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Equine-Assisted Practicum in Counselor Supervision

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Abstract

Counselors-in-training often experience performance anxiety and have difficulty with emotional boundary setting when working with clients during their practicum experience. Both of these issues can impact the building of positive therapeutic relationships. Clinical supervision can assist in the reduction of counselor-in-training anxiety and in the setting of appropriate boundaries. However, due to the evaluative nature of supervision, counselors-in-training may be reluctant to discuss these issues during practicum supervision. The use of equine-assisted learning as part of a practicum course may enhance the development of skills and decrease problem areas for counselors-in-training.

Keywords: equine-assisted learning, supervision, counselors-in-training, performance anxiety in counseling, emotional boundaries, therapeutic relationships

Counseling requires a comfort with ambiguous situations (Levitt & Jacques, 2011). Learning to interpret people's feelings and experiences to help them improve their life is a complex, non-linear process (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). The complexity of client work and case conceptualization leaves many counselors-in-training feeling anxious, confused, and filled with self-doubt (Schwing, LaFollette, Steinfeldt, & Wong, 2011). Typically, counselors-in-training begin to counsel clients when enrolled in a practicum course (Counsel for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2016). Practicum provides counselors-in-training a chance to experience the ins and outs of counseling clients before they enter a full-time internship. Students are expected to work 100 hours at their practicum site and meet with clients face-to-face for at least 40 of these hours (CACREP, 2016). Upon meeting with clients, most practicum students realize that building valuable therapeutic relationships with clients is an uncertain, vague process that does not follow a linear path (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003).

Practicum students experience common issues (e.g., performance anxiety) that impact their ability to build therapeutic relationships with clients. These issues are consistent throughout counselor education programs in the United States and Europe (Schwing, et al., 2001; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Students have little time to work on these skills before going on to internship. Supervision is the most productive way to help practicum students develop the skills needed to overcome these issues (Schwing et al., 2011).

During practicum, students meet weekly for individual or triadic supervision, and for 1.5 or more hours of group supervision (CACREP, 2016). Supervision is defined as,

a process in which an experienced professional holding appropriate preparation, degree, licensure and/or certification provides consistent support, instruction, and feedback to a counselor-in-training, fostering his or her personal (psychological), professional and skill development while evaluating his or her delivery of ethical services. (Lambie & Sias, 2009, p. 350)

During supervision sessions, supervisors model how to form a working relationship between supervisor and supervisee, and create a safe place to introduce interventions, which help practicum supervisees address the difficulties they experience in counseling sessions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). However, due to the evaluative nature of supervision and the performance anxiety of practicum students, these critical issues may not be fully addressed by practicum supervision (Schwing et al., 2001; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Although practicum students see supervisors as mentors, supervisors are also evaluators of students' skills (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014).

This paper discusses how practicum students' performance anxiety, and their difficulty in establishing emotional boundaries, impacts the forming of the therapeutic relationship and how equine-assisted learning supervision (EAL-S) can aid in developing practicum students' self-confidence (Gatty, 2001; MacDonald & Cappo, 2003) and boundary-setting skills (Coyote, n.d.; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). It details how adding an EAL-S experiential learning workshop to every fourth practicum class meeting allows supervisors to work through these issues with practicum students both individually and as a group, providing an effective way to help practicum students transition from the beginning stages of working with clients to a more clinically developed, personal approach.

Equine-assisted learning (EAL) is an experiential learning approach in which interactions with horses (equines) guide participants (practicum students) toward personal growth and the development of life skills (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International [PATH], 2015a). A professional facilitator helps translate the feedback the horses give to participants and prompts participants to think about their own preconceived notions of relationship building, styles of emotional coping, and how they are perceived by others (PATH, 2015a).

Equine-assisted learning improves participants' conflict resolution skills, relationship-building capacities, communication abilities, problem-solving skills, and self-confidence (Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Barrio Minton, Fernando, & O'Callaghan, 2010). Furthermore, EAL increases the internal locus of control, which assists with the forming and governing of emotions (Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey, 2009). Animal-assisted therapy also helps counselors-in-training develop therapeutic

relationships and boundary setting with clients (Stewart, Back-Gorman, Harris, Crews, & Chang, 2015).

The use of animal-assisted interventions in conjunction with supervision helps create a strong therapeutic relationship between supervisors and supervisees (e.g., practicum students) and increases supervisees' comfort in discussing issues that occur in sessions with clients (Stewart et al., 2015). Equine-assisted learning supervision promotes self-growth and self-exploration, and aids participants/practicum students in developing their own personal models of counseling (Stewart et al., 2015).

Performance Anxiety and Building Therapeutic Relationships

Anxiety is a common theme when practicum students discuss their initial experiences in counseling clients (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Schwing et al., 2011). Performance anxiety is one issue that impacts the therapeutic relationship between clients and counselors, and that between counselors (supervisees) and their supervisors (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Competency in counseling takes years of practice since the profession of dealing with human emotions is a complex one. Practicum students who do not expect this complexity often experience overwhelming anxiety. They fear not having the "right answers" for clients (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Anxiety over performance causes practicum students to focus inward as they worry about how they should react to what clients are saying instead of being present for clients in the moment.

Difficulty staying in the moment can lead to problems in forming empathetic therapeutic relationships with clients and in conceptualizing what is actually occurring in sessions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Schwing et al., 2011). Such internal focus can inhibit practicum students from truly connecting with clients and appearing genuine in their responses. Anxiety can also halt practicum students' processes of deciding how to react in specific situations (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003).

Equine-Assisted Learning Supervision and Performance Anxiety Reduction

The confidence that comes from positive professional experiences takes time to develop, and in practicum class, students are usually limited in the number of direct service hours in which they see clients (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Having positive interactions while working with horses as part of the practicum experience provides students more experiences working with uncertain situations, while working to develop positive relationships (with horses).

The novelty of spending time with large animals in a new environment can be stimulating for practicum students and thereby aid them in learning and retaining skills. Because a horse's size and presence can intimidate people, the experience of walking up to a horse, establishing a connection, and having the horse do something they have asked can boost self-esteem and decrease anxiety about forming connections with people (Strozzi, 2004; Trotter et al., 2008).

Horses are unique from cats, dogs, and other domesticated animals because they are prey animals (Chandler et al., 2010; Roberts, Bradberry, & Williams, 2004; Trotter et al., 2008). That is, horses in the wild are hunted by other animals such as mountain lions (Kohanov, 2007; Strozzi, 2004). This quality gives horses a distinct set of instinctual

features that makes them excellent teachers of relationship, communication, and mindfulness skills (Chandler et al., 2010; Strozzi, 2004). Studies show that due to horses' highly sensitive nature, therapeutic work with them can increase people's tolerance for anxiety and help reduce self-focus (Chandler et al., 2010; Trotter et al., 2008)

Interactions with horses are planned but are uncertain and nonlinear in nature. Due to horses' sensitivity to others, their reaction to people and situations can never fully be anticipated (Strozzi, 2004). This uncertainty and ambiguity mirrors the work with clients that practicum students experience. As previously discussed, practicum students develop anxiety over "not having the right answer" for clients (Schwing et al., 2011; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). This causes them to turn inward rather than focusing on clients. Imagine putting these students in a ring with loose horses. The students would have difficulty not focusing on the horses' movements and reactions in the moment. The students may approach the horses, retreat from the horses, or just stand still, unsure. The horses will react differently to each choice. If, for example, a student initially chooses to walk away from the horses, but then decides to approach them, the horses will react to the second choice. If the student decides to approach the horses but then decides to stop and wait, the horses will react to that. In short, horses give feedback to each choice in real time, nonverbally (of course), as it happens. Horses live in the moment—they do not react to what a person did in the past (unless the act was particularly traumatic for the horse). They do react to what a person is doing in the moment and assess whether the person is a friend (potential herd member) or a foe (predator; Kohanov, 2013; Strozzi, 2004). This allows students to experience making new choices when their first choice does not produce the desired result, and to end up with a positive outcome—just as experienced counselors do with clients.

Horses are alert for threats and predators in the environment at all times (Kohanov, 2007; Strozzi, 2004). Living in the past would endanger not only themselves but every herd member. Horses respond only to the experience of the moment due to their instincts as flight prey animals (Kohanov, 2007; Trotter et al., 2008). This herd mentality is also part of the nonjudgmental aspect of a horse's nature. For the herd to function effectively, every horse must fulfill his/her role, and every horse has a place in the hierarchy (Kohanov, 2013). There must be a clearly defined role for everyone or the entire herd is put in danger. Horses' extreme sensitivity to their environment is what protects them from unseen predators creeping up in the background; being aware of these predators' intentions before they pounce can save the lives of the horse and its herd members (Kohanov, 2007; Strozzi, 2004).

Horses are also aware of what people are trying to be (brave, assertive, socially accepted) and of their inner feelings (scared, unsure; Kohanov, 2007; Strozzi, 2004). This sensitivity is known as congruence, or presenting oneself on the outside as one feels on the inside (Strozzi, 2004). The need for congruency when working with horses can help practicum students become aware of and work through some barriers to forming relationships.

Sometimes practicum students are not fully aware of their anxieties or are unable to admit them in supervision due to the power differential between supervisor and supervisee (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Students may choose to discuss cases that they feel are going well or highlight skills they are comfortable discussing (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Working with a horse can help practicum students become more aware

of their underlying feelings due to the horse's sensitivity to congruency of feelings and actions (Trotter et al., 2008). Areas of strengths and growth become apparent when working with horses. This can help students and supervisors identify issues that cause anxiety and explore the underlying causes.

If students are having difficult sessions with clients because they feel they are not "doing enough" or that clients are not "giving them enough to work with," this may show in their work with the horses. For example, a practicum student may take a horse out of the field, and the horse may resist by pulling back or refusing to move forward. The student might resort to pulling and trying to use force to get the horse to move forward. A facilitator could ask the student to take a few deep breaths and assess what would make the situation better (e.g., standing next to the horse's shoulder and walking with the horse). The supervisor could use this as a metaphor for the student's work with clients (e.g., counselor as the "expert" trying to pull clients to a desired place, versus counselor as partner to clients). Developmentally, practicum students need "confirmatory feedback" (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993, p. 398), and this is what the horses provide in their action responses.

Practicum students working hands-on with horses learn that trial and error is almost always the process to follow when first trying to form a connection with a new horse. Performance anxiety in practicum students interferes with the client's growth when the student is afraid of making the wrong decision. This halts the decision-making process. With the help of the EAL-S facilitator, the trial-and-error process in forming relationships with the horses helps students recognize and overcome the paralyzing fear of "making the wrong choice" with clients. Supervisors can tell practicum students that making suggestions or offering reflections that do not resonate with clients will not "end" a counseling relationship. Sometimes students will understand this, but many times they still hold on to anxiety. EAL-S normalizes the experience of the trial-and-error process and allows supervisors to make the connection between these experiences and the forming of therapeutic relationships with clients. This helps students actually experience the process rather than talking about it abstractly in supervision.

This process of trial and error can be discussed in the group setting. That is, different students will get the same result from the horse using different approaches. Seeing this in the group setting decreases students' anxiety about making the right choice, and students realize there is more than one "right" decision in any counseling situation. Watching peers go through the same process can also help students normalize their anxiety and learn how others solve problems and build relationships.

Another performance anxiety issue raised by students is trying not to show the signs of physical anxiety (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Horses will respond to a person's nervous body language by not wanting to initially establish a relationship with that person (Strozzi, 2004). When a jittery, nervous person moves quickly toward a horse, the equine reads it as something to be wary of and will not be in a relationship-building mindset. A facilitator could point out the horse's reaction and prompt the student to try to take a few deep breaths and change his/her body language and focus on calmness. The motivation to form a connection with the horse helps the student become more aware of his/her own body indicators of anxiety or excitement. The opportunity provided in EAL-S to calm oneself and to experience a positive connection with the horse becomes a powerful learning experience.

Specific Interventions

Most student interaction with horses can be structured to address anxiety issues, but there are a few that are particularly beneficial. Being in tune to one's body language, remembering to be in the now, and forming new relationships in an uncertain environment all contribute to decreasing students' performance anxiety. The following activities can help with reducing performance anxiety and increasing student confidence.

Horse handshake. The facilitator introduces each horse by telling the students a little bit about the horse's personality (e.g., past history, likes/dislikes), then showing the students how to approach a horse: holding out their hand, palm facing down, fingers turned in. Students are then asked to approach whichever horse they feel wants to work with them. Students approach and meet the horse and return to the group. Processing this experience, facilitators might ask:

1. How did you decide that this particular horse chose you? What did the horse do or what did you feel that helped you decide?
2. How would you describe the process of approaching and greeting the horse? Was there any anxiety involved (physically/emotionally/socially)?
3. Was there anything you changed in your body language before the horse wanted to greet you (clenched hands, physical posture, or facial expressions)?
4. What was it like having your peers and professor there during the experience?
5. How can you use the experience of shaking hands with the horse in interactions with clients?

Obstacle course. Each student chooses an obstacle (poles, barrel, or cones) and puts it in the horse ring. Students then label their obstacle as something that causes them anxiety (e.g., meeting with a new client). Once all of the obstacles have been placed in the ring, students lead and walk a horse that is assigned to them through the obstacle course. The students observe one another as they complete this activity. Processing questions include:

1. What was your mental process for overcoming the anxiety of getting through the obstacles?
2. How did you help your horse get through the obstacle course while also dealing with your own anxiety?
3. What was it like watching others go through their obstacles? What was it like watching them go through your obstacle?

Through these activities, students may discover that they can feel anxious yet still help someone (their horse partner/clients) overcome obstacles at the same time. They may also learn, by watching each other, different ways to cope with anxiety.

Emotional Boundaries and Building Therapeutic Relationships

Schwing and colleagues (2011) found that practicum students struggle to set appropriate emotional boundaries with clients. Some students' boundaries are too rigid, while others' are too open. Practicum students who are guarded and have rigid emotional

boundaries tend to have difficulty developing empathy and seeing situations from their clients' point of view (Schwing et al., 2011; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). These students come across as uncaring and judgmental, which leads to reduced client sharing.

Practicum students who are too emotional with clients or lack sufficient boundaries, meanwhile, may have trouble keeping relationships with clients strictly professional (Schwing et al., 2011). This can lead to burnout and trouble forming professional therapeutic relationships with clients (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Skovholt and Rønnestad (2003) discussed how developing appropriate emotional boundaries with clients is a career-long process, and developing these skills through supervision and self-monitoring is key. Learning to identify with clients while keeping one's self and emotions safe takes years of practice (Schwing et al., 2011). Identifying, discussing, and normalizing the struggle to establish appropriate emotional boundaries with clients aids in student development (Guiffrida, Jordan, Saiz, & Barnes, 2007).

Equine-Assisted Learning Supervision and Emotional Boundaries

As previously discussed, most practicum students experience performance anxiety. This leads them to ignore or neglect their emotional needs in order to appear more professionally competent (Schwing et al., 2011). As discussed, horses can sense the underlying feelings of people, and EAL-S can assist in processing these feelings with participants/practicum students (e.g., feeling identification and associated body language). The ability to self-monitor feelings and body language usually comes with years of practice in the field (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). With EAL-S, practicum students get a head start on this journey.

Horses are instinctively social and rely on herd hierarchy for survival. Every member of the herd has a role (Kohanov, 2013; Trotter et al., 2008). Horses will attempt to form relationships with new "herd members" (i.e., practicum students). The herd tests the relationship, leadership abilities, and communication skills of new members to make sure the new members are performing their role to protect the herd. This gives practicum students the opportunity to have horses assess their potential for leadership and determine where they fit in the herd hierarchy. Is this student a leader? A lookout? A threat or liability?

Horses also realize that herd members can change their potential, and they adjust their perceptions of members based on members' actions (Kohanov, 2013). Horses' ability to respond in the moment and not hold on to emotions from the past can model for students how to set appropriate emotional boundaries with clients. While students are with clients, they empathize and respond to clients, but when clients leave, students' feelings must be compartmentalized or stored so that they fulfill their other roles in life to their fullest potential.

Although practicum students tend to have good interpersonal skills, they often lack awareness of how their behaviors and reactions may impact counseling (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). For example, when reviewing videotaped counseling sessions, students tend to focus on interventions or client feelings, rather than on their own emotions.

During EAL-S, interactions with horses can increase students' awareness of how their emotional reactions impact relationship building. For survival, horses reflect and

react to what members of the herd are feeling (Trotter et al., 2008). If the lookout suddenly becomes aware of danger, the herd's survival depends on how fast the alert of danger is communicated. Therefore, all members of the herd copy the body language and energy level of the lookout member. Having students interact with horses and discuss the herd's reaction to them becomes a teachable moment, which may increase student awareness of how their feelings and reactions affect others (Strozzi, 2004). The EAL-S model can also point out student defensiveness or posturing that may negatively affect counseling skills development.

Emotional boundary setting is not something practicum students tend to have awareness of or motivation to work on in typical classroom supervision settings (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). This is partly due to the vagueness of boundary problems and ever-present student anxiety (Guiffrida et al., 2007; Schwing et al., 2011). Often, students try to hide feelings of doubt in order to receive positive evaluations from faculty (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993). The novel experience of working with horses increases student involvement and dedication and creates an "exploring attitude" to the learning process (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 1993 p. 349). The addition of horses also creates a warmer, more vulnerable student perspective of the supervisor who has a relationship with the horse; this can also increase students' motivation to disclose difficulties (Stewart et al., 2015). Further, it affords supervisors an opportunity to model appropriate emotional boundaries in relationships.

Specific Interventions

The following interventions can assist practicum students in setting appropriate emotional boundaries.

Herd observation. Students quietly observe the horses and jot notes concerning the herd's interactions. After approximately 15 minutes, students are encouraged to share their observations. EAL-S puts student observations into two categories: direct observations of the horses' behaviors (e.g., "the brown horse pulled on the white horse's halter"), and student *interpretations* of the horses' behaviors (e.g., "the brown horse *bullied* the white horse because *he is aggressive*"). With EAL-S, a discussion is then facilitated concerning the differences in interpretations of events and the emotions students typically tie to the actions of others.

When learning to establish emotional boundaries in counseling, students must first explore their personal beliefs concerning emotional expression and boundary setting (Strozzi, 2004). For example, if a student considers physical touch to be an aggressive move, this may explain the emotions they attach to it (e.g., aggression). Students may also find they lack interpretation skills and have more observations rather than interpretations. By using student observations and interpretations of the horses' actions to frame discussion rather than students' own reactions, students will often open up about emotional boundary issues that they otherwise would not feel safe sharing (Guiffrida et al., 2007).

Placing the problem. In this intervention, each student has a horse with which to work. Students are asked to participate in intentional grooming. During intentional grooming, students carry out regular grooming activities for the horse, such as brushing, while paying attention to what the horse enjoys and does not enjoy. The point of intentional grooming is to make the grooming as enjoyable as possible for the horse and

to satisfy the horse's needs. After grooming, students are guided to close their eyes and think of an issue they are facing in their lives. They are instructed to take their hands and place the problem on their horses' back, so the horses "carry the burden" of this problem for them. After spending a few more minutes with the horse, they are instructed to assess whether they think the horse can keep the problem for a while or if they need to take it back. Discussion ideas could include:

1. What was it like to give to the horse during the grooming exercise? What did you take away from that part of the activity?
2. What was it like having the horse hold your problem for you? How did you end the exercise with your horse?
3. How could you use this to "put away" client problems? What about your own problems when entering a counseling session?

The equine-assisted learning supervisor must share the difference between externalizing and internalizing problems. These interventions give students a new perspective on their own emotions, how they express them, and how they tend to interpret outside events. These activities can lead to growth and exploration of emotional boundaries and an understanding of how boundary setting affects students' professional and personal relationships.

Limitations in Using an EAL-S Approach

There are limitations to adding an EAL-S component to practicum classes. The first is the setting. A horse facility must be available. The location needs to be easily accessible to students. A second limitation is the cost. Without increasing lab fees for the class, the school would most likely have to provide money to cover the use of the horses and the facility. There is also a liability factor to consider. Liability insurance would need to cover any injury sustained on the horse property.

Having a professor/supervisor with the proper training and horse experience is also necessary. At some therapeutic facilities, equine specialists are available to work with supervisors to help facilitate an EAL-S session (PATH, 2015b). For more information on locating equine specialists and developing an EAL program, see the PATH (2015b) manual and Web site at <http://www.pathintl.org/resources-education/efp-manual>

Another limitation is that some students may also have little interest in forming relationships with animals or may have too high of a fear response to learn from the experience. Others may have allergies to horses, hay, or dust, making it an inappropriate setting for them.

Conclusion

This article outlines EAL-S as a supervision model for practicum counseling students. Equine-assisted learning supervision can address common issues practicum students experience, such as performance anxiety and emotional boundary setting, which impede the development of therapeutic relationships. Interventions based on equine-assisted learning applications are provided. To date, there is no supervision-based

research to support the ideas presented. However, studies with other populations support the effectiveness of equine-assisted learning (Chandler et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2004; Trotter et al., 2008). Future research on the effectiveness of the EAL-S model with counseling students is needed.

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