hallberg, 2018; Trotter & Baggerly, 2019). Those involved in facilitating EAP programs for CSEY should carefully evaluate how to maintain safety and respond to evolving situations throughout the session formats and programming, as well as the significant needs in maintaining care of horses.

5.3. Limitations

There are a number of limitations related to the present study. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the methodology applied in this study and utilizes smaller, more homogenous sample sizes to support the layered data analysis process (Smith et al., 2012). The sample size in the study is relatively small, consisting of only six individuals, ages 13-16, within a residential setting in the upper Midwest. Given this sample size, saturation may not have been reached regarding any of the findings of this study.

In conjunction with the limited sample size, the researcher was also careful to operate from a trauma-informed, culturally humble stance, striving to avoid over-interrogation of survivors (Rothman et al., 2018). Similarly, the researcher was mindful to work within a study-specific role, and not primarily within a clinical identity as a trained mental health therapist. This meant that during the study the researcher did not utilize clinical counseling skills to engage in therapeutic interventions with participants. At the same time, this trauma-informed, research-specific role may have limited types and depth of data generated.

Moreover, transferability may also be a limitation due to the nature of the relatively homogenous sample. The study findings are reflective of a limited number of CSEY experiences and do not fully represent the wide range of experiences within commercial sexual exploitation. Also, the sample does not fully represent the diverse identities of CSEY. Considering one aspect of identity, that of cultural factors, two of the individuals in the study identified that their Native American heritage was an important value for them, and the remaining four identified as Caucasian. In light of these limitations related to experience, Smith et al., (2012) stated that findings from studies utilizing IPA are not intended to be fully generalizable (Smith et al., 2012).

5.4. Future Research

To date, there is no research regarding the use of EAP for CSEY. Additional research is needed as awareness of CSEY and the unique treatment considerations of this population grows. The broadening use of EAP for various populations is enriched by this research. Further exploration of the qualitative themes from this study could support additional qualitative, mixed-methods, and quantitative studies. Counseling competency standards related to equine therapies need to be explored and further developed for working with CSEY. Currently, the American Counseling Association (ACA) has developed the Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling

Competencies that discuss the importance of clinical intentionality and ethical obligations in selecting equine interventions (ACA, 2016). However, these competencies only address equine interventions in general and do not discuss specific nuances or guiding practices for EAP.

The incorporation of other data sources may also bolster future research. Studies incorporating biomarker data could measure hormone levels or engage in brain scan imaging to support findings. Some research suggests that equine intervention may lead to decreases in cortisol (Odendall, 2000; Odendall and Mientjes, 2003; Yorke, et al., 2013). The measurement of GABA, norepinephrine, and human growth hormone may also be useful given their neurobiological connection to trauma (Levine, 2017). In addition, the use of assessment tools may also yield important data regarding participant outcomes. Studies of equine intervention frequently cite statistically and/or clinically significant reduction in negative symptoms and increase in adaptive factors on various assessment scales and inventories (Johnson et al., 2018; Lanning et al., 2017; Romaniuk et al., 2018; Shelef et al., 2019). These data sources may yield important findings for research regarding the future use of EAP.

5.5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of CSEY at a TWR in an EAP program. More specifically, the researcher sought to identify implications for EAP programs for CSEY in residential treatment. Three superordinate themes were identified, with nine total subthemes. These themes both added to and extended the current literature regarding treatment of CSEY and EAP programming. In light of existing research and this study, those who work with CSEY are offered complex treatment dynamics to consider in utilizing EAP. Overall, the qualitative themes in this study indicate a variety of positive therapeutic outcomes unique to the

use of horses for CSEY. As advocates for survivors, those interested in the healing of CSEY should take into consideration the benefits of EAP.

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APPENDIX A. CHILD ASSENT FORM

The impact of an equine intervention on social emotional learning in youth

CHILD ASSENT FORM AGES 7-12

I am Jenna Hershberger, MS, LAPC, a doctoral candidate from North Dakota State University. I am doing a study to understand what kids think and feel in the Equine Assisted therapy program with horses at Home On The Range (HOTR). We are asking you to take part in the research study because you are currently in therapy that includes the use of horses at Home On The Range.

For this research, you will wear a watch that measures your heart rate and shows different colors when your heart rate goes up or down. I will also ask you some questions about how you feel about therapy that involves horses, how you think it is different than other therapy you have experienced, and what you think you might have learned. I will keep all your answers private and will not show them to your teacher or parent(s)/guardian. Only people from NDSU and HOTR working on the study will see them.

You will also be given a journal to write your thoughts at the start of the project. There will be six pages that have a question on them that I would like you to answer some time during the 10 weeks you are doing therapy with the horses. It will be questions about your therapy with the horses and how you feel about it. You are free to write as much in the journal as you want, and I will only look at these six journal entries. At the end of the study, I will make copies of what you wrote and return the journal to you to keep for being part of the study. Like the questions I will ask you, only people from NDSU and HOTR working on the study will see them.

At the end of the study, we will meet with the other participants for one focus group. During the focus group you can tell me about what it was like for you to be in therapy with the horses.

I don't think there are any big risks for being part of this study, but you may experience hard feelings from time to time when I ask you about things that have been difficult for you. You never have to answer a question if you feel uncomfortable. You may at times feel confused about the questions, so I will help you as best I can to explain them clearly.

Sometimes we need to show your information to other people. If you tell us that you have been abused or if we think you might be a danger to yourself or other people, we will tell someone who can help, like a member of Home On The Range's staff.

Because you are agreeing to talk with me, you will keep the journal that you are given to write in as your very own. You may be helping me to understand how having therapy that includes horses may help other kids like you.

You should know that:

Revised December 2020
NDSU IRB Child assent form

- You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You won't get into any trouble with NDSU or any staff at Home On The Range if you say no.
- You may stop being in the study at any time. Also, if there is a question you don't want to answer, just leave it blank.
- Your parent(s)/guardian(s) were asked if it is OK for you to be in this study. Even if they say it's OK, it is still your choice whether or not to take part.
- You can ask any questions you have, now or later. If you think of a question later, you or your parents can contact me at jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701-652-5538, or my advisor Dr. Jodi Tangen at jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701-231-7676. You may also contact Dr. Erika Berg who is part of the research team at erika.berg@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701-231-7641.

Sign this form only if you:

- have understood what you will be doing for this study,
- have had all your questions answered,
- have talked to your parent(s)/legal guardian about this project, and
- agree to take part in this research

Your Signature	Printed Name	Date
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Name of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian(s)

Researcher explaining study Signature	Printed Name	Date
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APPENDIX B. YOUTH ASSENT FORM

NDSU North Dakota State University
Counselor Education and Supervision
SGC C117
Fargo, ND 58108-6050
701-231-7202

Home On The Range
16351 I-94
Sentinel Butte, ND 58654-9500
701-872-3745

YOUTH ASSENT FORM

The impact of an equine intervention on social emotional learning in youth

Invitation:

- You are invited to take part in a research study to better understand your experiences of the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding program at Home On The Range and whether you think it helps or not.
- The study is being done by Jenna Hershberger, MS, LAPC, a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision at NDSU. Jenna will be conducting the research and is your contact for the research during the study. She can be reached at jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu or via phone at (701) 652-5538.

What will the research involve? If you agree to participate, you will:

- Wear a watch that measures your heart rate when you are working with the horses. This lets us record your heart rate and see if it changes during the study.
- Be interviewed one-on-one by Jenna Hershberger at Home On the Range at the end of the 10-week program. The interview will be audio recorded and take about 45 minutes and include questions about the experiences in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program. Once Jenna listens to the recording and makes some notes, the recordings will be destroyed.
- Respond to six questions written inside a journal we will give you. You will be given 15 minutes to answer those questions after the weekly sessions during the 10-week EAP Rhythmic Riding Program. Jenna will make copies of the journal entries and then return them to you to keep.
- Participate in one 45-minute focus group at the end of the program to provide feedback about experiences with the horses.

Jenna will watch some of your equine EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions, as long as all group members agree, and will make some notes about what she sees.

What are any risks or benefits for me?

- Risks are that you might feel sad or mad about what you are sharing or feel confused by the questions but I will do my best to help you understand the questions clearly. It is not possible to know all potential risks in research, but there is a chance that someone outside Home On the Range or NDSU would see your data.
- Benefits are by being in this study you will be helping therapists understand how they can improve therapy or how horses might make therapy better.

Do I have to take part in the research?

- Your parent(s) or legal guardian(s) have given their permission for you to be in the research, but

it is still your choice whether or not to take part.

- Even if you say yes now, you can change your mind later, and stop participating.
- Your decision will have no effect (bad or good) on your treatment at Home On The Range or interactions with NDSU.
- There may be some situations that arise that indicate you would be best served by leaving the study, like when you are not following instructions or if you are being harmed.

Who will see my answers and information?

- We will make every effort to keep your information private; only the people helping us with the research will know your answers or see your information.
- Your information will be combined with information from other people in the study. When we write about the study, we will use pseudonyms, and no one will be able to know what your information is.
- If you want to look at the information we collect from you, just let us know, and we will provide it to you. But, you cannot look at information from others in the research.

Sometimes we need to show your information to other people. If you tell us that you have been abused, or if we think that you might be a danger to yourself or other people, we will tell someone who can help, like staff at Home On The Range.

What will I get if I agree to be in the research?

You won't get anything extra for being in the research.

Is there anything else I should know?

If you are injured or hurt because of this research, you should tell your parent(s)/guardian(s) to contact Jenna Hershberger at jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu or via phone number (701) 652-5538. You can also contact her faculty advisor, Dr. Jodi Tangen at jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu or via phone number (701) 231-7676. You may also contact You may also contact Dr. Erika Berg who is part of the research team at erika.berg@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701-231-9611.

Later on, if we discover more information about this research, we will tell you about it so you can decide whether or not you want to stay in the study.

What if I have questions?

- You should ask any questions you have right now, before deciding whether or not to be a part of the research.
- If you or your parent(s) or guardian(s) have questions later, contact us at: jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu or via phone number (701) 652-5538. You can also contact her faculty advisor, Dr. Jodi Tangen at jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu or via phone number (701) 231-7676 or Dr. Erika Berg at Erika.berg@ndsu.edu or by calling (701) 231-9611.
- Your parent(s) or legal guardian will receive a copy of this form to keep.

What are my rights?

- You have rights as a research participant.
- If you have questions about your rights, or would like to talk to someone about this research, you can contact the NDSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) at:
 - 701-231-8995
 - Toll-free at 1-855-800-6717
 - ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu .
- The IRB is responsible to make sure that your rights and safety are protected in this

research.

Sign this form only if you:

- have understood what the research is about and why it's being done,
- have had all your questions answered,
- have talked to your parent(s)/legal guardian about this project, and
- agree to take part in this research

Your Signature

Printed Name

Date

Name of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian(s)

Signature

Printed Name

Date

Researcher explaining study

APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT: PARENT/GUARDIAN PERMISSION FORM



Counselor Education and Supervision
SGC C117
Fargo, ND 58108-6050
701-231-7202

The impact of an equine intervention on social emotional learning in youth

Parent/Guardian Permission Form

This study is being conducted by:

Dr. Erika Berg (Principal Investigator)
Animal Sciences
Erika.berg@ndsu.edu
701-231-7641

Jenna Hershberger, MS, LAPC (Co-Investigator)
Doctoral Candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision
Jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu
701-652-5538

Dr. Jodi Tangen, PhD (Faculty Advisor)
Counselor Education and Supervision Program Director
Jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu
701-231-7676

Key Information about this study:

This consent form is designed to inform you about the study your child is being asked to participate in. Here you will find a brief summary about the study; however, you can find more detailed information later on in the form.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experiences of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) in an Equine Assisted Therapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding program. The program is being implemented as part of a treatment plan for commercially sexually exploited females, ages 12-18, residing in the Home On The Range (HOTR) childcare facility to determine the efficacy of the therapeutic intervention specifically for this population. The data will be collected at HOTR and any identifying information will be removed. Risks of participation in this study include very minimal risk of loss of confidentiality of participant responses. Only the research team will have access to data. Additional risks may include emotional distress related to sharing personal information with the researcher. Benefits include greater self-awareness and insight into personal experiences. Time commitment involves engaging in 10 weeks of the EAP program for 1.5 hours per week, meeting for one 45-min interview with the researcher, answering 5 brief, open-ended journal prompts over the course of

Version date: 08/14/2021

1

the 10 weeks, and participating in one focus group at the end of the study to provide feedback regarding experiences. Participants will be able to keep their journal at the conclusion of the study.

Why is my child being asked to take part in this study?

Individuals asked to participate in this study are residents of Home On The Range (HOTR) ages 12-18 years and have been involved in the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding program at HOTR. Your child is being asked to take part because they are already attending this program.

What will my child be asked to do?

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of youths' experiences of the EAP Rhythmic Riding program at HOTR. They will be asked to wear a watch that measures their heart rate during the EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions. The colors on the watch change color as the wearer's heart rate changes. Your child will also be asked to keep a journal of their experiences in the EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions, as well as be interviewed at the end of the 10-week session. Additional goals include gaining insight into the ways the program's environment as a residential therapeutic working ranch influences experiences of participants as well as how the EAP Rhythmic Riding program compares and contrasts to participants' previous therapy experiences in one-on-one individual counseling or non-equine oriented group counseling.

Where is the study going to take place, and how long will it take?

All study activities will occur at HOTR. The structured interview consists of 13 questions and will take approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by Jenna Hershberger for data analysis. All audio recordings will be confidential, transcripts will be de-identified, and audio recordings will be destroyed after analysis is complete.

Each participant will also be given a journal after consenting to take part in the study. Journals will have six prompts inside, and each participant will be 15 minutes after the weekly EAP sessions to respond to the journal prompts. Journal entries will be copied for data analysis and stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office. All journal copies will be destroyed upon completion of data analysis. Participants will be allowed to keep their journals.

As long as all group members consent/assent, Jenna Hershberger will observe EAP Rhythmic Riding therapy group sessions. During these groups, she will create field notes of what she observes during the group sessions.

At the end of the 10-week program, participants will engage in one 45-minute focus group to provide feedback regarding their experiences in the program with the horses. Jenna will ask 6 questions about participants' experiences.

The EAP Rhythmic Riding program occurs once a week for an hour and a half, for 10 weeks. Residents taking part in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program have the option to be included in the research study.



What are the risks and discomforts?

Risks of participation in this study include very minimal risk of loss of confidentiality of resident responses. The data will be collected at HOTR and any identifying information will be removed. Outside of Home on the Range, only Dr. Erika Berg, Jenna Hershberger, and her faculty advisor, Dr. Jodi Tangen, will have access to research data. Additional risks may include emotional distress related to sharing personal information with the researcher.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research; however, reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize known risks. If new findings develop during the course of the research which may change your willingness to participate, we will tell you about these findings.



What are the expected benefits of this research?

Individual Benefits: Potential benefits for your child include gaining a better understanding of effective therapy treatment for your child as well as greater self-awareness. It is possible that no direct benefit will be gained by participating in this study.

Societal Benefits: Knowledge gained from this research may help develop programs that would benefit other youth in similar situations. In addition, this study will contribute to the research regarding the risks and benefits of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding programs.

Does my child have to take part in this study?

Your child's participation is voluntary and your child can decide to not include their data at any time. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect you or your child treatment. Your child will already be participating in treatment at Home On The Range, and will continue in the program whether they choose to participate in the study or not. Your declining participation in the study will not affect your present or future relationship with NDSU or Home On The Range, or any other benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you are free to withdraw your permission and to discontinue their participation at any time.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

Your child may choose to take part in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program and not allow their information to be used for research.



Who will have access to my child's information?

We will keep private all research records that identify your child. This information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study, we will use pseudonyms and write about the information we have gathered. Any specific statements or quotes provided during the interviews that may be used in publication will be

stripped of any identifying information. We may publish the results of the study; however, we will keep your child's name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your child's name will be separated from the research records before sharing information for data analysis. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your child's information to other people. For example, the law may require use to show information to a court or tell authorities if we believe there has been child abuse or neglect, or if your child poses a danger to self or others. In the event this situation should occur, Jenna Hershberger will notify, Laura Feldman, Executive Director at Home On The Range.

How will my child's information be used?

Your child's information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. Any specific statements or quotes provided during the interviews that may be used in publication will be stripped of any identifying information. We may publish the results of the study; however, we will keep your child's name and other identifying information private. Collected samples/data will not be used or distributed for future research, even if de-identified.

Can my child's participation in the study end early?

Your child's participation may end early due to situations that arise. These situations may indicate your child would be best served by leaving the study, such as if they are not following instructions or if they are being harmed.



Is any compensation available for participating in the study?

No.



What if we have questions?

Before you decide whether your child may participate in this study, please ask any questions that come to mind now. Later, if you or your child has questions about the study, you can contact Jenna Hershberger at jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701.652.5538 or her faculty advisor Dr. Jodi Tangen at jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701-231.7676.

What are my child's rights as a research participant?

Your child has rights as a research participant. All research with human participants is reviewed by a committee called the *Institutional Review Board (IRB)* which works to protect participant's rights and welfare. If you have questions about your child's rights, an unresolved question, a concern or complaint about this research you may contact the IRB office at 701.231.8995, toll-free at 855-800-6717 or via email (ndsu.ibr@ndsu.edu).

Documentation of Informed Consent:

You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Signing this form means that

1. you have read and understood this consent form
2. you have had your questions answered, and
3. you have granted permission for your child to be in the study.

You will be given a copy of this permission form to keep.

Your signature

Date

Your printed name

Date

Signature of researcher explaining study

Date

Printed name of researcher explaining study

**APPENDIX D. INFORMED CONSENT: LEGALLY AUTHORIZED
REPRESENTATIVE FORM**



Counselor Education and Supervision
SGC C117
Fargo, ND 58108-6050
701-231-7202

**The impact of an equine intervention on social emotional
learning in youth**

Legally Authorized Representative Form

This study is being conducted by:

Dr. Erika Berg (Principal Investigator)
Animal Sciences
Erika.berg@ndsu.edu
701-231-7641

Jenna Hershberger, MS, LAPC (Co-Investigator)
Doctoral Candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision
Jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu
701-652-5538

Dr. Jodi Tangen, PhD (Faculty Advisor)
Counselor Education and Supervision Program Director
Jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu
701-231-7676

Key Information about this study:

This consent form is designed to inform you about the study your ward is being asked to participate in. Here you will find a brief summary about the study; however, you can find more detailed information later on in the form.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experiences of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC) in an Equine Assisted Therapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding program. The program is being implemented as part of a treatment plan for commercially sexually exploited females, ages 12-18, residing in the Home On The Range (HOTR) childcare facility to determine the efficacy of the therapeutic intervention specifically for this population. The data will be collected at HOTR and any identifying information will be removed. Risks of participation in this study include very minimal risk of loss of confidentiality of participant responses. Only the research team will have access to data. Additional risks may include emotional distress related to sharing personal information with the researcher. Benefits include greater self-awareness and insight into personal experiences. Time commitment involves engaging in 10 weeks of the EAP Rhythmic Riding program for 1.5 hours per week, wearing a watch that measures heart rate, meeting for one 45-min interview with the researcher,

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answering 6 brief, open-ended journal prompts over the course of the 10 weeks, and engaging in one 45-minute focus-group at the conclusion of the study. Jenna will ask 6 open-ended questions about participants' experiences during the focus group. Participants will be able to keep their journal at the conclusion of the study.

Why is my ward being asked to take part in this study?

Individuals asked to participate in this study are residents of Home On The Range (HOTR) in ages 12-18 years and have been involved in the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding program at HOTR. Your ward is being asked to take part because they are will be attending this program.

What will my ward be asked to do?

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of youths' experiences of the EAP Rhythmic Riding program at HOTR. They will be asked to wear a watch that measures their heart rate during the EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions. The colors on the watch change color as the wearer's heart rate changes. Your ward will also be asked to keep a journal of their experiences in the EAP Rhythmic Riding sessions, as well as be interviewed at the end of the 10-week session. Additional goals include gaining insight into the ways the program's environment as a residential therapeutic working ranch influences experiences of participants as well as how the EAP Rhythmic Riding program compares and contrasts to participants' previous therapy experiences in one-on-one individual counseling or non-equine oriented group counseling.

Where is the study going to take place, and how long will it take?

All study activities will occur at HOTR. The structured interview to be done at the end of the 10 weeks consists of 13 questions and will take approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be audio recorded by Jenna Hershberger and transcribed for data analysis. All audio recordings will be confidential, transcripts will be de-identified, and audio recordings will be destroyed after analysis is complete.

Each participant will also be given a journal after consenting to take part in the study. Journals will have six prompts inside, and each participant will be asked to respond to the journal prompts over the course of the EAP Rhythmic Riding program. Journal entries will be copied for data analysis and stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office. All journal copies will be destroyed upon completion of data analysis. Participants will be allowed to keep their journals.

As long as all group members consent/assent, Jenna Hershberger will observe EAP Rhythmic Riding therapy group sessions. During these groups, she will create field notes of what she observes during the group sessions. Participants will also provide feedback at the conclusion of the study in one 45-minute focus group. Jenna will ask 6 questions regarding participants' experiences with the horses.

The EAP Rhythmic Riding program occurs once a week for an hour and a half, for 10 weeks. Residents taking part in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program have the option to be included in the research study.



What are the risks and discomforts?

Risks of participation in this study include very minimal risk of loss of confidentiality of resident responses. The data will be collected at HOTR and any identifying information will be removed. Outside of Home on the Range, only Dr. Erika Berg, Jenna Hershberger, and her faculty advisor, Dr. Jodi Tangen, will have access to research data. Additional risks may include emotional distress related to sharing personal information with the researcher.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research; however, reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize known risks. If new findings develop during the course of the research which may change your willingness to participate, we will tell you about these findings.



What are the expected benefits of this research?

Individual Benefits: Potential benefits for your ward include gaining a better understanding of effective therapy treatment for your ward as well as greater self-awareness. It is possible that no direct benefit will be gained by participating in this study.

Societal Benefits: Knowledge gained from this research may help develop programs that would benefit other youth in similar situations. In addition, this study will contribute to the research regarding the risks and benefits of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) Rhythmic Riding programs.

Does my ward have to take part in this study?

Your ward's participation is voluntary and your ward can decide to not include their data at any time. Your decision whether or not to allow your ward to participate will not affect you or your ward's treatment. Your ward will already be participating in treatment at Home On The Range, and will continue in the program whether they choose to participate in the study or not. Your declining participation in the study will not affect your present or future relationship with NDSU or Home On The Range, or any other benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. If you decide to allow your ward to participate, you are free to withdraw your permission and to discontinue their participation at any time.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

Your ward may choose to take part in the EAP Rhythmic Riding program and not allow their information to be used for research.



Who will have access to my ward's information?

We will keep private all research records that identify your ward. This information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study, we will use pseudonyms and write about the information we have gathered. Any specific statements or quotes provided during the interviews that may be used in publication will be

stripped of any identifying information. We may publish the results of the study; however, we will keep your ward's name and other identifying information private.

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How will my ward's information be used?

Your ward's information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. Any specific statements or quotes provided during the interviews that may be used in publication will be stripped of any identifying information. We may publish the results of the study; however, we will keep your ward's name and other identifying information private. Collected samples/data will not be used or distributed for future research, even if de-identified.

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Your ward's participation may end early due to situations that arise. These situations may indicate your ward would be best served by leaving the study, such as if they are not following instructions or if they are being harmed.



Is any compensation available for participating in the study?

No.



What if we have questions?

Before you decide whether your ward may participate in this study, please ask any questions that come to mind now. Later, if you or your ward has questions about the study, you can contact Jenna Hershberger at jenna.hershberger@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701.652.5538 or her faculty advisor Dr. Jodi Tangen at jodi.tangen@ndsu.edu or via phone at 701-231.7676.

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Documentation of Informed Consent:

You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Signing this form means that

1. you have read and understood this consent form
2. you have had your questions answered, and
3. you have granted permission for your ward to be in the study.

You will be given a copy of this permission form to keep.

Your signature

Date

Your printed name

Date

Signature of researcher explaining study

Date

Printed name of researcher explaining study

APPENDIX E. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience with the equine rhythmic riding program and the horses.
2. Tell me about your experience with the equine rhythmic riding program and the watches.
3. How has your experience of the equine rhythmic riding program impacted you?
4. How has this experience influenced your relationships with others?
5. How has this experience influenced your relationship with yourself or how you imagine yourself?
6. How do you think this experience has influenced others who have taken part in the equine rhythmic riding program?
7. How is the equine rhythmic riding program with horses different from other therapy or therapy programs you have participated in?
8. What feelings came up for you during the course of the equine rhythmic riding program?
9. What thoughts came up for you during the course of the equine rhythmic riding program?
10. What behaviors did you notice you engaged in during the course of the equine rhythmic riding program?
11. What did you learn about yourself from this experience? What about others?
12. What has been the best part of this experience for you?
13. What has been the hardest part of this experience for you?
14. What have I missed that you would like to share with me about your experience?

APPENDIX F. JOURNAL PROMPTS

Journal Prompts

1. Write about your experience in the equine rhythmic riding program with the horses today. You can share anything. Examples might include your thoughts, feelings, actions, frustrations, or just your general experience.
2. What was your experience with the equine rhythmic riding program and the watches?
3. Write about your relationship with the horses.
4. Write about how you think the horses experience you.
5. Write about how you experience yourself in the equine rhythmic riding program sessions.
6. Write about what you learned about yourself and anyone else during the equine rhythmic riding program sessions.

APPENDIX G. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

1. What was your experience in the equine rhythmic riding program and with the horses?
(Examples might include your thoughts, feelings, actions, frustrations, or just your general experience)
2. What was your experience with the equine rhythmic riding program and the watches?
3. How does the equine rhythmic riding program with horses compare to other therapy or therapy programs you have participated in?
4. What did you learn about yourself through this experience? What about others?
5. What was hardest part of this experience for you?
6. What was the best part of this experience for you?