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## Experiences of Incarcerated Young Men in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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The Experiences of Incarcerated Young Men in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy:  
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

by

Cynthia Vanessa Penalva

A Dissertation Presented to the  
Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Osteopathic Medicine  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

**Nova Southeastern University**

**2021**

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**Cynthia Vanessa Penalva**

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**Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Osteopathic Medicine**

This dissertation was submitted by Cynthia Vanessa Penalva under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Osteopathic Medicine and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

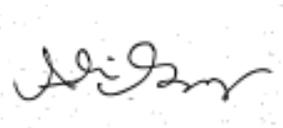
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## **Dedication**

For GOGUth. To the young people that sparked the inspiration for this entire scholarly journey. The past 20 years have been an adventure, a privilege and a lesson. Thank you for trusting me, loving me, and pushing me. To the team, that goes for you too. No matter what titles I work to earn in this lifetime, I was most proud to be your pastor.

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## Abstract

In 2018, 14,000 young people between the ages of 11 and 18 were incarcerated in the United States (Fosler, 2018). Incarcerated are more likely than non-incarcerated youth to experience anxiety, depression, violence, and behavior issues. While mental health treatment facilities often provide resources such as continuing education, General Education Development, vocational training, and talk therapy services (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019), Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is a relatively unexplored intervention for this population. The increasing need for innovative mental health services tailored to specific client populations has inspired collaborations among community professionals seeking to deliver high-impact interventions. One such community effort was developed through the joining of three community partners: Stable Place, a non-profit EFP organization; the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University; and The Quell Foundation. They came together to fund, staff, and collaborate with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice to provide EFP services to the incarcerated young male clients at the Pompano Youth Treatment Center. Funding for this project allowed participants to attend up to 12 EFP sessions and participate in voluntary post-treatment interviews. The study explored the participants' experiences with EFP using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) along with an autoethnographic account of my experience as a clinician which allowed for a more complex understanding of the process and offered a rich and multifaceted view of this experiential approach to treatment.

Keywords: *equine-facilitated psychotherapy, incarcerated youth, interpretative phenomenological analysis, autoethnography*

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

When you find that the horse is compelled and interested in you, something in you changes. That can be healing or move you deeply. There's a difference between mastering something physical and working with an animal. There's a spiritual component to working with a horse.

-Buck Brannaman

Young people in today's prisons are considered an at-risk population, as they experience crucial developmental milestones and critical lifestyle changes under the mandatory guidance of an institution. The United States has long been criticized for its high number of young people in the judicial system. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (2019), over 1.3 million juveniles are serving prison time across the country. Each year, detention centers are filled with young people ranging from 10 to 18 years old (United States Department of Justice, 2019). In 2018, approximately 27,000 young people between the ages of 10 and 18 were served with detention in the state of Florida (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019); 21,000 of them were males. Detention facilities are designed to house young people who are awaiting court dates, seeking treatment related to the crimes they committed, or awaiting placement in a permanent facility. When we think of jails or prisons, we often envision the small cell blocks, the bars, and the inmate uniforms. However, the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) provides underage *offenders*—the term often used to describe incarcerated young people—with a housing facility that resembles a community more than it does a prison.

More than half (65%) of the youth in the DJJ's care meet criteria for mental illness or substance use disorders (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019). A

considerable number of them have also experienced severe childhood trauma (physical, sexual, emotional abuse), which impacts their behavior and treatment needs. All of these issues must be addressed and treated through a series of assessments, evaluations, crisis intervention and treatment services (Underwood & Washington, 2016). While the DJJ's residential facilities provide housing, education, vocational training, and mental health services, the treatment options are limited and may, therefore, be ineffective in preventing re-offenses (Florida Department of Corrections, 2018). Furthermore, studies have found that these facilities also fall short of meeting the young people's mental health needs (Barnert et al., 2017).

### **Background of the Problem**

Due to the sheer volume of incarcerated young men, the government overlooks the needs of this population, making it less likely that their health needs will be met (Prison Policy Initiative, 2019). At least 46% of the male youth who are incarcerated have urgent medical needs, including those related to mental health, that require immediate attention (Underwood & Washington, 2016). Barnert et al. (2017) found that 70% of these youth have been diagnosed with psychiatric disorders that must be addressed in order to mitigate their poor health outcomes. Confinement erodes the mental health of incarcerated male youth, which may make it hard for them to cope with life in society once they are released (Wilson, 2012). This is due to the fact that they are exposed to stigmatization, disrupted social networks, pressure to increase social credibility, and other factors that can lead to suicide, post-traumatic stress, and reoffending behaviors (Florida Department of Corrections, 2018). Since juvenile detention centers are not equipped to provide nuanced mental health services, young

people tend to get filtered through the system by serving their time without receiving the opportunity to self-reflect, grow, or learn about themselves.

One facility in South Florida, the Pompano Youth Treatment Center (PYTC), aims to provide services that go beyond the standard. The PYTC is defined by the DJJ as a non-secure facility, which means that the youth are not restrained or placed behind bars. It houses high risk young males between the ages of 13 and 18 and is dedicated to providing them with evidence-based services, behavior management programs, counseling, vocational planning, and transitional discharge services (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019). Recently, the PYTC partnered with Stable Place—an Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) organization located in Davie, Florida—with the support of partial funding from The Quell Foundation. The purpose of this collaboration was to provide EFP to a group of males from the PYTC who elected to participate in a research study. The study was carried out over the course of three years, during which time several different groups of males from the PYTC attended four to 10 EFP sessions at the Stable Place facility.

Prior to the initiation of the funded research study, I was privileged to work as an intern at Stable Place, as part of my clinical training. At the time, Stable Place was already working with the PYTC, providing EFP to a select group of residents. The groups were a formative part of my therapeutic training, as they taught me the importance of flexibility, therapeutic maneuverability, and fun. It was always a source of great joy to arrive at the barn and see a group of rambunctious young men jump out of a van and approach our horses with a combination of reverence, apprehension, and curiosity. Many might assume that young men coming from a facility like the PYTC would be

disrespectful, dangerous, or criminal in their behavior. Instead, each cohort of young men who participated in EFP proved to be eager to learn, excited to be out in nature, and willing to be vulnerable. Each session left me with a sense of awe and a keen awareness of the privilege I had to be a witness to the courageous journey of each participant. To this day, the groups from the PYTC are my favorite population to work with in therapy.

The Quell Foundation (2020) has taken up the initiative to raise awareness about mental illness and reduce the number of suicides, overdoses, and incarcerations. As a paragon of mental health awareness, the organization is dedicated to eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses. The foundation aims to create a strategic initiative that will promote open, non-judgmental dialogue aimed at normalizing mental health struggles. The Quell Foundation has partnered with Nova Southeastern University (NSU) and Stable Place, as these organizations are aligned with its mission to provide education and mental health services to underserved communities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The partnership between Stable Place and NSU has been years in the making. In 2009, Dr. Shelley Green, a professor in the Department of Family Therapy at NSU, developed and began teaching an elective course to master's and doctoral students in the department: Introduction to Equine Assisted Family Therapy. The course teaches EFP as an experiential clinical modality that incorporates the horse as an integral part of the therapy session (Banaja & Green, 2019). With a commitment to expanding the impact of EFP, Dr. Green developed an advanced course for family therapy students, as well as developed and refined the clinical activities utilized in EFP sessions at Stable Place.

The graduate level courses offered in the Department of Family Therapy at NSU

are based on brief, systemic, strength-based, and non-pathologizing assumptions about people and their ability to navigate mental health challenges (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; Green, 2018; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Operating under the belief that behavior makes sense in context, and that people move through the world in relationship to larger systems, family therapists remain curious about the unique ways in which clients interpret their reality. With respectful curiosity, they avoid pathologizing and making assumptions about their clients. Rather than offering their own wisdom, or holding clients to standards of right and wrong, they seek to highlight the clients' own wisdom and expertise.

This brief, relational approach to therapy is also the basis of the EFP model developed by Green (2014). The clinical assumptions used in traditional brief therapy translate beautifully into the experiential work at the barn. The horses assist clients, therapists, and anyone else involved in the EFP process to be mindful and present, and to focus on what is happening in the moment. The approach is the same: honor the wisdom and expertise of the client, as well as that of the horse. Because horses are prey animals, their intuition and instincts provide them with a heightened sense of awareness. This is a vital aspect of the therapeutic relationship that lends an experiential quality to the process. Adhering to guidelines regarding safety and ethics, therapists using this approach invite clients to explore what works for them during each session. The EFP approach is informed by relational and systemic assumptions that regard clients' experiences and expertise as useful. In this way, clients do not have to worry about being wrong or right in the therapy process. Rather, they are encouraged to remain present to what is occurring in the moment, seeing how it can be useful. In addition to privileging

the client's experience, EFP therapists also privilege the horses and their responses, making use of them by including them in the conversation.

The therapist must remain present and curious in order to fold the client's experiences and the horse's responses into the therapeutic conversation. This is one of many ways in which the process of EFP differs from traditional talk therapy. Being outdoors, in nature, and in the presence of a large animal is already different; but experiencing the sessions in a physical way creates an even further distinction, which offers many useful therapeutic moments that can be utilized in the process. The concept of utilization refers to a therapist's making use of "whatever the client does that is somehow 'right,' 'useful,' 'effective,' or 'good,' for the purpose of developing a solution" (DeShazer, 1988, p. 113). This is what EFP therapists do when incorporating horses in the process of therapy. Horses make excellent therapeutic partners, as they continually provide nuggets of useful insight throughout the sessions.

The EFP model is informed by the idea that what occurs in session is both useful and relational. Therapists who practice this approach do not look for problem causes or provide simplistic advice. Instead, based on the principles of brief therapy, they seek to explore and understand the client's relationship to the problem, rather than aiming to change the problem in some objective way (Watzlawick et al., 1974). They highlight clients' strengths, instead of focusing on weakness or pathology (Green, 2014).

According to Flemons and Gralnik (2013), therapeutic change becomes possible when clients are freed up from attempting to contain, negate, push away, or separate from their experiences. Therapists using the EFP approach encourage clients to connect to their problems in such a way that they can respond to them resourcefully, creating

opportunities for choice and change (Flemons & Gralnik, 2013). They utilize metaphors and invite clients to interpret the horses' responses, thereby providing them with a sense of agency (Flemons, 2002). With the help of the horses, clients can view their problems, and themselves, in a different light.

### **My Involvement**

As a family therapist, it has been my privilege to work in a number of different settings with many diverse populations. While I have worked in group settings, in-home settings, therapy clinics, and residential centers, nothing has compared to working in the barn setting. There is something remarkable about being outdoors, working with animals, and experiencing therapeutic change in the moment with clients. Working alongside horses creates an experiential dimension to the work that is truly transformative.

I have always had an affinity for working with young people. As a former youth pastor in my community church in Hialeah, FL, I have cultivated a passion for the emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing of young people. Although I have primarily worked with Latinx youth in the Christian church setting, I have engaged with at-risk youth in my local community for as long as I can remember. Being immersed in the Spanish-speaking community of South Florida has given me a unique perspective on life, and on what it takes to thrive. I have grown up around people who have taught me about resilience and growth in the face of adversity by believing, trusting, and persevering. Witnessing the struggles and triumphs of people I love and admire has taught me to look past the external and search for the strengths within myself and others. This is why the strength-based brief therapy approach presents such a solid theoretical fit for me.

When I was presented with the opportunity to work as a therapist for Stable Place, I did not expect to find a research opportunity there as well. Initially, I was interested in working as a therapist to gain clinical experience, by running groups and joining with the teenagers who came out to the barn. My role as a therapist at Stable Place allowed me to fulfill my passion of working with young people in an equine-assisted context. When The Quell Foundation partnered with Stable Place to conduct research, I knew the findings could potentially benefit this population in the future, as well as add to the existing literature on EFP. I wanted to be involved in every way possible. Once the project was underway, it became clear that I could make this my dissertation research. I saw this as an opportunity to involve myself in a project that I could believe in. It was the perfect project for me as this particular group was aligned with my preferred population: adolescents. It is my strong belief that youth are the backbone of any society, and attending to their holistic needs is a community-based responsibility. For that reason, I decided to delve into a clinical and research project that had the potential to benefit young people in some way.

### **Horses and Adolescent Males**

While the adolescent young men from the PYTC attended therapy after having been sentenced to the detention center, the EFP sessions with them can be viewed as preventative, as they provide the young men with skills and self-reflection to prevent further offenses. As social justice advocates, allies, and health care professionals, it is our responsibility to bring sensitivity and awareness into our work, both clinically and in our research. In this climate, in this society, and for far too long, Black and Brown young men have been disenfranchised, dehumanized, targeted, and harmed. It is, therefore,

important for us to be mindful of the participants' cultural background, socioeconomic status, and personal experiences in our work with them.

As I prepared for this research project, I could not help but notice the similarities between the young men and the horses. Horses can be intimidating creatures. They are powerful, beautiful, and majestic. But they are also large, heavy, fast, and unpredictable. Horses are gorgeous creatures, but they can also be scary. Teenagers can be scary, too. They may be unpredictable, powerful, self-sufficient, and judgmental. Teenagers in groups multiply the level of intimidation exponentially. Working with a group of colleagues made up of mostly white women, both therapists and Equine Specialists, I observed how Black and Brown teenagers could be perceived as intimidating by the staff in the same way the horses could be seen as intimidating by the participants.

Societal prejudice has led these young men to be categorized as dangerous, criminal, scary, and inhuman. They are routinely targeted and subjected to racism and dehumanization. Horses are prey animals; their highest priority is to keep themselves safe. They are always prepared to move quickly, and they have a keen perception of even the slightest changes in the atmosphere and their surroundings. They do what they need to do to avoid being harmed. Much like horses, young men who have been incarcerated are just trying to survive in the wild.

Upon first glance, and because of the context surrounding the young men's arrival at Stable Place, the clinical team members are fully aware that the participants have committed—or, at least, been convicted of—crimes that landed them in the treatment center. With that awareness comes a plethora of assumptions, opinions, judgments, and even sympathy or pity. Naturally, when a pack of guys steps off a van to come to group

therapy, there is an element of intimidation on both sides. The boys are intimidated by the clinical team, which happens to include large animals, and the team is intimidated by the group of young, male strangers. However, guided by the belief that things make sense in context, we can proceed with curiosity and seek to learn about what makes these young men who they are. We can explore what got the participants to the PYTC, aim to understand how we can possibly be helpful to their current situation and to their future plans. Rather than seeing these young men through the lens of pathology or attempting to save them, we can connect with them as human beings who got themselves in trouble and are working to stay out of it in the future.

It is not lost on me that incarcerated adolescents are part of the criminal justice system for a reason, and I do not excuse whatever actions landed them in the treatment facility. I simply choose not to define them by their past. Instead, I am curious and excited about asking them to search within themselves, because I truly believe they possess all the tools and traits necessary to succeed. I believe they are enough; they are capable of making changes within their personal situations. And while they might be placed in a circumstance that does not foster that belief, I hope they will realize that they do not have to be prey animals in the wild. They too can search for safety. They can reach out to the appropriate people for resources and develop enough self-awareness to think rationally before acting impulsively and make impactful changes for themselves.

As previously mentioned, an autoethnographic perspective will be used to explore how these experiences made a difference for the participants as well as for myself. A big part of the reason this work is so deeply personal, aside from the reasons previously mentioned, is that I saw myself evolve as a professional as a result of this work. As I

watched the different cohorts of participants cycle through the program, I was privileged to observe and participate in their evolution. I consider myself an emerging researcher, and a clinician in this field, and so it is important to contribute to the existing literature. Along with contributions about how this work can be beneficial or helpful to clients, it is just as important to analyze how the experiential training can be beneficial and helpful to therapists as well. This study is about the exploration of experiences of Equine Facilitated Therapy, the participants', and my own.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of incarcerated young men who participated in EFP. I sought to understand what changes, if any, these young men experienced as a result of their EFP sessions. In the original research study conducted by Green, Levi-Minzi, & Judd (2019), quantitative research surveys were used to measure change and qualitative interviews were collected with the purpose of contextualizing the quantitative results. I used the qualitative approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the results of interviews previously collected by other researchers from the young men from the PYTC taking part in EFP sessions at Stable Place. The analysis used the archival data already collected to explore the experiences as they were expressly shared for the previous research project. I also incorporated an autoethnographic component into the study, to explore how my personal development and clinical skills were sharpened by this experience.

### **Summary**

My aim for this study was to explore the ways the young men from the PYTC made sense of, and benefited from group EFP sessions. It is my hope that this form of

treatment can continue to be adapted for this particular population in the future. In this chapter, I provided an overview of the limited treatment offered to incarcerated young men in South Florida. I briefly introduced the Pompano Youth Treatment Center (PYTC), which aims to provide residents with innovative therapy services, and identified its involvement with the collaboration created by Stable Place, NSU, and The Quell Foundation. I shared how my own journey as an Equine Therapist led to my decision to conduct the present study.

My role as the researcher of this study has been grounded in a stance of respectful curiosity. Through this research project, I sought to learn whether EFP made a difference for the young men who participated in sessions at Stable Place. My hope was that this process of conducting this research would enable me to continue growing and learning—not just about EFP, but also about myself. I am also hopeful that this study will contribute to the field of family therapy and the body of literature on EFP.

In Chapter II, I will present an overview of the existing literature on EFP and its relevance to the population of incarcerated male youths. In Chapter III, I will present the research methodology and design used for this study. In Chapter IV, I will detail my findings using both the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Autoethnography methods. In Chapter V, I will conclude the study by discussing how this fits into the current literature and propose recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore the literature relevant to the topic of this study. First, I present current statistics regarding incarcerated young males in South Florida detention centers and identify the types of services offered to them. I explore what one particular detention center—the Pompano Youth Treatment Center (PYTC)—is doing to rehabilitate its residents. I outline the nuanced aspects of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) offered by Stable Place and distinguish it from other animal-assisted therapies. Finally, I discuss the systemic and relational theoretical framework of the EFP approach.

### **Incarcerated Young Males in Florida**

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020), almost two million youth are arrested in the United States every year.

In accordance with The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, the ultimate goal of juvenile justice was to divert youth from the formal, punitive processing of the adult justice system. This in turn resulted in the use of community-based programs rather than large institutions. (Underwood & Washington, 2016, p. 1)

If the goal as a country is to punish youth in a different way than adults are punished, then the treatment they receive must be different as well. In many states, and in Florida in particular, community-based programs are tasked with both disciplining and providing care for young people serving prison sentences. Mental health services are one form of

care received by incarcerated youth. According to NAMI (2020), 70% of incarcerated youth have a mental health condition that contributed to their incarceration.

Singh et al. (2005) explain that:

Despite the lack of evidence specific to mental health treatment of incarcerated youth, there is a wealth of empirical support for treatment of disorders common in this population such as post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, conduct disorder, substance use and psychosis. These established treatment modalities may be incorporated into service provision for youth in custody to improve health outcomes. (p. 208)

Although there is a plethora of data indicating that incarcerated youth receive inadequate mental health care, it is important to note the difficulty of providing services to individuals who do not believe they need those services. As Abram et al. (2015) explain, many incarcerated youth may be uncooperative with therapy referrals because they are either unaware of their mental health problems or believe they can solve them on their own. Therefore, the “youth must first understand that they need mental health services before they will seek them out” (Abram et al., 2015, p. 6).

The stigma that is placed on mental health issues can be another barrier keeping incarcerated youth from seeking therapy services. Society contributes to the assumption that needing mental health services signifies deficiency, weakness, or pathology. This is unfortunate, because estimates reveal that approximately 50 to 75 percent of the two million youth in the juvenile justice system meet criteria for a mental health disorder (Underwood & Washington, 2016). Joseph-DiCaprio et al. (2000) point out that juvenile

detainees often have physical or psychological disorders that contribute to behavior problems; therefore, their criminal activity may be related to unmet mental health needs.

Underwood and Washington (2016) explain that “although incarceration and detainment is necessary for a small percent of juveniles, long-term confinement experiences tend to do more harm than good, often leading to continued offending and recidivism” (p. 2). While it may be necessary to detain youth who commit crimes, it is important to note that the methods of incarceration utilized with adult inmates do not yield the same results when applied to juveniles. Incarceration on its own does not rehabilitate young people. Adequate treatment, which includes services to address the youth’s mental health issues, is an essential part of the rehabilitation that can take place in detainment centers. However, as previously indicated, “how youth think about services helps determine whether they cooperate with referrals or remain in treatment” (Abram et al., 2015, p. 3). Abram et al. (2015) note that other barriers preventing youth from seeking services may include racial and ethnic disparities; lack of minority service providers; sociocultural barriers; or external factors, such as poverty or low socioeconomic status. This raises important questions about who provides mental health services to incarcerated youth, how they deliver those services, and how effectively they serve the young people who need them.

### **Florida Juvenile Justice**

The state of Florida has four different branches of services for incarcerated youth. The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) (2019) identifies these branches as Prevention Programs, Probation Programs, Residential Facilities, and Detention Centers. There are 21 facilities throughout the state that house minors who have been detained for

committing a crime. These Detention Centers are divided among three regions: North, South, and Central. The state of Florida also has 48 Residential Facilities, which house youth who have been court-mandated to stay in the care of the state for an extended amount of time and adhere to a commitment plan overseen by a Juvenile Prevention officer. The Residential Facilities provide short-term monitoring and deliver various programs and services for rehabilitation as well as education and job training. These facilities have varying degrees of security; some serve high-to-maximum-risk offenders, and others house non-secure residents. In maximum-security facilities, residents serve long sentences, during which time they are supervised around the clock and have no access to the community. Treatment at these facilities often includes the possible use of restraints. Non-secure residential centers house residents who present a low risk to the community. While these facilities are also secured and supervised by staff around the clock, the residents are allowed supervised access to the community (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019).

South Florida has one residential facility in Broward County: the Pompano Youth Treatment Center (PYTC), located in Pompano Beach. The PYTC partners with the community to provide services to its residents that go above the standard for vocational, education, and mental health services in residential facilities. It is significant to note that the lead therapist in the PYTC actively sought out additional services to provide the residents. Together, the clinical staff at the facility determined that it was important to collaborate with an organization that could provide unconventional therapy services for their residents.

### **Pompano Youth Treatment Center**

The PYTC provides services for up to 24 young males between the ages of 13 and 18. It is funded by Sequel Youth Services (2020), a leading national behavioral health organization that develops and operates a broad continuum of treatment programs for children, adolescents, and adults with behavioral, emotional, and physical challenges. This facility serves young people identified to need substance abuse treatment in a residential environment. The program utilizes a behavior management system and provides substance abuse treatment, medical services, individual and group counseling, and family therapy. Basic medical services are provided onsite (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019). The PYTC provides youth with vocational/career training, secondary education programs, industry certification, job placement, mentoring, and support services using evidence-based curricula, in order to equip residents with the tools they need to manage life outside the center. It offers vocational services provided by the Broward County School District (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019), as well as counseling services and education about restorative justice principles. Additionally, it provides residents with the opportunity to participate in community-based programs, such as the EFP sessions provided by Stable Place.

My experience with South Florida residential facilities is limited to the PYTC, so I cannot say how it compares to other facilities in the state. However, during the time that I worked with them, it was evident that the staff members value their residents and commit to their well-being. One of the PYTC staff members I interviewed, Mr. Pierre Desrosiers, shared that he greatly values the center's partnership with Stable Place, which was formed because of the core belief at the PYTC that therapy "helps to promote

emotional growth among the youths” (P. Desrosiers, personal communication, April 22, 2020). Mr. Desrosiers also noted that while the youth benefit from this form of outdoor therapy, the staff—who are accustomed to working indoors all day—experience a “soothing and calming effect” from it as well. Describing the reasons why the PYTC continues its collaboration with Stable Place, Mr. Desrosiers said:

It indubitably makes a difference with our youths. For those 90 minutes they are exhibiting behavior that’s indicative of who they really are before they are en route back to our program and have to put on a mask for the rest of their peers. Animals inexplicably assist us in a way that no other human being can. Our youths develop personal relationships with the horses and have shared personal experiences with them. (personal communication, April 22, 2020)

The decision made by PYTC staff to connect residents with services that will make impactful changes in their lives led to a collaboration among three like-minded organizations: NSU, Stable Place, and The Quell Foundation. Each of these organizations provides a key element to the experience made available to the incarcerated youth in the PYTC.

### **Community Partnerships**

The Quell Foundation is a national non-profit organization with a mission to remove the stigma associated with mental illness and reduce the number of suicides, overdoses, and incarcerations among people with mental health diagnoses (The Quell Foundation, 2020). The Quell Foundation works to provide scholarships for students in higher education who are working towards a degree in a mental health field. It partners with universities and colleges across the country—one of which is NSU—to support their

work in training mental health professionals and providing unique services to the community. The partnership between Stable Place and NSU has produced a unique place for mental health professionals to train in the equine therapy approach.

The coming together of Stable Place, NSU, and The Quell Foundation created the potential for a research project that would explore the effects of EFP with incarcerated young men. Staff members from all of the organizations worked together to support the rehabilitation of the incarcerated youth participating in this project. They collaborated with the shared goal of reducing recidivism among the youth and teaching them to draw from their strengths and virtues. The Quell Foundation, consistent with its mission to support therapists in training, provided the funding for the project and generated quantitative data that can inform future clinical interventions for incarcerated youth.

The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) (2019) is guided by the mission of increasing public safety by reducing juvenile delinquency through effective prevention, intervention, and treatment services that strengthen families and turn around the lives of troubled children. To carry out its systemic vision, the DJJ offers a range of services for individuals and families with the goal of making a difference and creating positive change in communities. The staff members at the PYTC have a similar mission and vision. They knew that making treatment services that were outside the box available might offer something different to the young men in their facility. Although the PYTC provides many different educational programs and mental health services, the clinical staff was eager to partner with organizations like Stable Place, in order to offer an innovative, experiential approach to therapy.

## **Animal Assisted Therapy**

Animal-assisted therapy, which incorporates animal contact in treatment interventions as a means of accentuating or alleviating individuals' mental states, has been utilized for decades (Wilson, 2012). Equine-assisted therapy can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks; the first official therapeutic use, however, is dated back to the 1600s, when physicians first used animals to improve patients' mental health. Despite the fact that animal-assisted therapy remains a subject of debate in myriad counseling settings, its use has grown in the past few decades (Shelton, Leeman, & O'Hara, 2011). Proponents of animal-assisted therapy assert that it assists in the formulation of positive therapeutic alliances between client and animal. While the inclusion of animals in medical and therapeutic settings has been around for centuries, the documentation of its use has not.

Levinson (1978) was the first person to formally discuss the benefits of animal-to-human connection. He studied the effects of pets on owners' personality development and found that the ability to communicate with animals requires empathy, as it is non-verbal in nature. He also affirmed that human-animal associations "have therapeutic value and contribute to self-understanding" (Levinson, 1978, p. 1031). Much has been written about the animal-human connection, and much has been studied regarding the benefits of having animals assist in human conditions. Many studies have since been conducted to measure the effects and benefits of animal-assisted therapy on mental health. Belo's (2017) writings about anthrozoology, the study of human-animal interactions, focus on the many ways in which animals positively impact human health. Much has been written since the time Levinson shared his pioneering ideas about animal-assisted therapy, which is now defined as a "goal directed intervention in which an

animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process” (Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 23). Animals continue to contribute to the therapeutic process; more recently, the benefits of incorporating horses in therapy have become evident.

### **Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy**

A wide array of animals can be used within animal-assisted therapies; however, some therapists choose to work with horses, as their nature helps clients make sense of their therapeutic experiences and relate them back to their life experiences. Horses are known for interacting with humans in a sociable and cooperative manner (Shelton, Leeman, & O’Hara, 2011). Herd animals by nature, they interact, connect, and demonstrate sensitivity toward their human counterparts. This makes them ideal for therapeutic work. Brandt (2013) explains that:

unlike cats or dogs, horses are prey animals and must be attuned to their environment at all times to ensure survival. Thus, horses are excellent at remaining present in the moment and accurately interpreting environmental cues. Further, horses are highly social herd animals and depend on continuous communication between members for safety. (p. 24)

This strong sense of attunement distinguishes horses from humans, who tend not to be so present; this makes them excellent therapeutic partners.

The Equine Assisted Therapy field has been around for over 30 years. There are many variations of it utilized throughout the country, as well as internationally. For example, Therapeutic Horseback Riding is an equine-assisted approach that involves physical exercises, riding, rehabilitation, and mounted work (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). Hippotherapy, another therapeutic approach that incorporates horses, is related to

physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy (Hallberg, 2018). Other therapies include therapeutic horseback riding (THR), therapeutic carriage-driving (TCD), equine-facilitated experiential learning (EFEL), interactive vaulting, and equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). In essence, any form of therapy that involves active, physiotherapeutic exercises falls under the Equine-Assisted Therapy and therapeutic horsemanship umbrellas (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013).

Grimm (2015) explains that “many highly-educated equestrians work hand-in-hand with therapists, psychologists, teachers, doctors, and other professionals to provide this relatively new type of therapy” (p. 19). In contrast to those therapies aimed at producing physiological benefits, Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy, or Equine-Assisted Learning, helps people challenged by emotional and mental health conditions. In the realm of mental health, horses become more than physically beneficial therapy partners for many reasons. They provide unique opportunities for experiential learning in the therapy process. Their presence in the therapeutic process lends itself to a blend of exercise, recreational opportunities, complexity, spontaneity, and physical experiences within the sessions. Even individuals with no previous exposure to horses can benefit from their inclusion in therapy, as interacting with the animals in this context allows for discovery, skill-building, and teachable moments that would not likely take place in traditional talk therapy sessions.

According to Brandt (2013):

The human-horse bond can help develop several skills that are often lacking in individuals suffering from behavioral or mental health disorders. Mutual trust,

affection, patience, assertiveness, and responsibility are just some of many abilities that horses bring out in people. (p. 24)

The unique relationship between client and horse enhances the process of psychotherapy and creates a healing element that is unique to EFP (Brandt, 2013). Some might assume that the huge stature of horses could be daunting or intimidating to the clients; however, research suggests that most clients feel safe around the animals (Wilson, 2012).

Furthermore, by interacting with these large animals, despite their potentially intimidating size, clients are able to develop a sense of accomplishment and empowerment. As Brandt (2013) explains, exposure to horses in an outdoor setting “encourages the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication, as clients need to maintain awareness of themselves in relation to their surroundings” (p. 27). The relationship between the human and the horse produces mutually influencing responses that serve as information to be utilized by the therapist in the therapeutic process. This makes the relationship between client, therapist, and horse a collaborative one.

### **Current Research**

Much of the current research has focused on mounted riding or hippotherapy benefits. While some studies have focused on the effects of EFP, the research is still somewhat limited. Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, and Bowers (2007) utilized equine facilitated learning (EFL) with young people who had been diagnosed with eating disorders. The results of the study revealed that the interventions, while equipping participants with horsemanship skills, did not lead to increases in their self-esteem. Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman, (2011) have made strides in researching EFP with at-risk youth, including those in the prison setting. Similarly, Bachi, et al.(2011) conducted a

pilot study with at-risk youth and found that EFP led to “improvements in various parameters” (p. 306). Bachi et al., (2011) found that “trust, self-control, and life satisfaction” all had a significant increase (p. 306), and recommended incorporating a qualitative component to future studies, due to the “occurrence of change” (p. 309). Qualitative research can provide a different perspective for data. This research derives information from the view of a person (Creswell & Miller, 2000). It is helpful to observe the ways in which context can be further explored using qualitative research.

Hemingway, Meek, and Hill (2015) explored equine-assisted interventions with “young offenders” (p. 544), studying the ways in which horsemanship and equine-assisted learning can be beneficial. This study analyzed qualitative interviews to measure change and found that “calm assertiveness, confidence, and focus” increased (Hemingway, et al, 2015, p. 562). Trotter et al., (2008) have contributed even more significantly by conducting research regarding Equine Assisted Counseling (EAC); the study was conducted on 164 students twice a week for 12 weeks. Green, et al., (2019) found that “participants’ self-satisfaction improved, their sense of identity increased and their level of ego strength improved” (p.280). Compared to a school-based therapy program, this EAC program resulted in significant improvement, despite the study’s limitations. Trotter (2012) has also contributed to the field by publishing EAC textbooks that provide case studies and manualize the different ways in which EFP can be implemented with the many different populations for which it is appropriate.

Different forms of Equine Assisted therapies have been mentioned in the current research, including Equine Assisted Counseling. Along with EAC, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) research has been used specifically with the “at-risk” youth

population. Burgon (2014) defines youth as “at-risk” because of “their various psychosocial disadvantages” (p. 84). The literature has shown the current treatment gears toward the effects of EFP on individuals, specifically looking for resilience, increased positive behaviors or decreased negative traits. Bowers & MacDonald (2001) conducted a study to explore the effectiveness of EFP with at-risk adolescents. The population of this study were high school students attending an alternative high school due to behavioral issues who were later referred to an EFP program in Kansas. A total of 10 participants completed the 14 EFP sessions, and changes, such as decreased depression, were observed (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001). Hayden (2005), completed her dissertation and analyzed how EFP affected the resiliency of at-risk youth. The researcher interviewed 10 participants from two different EFP programs to explore whether or not their resiliency increased after treatment. While the youth were “at-risk” the study doesn’t identify what categorizes them as such, since the researcher was not connected to the clinical process and was not privy to how the participants came to partake in the EFP programs. Given that this dissertation was completed fifteen years ago, there is still much to be done to contribute toward the research of this field. While the previous study explored the experiences of participants with EFP, Wilson et al., (2017) interviewed therapists, as their perspective can provide valuable data regarding the perceived effectiveness of EFP in sessions. The proposed study offers the valuable perspectives of the participants and that of their experiences along with the experiences of the clinician and the researcher who are one and the same. It is my hope that this study will contribute to the existing research literature by revealing valuable information about the nuanced clinical model practiced at Stable Place.

### **EFP and Young Men of Color**

Due to the current political and social climate affecting the United States, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the level of risk young men of color must contend with regularly. Young men of color, both black and Latinx are considered *at risk* partly because of the racial disparities and the treatment they are subjected to on a regular basis. It is important to consider the implications of culture, socioeconomic status, privilege, and access to services on our clinical and research practices. Among the studies referenced in this paper about EAT, only Bachi et al., (2011) make mention of participants' socioeconomic status. Bachi et al., (2011) found that out of the 29 participants in the study, 70% were of low socioeconomic status. Other studies describe the participants' race. Trotter et al. (2008) conducted a study that had 164 participants, of which 136 participants were white and only 28 participants identified as either black, Hispanic or other. The study conducted by Iwachiw (2017) only included white participants. Cohen (2011) makes a case for how important it is to consider culture when working in EFP, stressing that "neglecting to name cultural identities and their implications on the study omits an important discussion" (p.19). As systemic, relational clinicians, it is vital to include the intersectionality of socioeconomic status, culture, race, gender and age into our clinical assumptions and into our research. Each of these studies (Bachi et al., 2011; Cohen, 2011; Iwachiw, 2017; Trotter et al., 2008) showed that EFP was found to be helpful to these at risk populations. This leads me to consider the ways in which this modality and intervention can be made accessible to young people of low socioeconomic status, among latinx and black communities providing them with the access and opportunity to participate in this type of therapy.

## Stable Place

The nature of EFP sessions can be quite complex. At Stable Place, the clinical team consists of the therapist, the equine specialist, and the horse. The therapist is the clinician responsible for the therapeutic outcome of the session. This person works together with the client to achieve the desired clinical outcomes. The equine specialist (ES) is a trained and certified horse expert who works with the therapist to ensure that the sessions make the most of the client/horse experience. The ES is responsible for attending to the safety of the horse and of any person involved in the session. The ES also provides feedback regarding the horse's behavior. This feedback is useful for the therapist and the client to explore in the therapeutic sessions. The horses are untrained, yet very helpful animals. While they are domesticated, they are not trained to be anything except horses. They are docile enough to be around people and free enough to just be themselves in session. The client's interactions with the horse provide the therapist with information about how the client may behave in other situations. In this way, the horse serves as a metaphor for other relationships in the client's life (Brandt, 2013; Green, 2017), as well as for behaviors (Klontz et al., 2007) or events in the client's world that have been problematic or challenging in their past (Duckers, 2008; Green et al., 2019). The metaphors that bubble up in the moment, based on what is happening with the horse, make for authentic and organic sessions.

The clinical team and the client all participate in the therapeutic process. Through the use of visual perception and the use of metaphoric language, the therapist and the Equine Specialist work together in a relational manner to utilize what is happening with the horse in the moment in a way that is meaningful to the client (Green, 2017). There is

a cooperation between animal and human; the horse perceives the body language and the voice of the client. The therapist is doing the same by listening closely, observing the session and cooperating with the equine specialist in order to provide clients with powerful, transformative moments in session (Green, 2017; Shelton et al., 2011).

Horses are extremely sensitive to changes in body language, which is their primary communication strategy. Their position in the social pecking order within the herd allows them to create a cooperative interconnection with one another through the use of non-verbal cues. It is due to this incredible sensitivity that horses can mirror the clients and thus provide a reaction that is often immediate and transparent in nature (Hallberg, 2012). For example, “when humans present with incongruence, horses instinctively react, reflecting the person’s internal emotional state regardless of outward expression” (Brandt, 2013, p. 24). When the horses respond in interesting ways, therapists can draw clients’ attention to this equine response as a way of evoking rich and curious conversations that would not be possible in a traditional therapy setting.

### **Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy: Groups**

Trotter et al. (2008) researched the efficacy of Equine-Assisted Counseling (EAC) for groups. Their study, which explored the use of talk therapy, group processing, and EAC, revealed that at-risk youth who received EAC experienced more benefits than those who only received talk therapy. The researchers explained that the EAC interventions succeed at “reducing externalizing problem behaviors while also improving adaptive skills” among the participants (Trotter et al., 2008, p. 279). These externalizing behaviors are classified as “problem solving,” increased “self-esteem” and improved “stress.” Trotter et al. (2008) also found that group processing led to conversations that explored

meaning between horses and participants. Group processing can help to normalize open discussions and encourages sharing personal experiences within the context of a cohort.

From the literature, it is apparent that group sessions allow for sharing experiences among fellow participants. The group sessions at Stable Place combined EFP activities and group processing. In group sessions, clients can feed off each other, engage in collaborative conversation, and get inspired to share and participate. At Stable Place, horses have long been utilized to address a variety of issues in group settings, including substance abuse, grief and loss, couple and family issues, and team building (Green et al., 2019). Adolescents participating in EFP group sessions may be open to engaging in group conversations, as they witness how the other group members choose to share in their experiences with the horses. The EFP groups allow for peer involvement, as it can be encouraging to observe how others participate and share. After all, regardless of what landed the adolescents at the PYTC, they continue to be adolescents; as such, it is possible for them to value external opinions and experiences in relation to their own.

Since adolescence is a stage of life in which individuals face challenges related to growing up and joining society (Wilson, 2012), adolescents represent an ideal population for EFP in a group setting. It is for this reason that I have chosen to explore the experiences of young men who have been detained and are serving time in this residential treatment facility who have participated in EFP groups. One study found that a high percentage of youth with criminal charges also have “co-occurring behavioral, emotional, or substance abuse disorders” (Quinn & Shera, 2009, p. 289). Therefore, it is possible that the therapeutic use of horses in the context of group therapy may have an impact on the mental and emotional health of the incarcerated adolescent group members.

### **Stable Place EFP Groups**

As previously mentioned, NSU, The Quell Foundation, and Stable Place joined together to offer EFP services to the adolescents at the PYTC, with the dual purpose of conducting clinical sessions and conducting research. This collaboration allowed groups of incarcerated adolescent males to attend therapy in a group setting, engage with the horses, and pay special attention to things they would not normally notice in a traditional therapeutic setting. For this study there were two cohorts that participated, with fifteen participants between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Out of the fifteen, 3 identified as Caucasian, 4 identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 7 identified as Black and 1 identified as other. Of the fifteen participants only two expressed to have had minimal previous horse experience. They described the horse experience as having been around horses before. Although experience is not necessary to participate in the EFP groups, it was useful information to have. As a clinician it was important for me to know if they would experience this horse interaction differently than what they had done in the past. However, the horse experience did not necessarily put them at any kind of advantage. The expectations and the responses from the clinical team were the same for all the participants. This EFP work is not about teaching horsemanship skills; rather, it emphasizes the psychotherapeutic experiences and their relationship to the lives of the participants. The ability to complete a task was not as important as what happened for the participant in the process of completing it.

EFP uses both verbal and non-verbal cues to determine what is transpiring in the present moment. This allowed the participants to be introspective and attuned to their surroundings, inviting them to generate meanings regarding their experiences with the

horses. The transformative nature of the EFP process can be witnessed in the moment, as the experiential interventions engage everyone involved (Green, 2017). This collaborative therapeutic process allows for both freedom and spontaneity within the structure of each session (Green et al., 2019). The flexibility to adapt to what happens in the moment is what makes this such an ideal therapeutic modality for the adolescent population. Adolescents are not always offered the freedom just to be due to the rules and boundaries set by adults. Part of what makes this experiential modality flexible is offering the participants the permission to make changes. For example, during sessions, clinicians can give in to certain concessions such as playing music while in session, while remaining committed to therapeutic moments that allow for transparent conversations among the therapist and group participants.

According to Green et al. (2019):

[EFP], with its experiential focus, can be used as a means of disrupting repetitive patterns of interaction and offering clients an opportunity to notice and experience these interactions in a different context. Through their interactions with the horses, clients can attempt new behaviors in the moment, and effective processing of client interactions with the horses can allow translation of these new behaviors into their everyday lives. (p. 238)

Group processing in EFP is an interactive and generative experience; the interactions lend themselves to further topics of discussion as participants are able to explore their experiences in an organic way. In the same way that the group processing is tailored to the group and its participants, the activities are as well. One unique and significant aspect of groups conducted in this setting is the structured flexibility or planned spontaneity that

occurs. The paradoxical combination of planned activities with unpredictable animals who have a mind of their own makes for interesting clinical experiences. Horses are not the only unpredictable elements; add a group of rambunctious teen boys to that setting, and it makes for an exciting session every time.

At the start of this process, the focus of the funded study was on reducing recidivism and measuring change. However, with each new group of young men that came out to the barn, as a therapist, I became increasingly aware of how personalized this process would need to be. When we first began facilitating these groups, our Stable Place clinical team would plan out the sessions and activities for the week, outlining our rationale and intentions for the process. Our work was grounded in the theoretical foundations and assumptions of brief therapy (Berg, 1994; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; DeShazer, 1988; Green, 2012; Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick, & Bodin, 1974). These clinical ideas informed the way our planning evolved. Inevitably, things changed once we met the different cohorts of young men. Each group of young men was different; each individual young man was different. As a team, we quickly realized that leading from behind (Haley, 1986) would be much more helpful than dictating how each session should unfold.

Our flexibility, coupled with the clinical agenda we established, made for a truly impactful therapeutic experience. As therapists, we had a responsibility to facilitate beneficial and useful change for these clients, as their time at the barn was not recreational. However, we could not determine what the therapeutic change would be or how the shift would occur, prior to the session. The level of flexibility we adopted as a clinical team was inspired by the training provided by Dr. Shelley Green. Green (2014)

adheres to brief therapy foundations in her clinical work, her teaching, and her supervision of EFP students (Berg, 1994; Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; DeShazer, 1988; Green, 2012; Weakland et al., 1974). She trains therapists to attend to “systemic wisdom” that provides information about what makes sense for clients (Green, 2014, p. 425). Flexibility comes into play when therapists approach their clinical work with respect for what clients bring to session, and with a willingness to co-create “new meaning and understanding” (Green, 2014, pp. 425).

At Stable Place, we conducted the EFP sessions outdoors, in a barn setting with large animals; so, a certain amount of chaos was always expected. What we learned is that what happens within that chaos is what makes a difference. The therapist can offer possibilities, altering the client's “relationship with the problem” through the “unpredictable interaction” that may transpire between the horse and the client (Green, 2014, p. 427). While adapting to the chaotic nature of the sessions, we also paid special attention to safety. Brandt (2013) notes that therapists working in non-traditional therapy settings must consider risks and limitations, such as the weather, the possibility for injury, potential client allergies, matters of confidentiality, and many more. These were all elements considered during each session, and the clinical team made sure to attend to the importance of these possibilities.

The experiential and outdoor nature of EFP requires a complexity of attention and attunement from members of the clinical team. This experience requires them to be aware of safety, clinically relevant moments, themes that may come up, group process, and horse behavior, at all times. As previously mentioned, the sessions are a collaborative process between the therapists, the equine specialists, the horses and the clients. In this

case, the clients are the participants. However, since this is a collaborative process, we also incorporated the PYTC staff's contributions to the sessions. We invited the staff to share what they notice as improved or helpful, as it is important for the participants to hear about their progress from people they interact with daily. While the PYTC staff did not contribute to the clinical work, they participated in maintaining order and safety throughout the duration of time spent at the barn as well.

Safety is of even greater importance when working with incarcerated youth who may see the open space as a possibility for escape but opt to remain present and participate in the sessions instead. Traveling from a detention center to a barn setting provides an opportunity for the young men to utilize the time at Stable Place as recreation or simply as a break from the treatment center. They may even see the outdoor setting as the perfect place to attempt to run away. However, what the youth from the PYTC showed is that there is something more compelling than escaping: interacting with the horses. The EFP process allows clients to be themselves; for incarcerated youth, this opportunity to interact with the horses and engage authentically, can be transformative.

The clinical team makes space for clients to bring their full selves into an environment that is radically different from what they experience daily. Therapists invite, rather than expect, clients to participate in the process. The respect and appreciation they demonstrate often disarms the clients and lowers their defenses. By using respectful language, carefully considering who the clients are as human beings, and inviting clients to interact with the horses, EFP therapists create a catalyst for engagement, and even vulnerability, among the youth. This EFP work presents challenges and opportunities that invite the full, intentional participation of everyone involved.

## **Activities**

In this section I will describe some of the standard activities facilitated at Stable Place. These are EFP group activities that are utilized with the intention of addressing certain themes, according to the group's needs. The PYTC participants also participated in these activities; the activities were modified to fit what the group needed. These activities can be used with individuals, couples and groups that come to Stable Place for EFP services. I will describe the activity as it facilitated with any client, and I will delineate when and how these activities were modified for the participants from PYTC.

### ***Meet and Greet***

Each cohort of youth participated in twelve 90-minute EFP sessions at Stable Place. Each session consisted of a different activity with the horses. The first activity is always centered around a meet-and-greet. It is the very first introduction to the barn, to the horses and to this therapeutic modality. We invite the participants to be present and to discover what they notice. We invite them to share their first impressions of the horses upon observing them. This approach allows for the first group process; hearing each other respond individually allows for a collaborative conversation among participants as a group. As each participant shares what they observe, we can invite them into the paddock to join the horses and to approach them with safety and curiosity. This invitation includes a request for them to notice if anything changes for them, or if they notice a change among the horses. When time allows we invite the participants to groom the horses. This involves brushing the horses and invites the participants to bond and connect with the horses. This activity is a standard way to invite clients to acclimate to the barn and to familiarize them with our EFP work at Stable Place.

### ***Catch and Halter***

An activity that requires a more hands-on approach is *catch and halter*. This invites the participant to choose a horse and attach the halter and a lead rope with the intention of walking the horse. Without giving any instructions, the participants are tasked with figuring out how the halter should fit, and inviting them to make as many attempts as they need. There is no wrong way, outside of safety parameters, of approaching the activity. Trial and error is part of the task, because it allows for problem solving and it invites the participants to reach out to their immediate resources if they need assistance.

### ***Lines of Communication***

One of the very first activities we altered in order to accommodate the group was *lines of communication*. This activity requires two participants to lead a horse in unison, working together to get the horse to move without speaking out loud. The purpose of this activity is to find creative ways to enhance communication. As we quickly realized with this group, the participants were not necessarily looking to bond, or work together. As a result, the activity was altered, allowing the participants to figure out how to compromise and negotiate the path of the horse, using any communication method they were comfortable with. The goal of the session was clear communication, and so we adjusted in order to make the metaphor applicable to their daily lives in PYTC and in their personal lives back home.

### ***You Gotta Crack a Few Eggs***

We also incorporated some personal activities as well. One of those activities was developed by Tracie Faa-Thomson and is called “*you gotta crack a few eggs*” (Trotter,

2012, p.130). This activity requires some vulnerability because we ask participants to draw or write their most treasured people or things on a hard-boiled egg. Once the eggs are decorated, we ask the participants to discuss what they chose to draw on their egg. We then ask them to find a way to *attach* their egg onto the horse. The activity has the participants keep their priorities protected while going through an obstacle course akin to life. Many things can happen during this activity: some people drop their egg during their journey through the obstacle course, while others get through the course with their egg intact. Despite the outcome, we discuss how they managed to complete the task. Even if the egg was dropped, we explore their process of keeping their eggs safe throughout. This activity uses metaphors about life's challenges, their goals, the obstacles that get in their way, and prioritizing safety.

### ***Labeling***

Another activity that requires visible vulnerability is called *labeling*. This activity entails painting on the horses. We ask participants to paint the labels they have been given by others, showing us how others see them. We also ask them to paint the labels they give themselves, or wish to give themselves. Because of how personal the activity is, it requires a significant amount of trust and vulnerability to share their labels. It is a hands on activity that requires close proximity to the horse, given they have to paint on the horse's body. The activity also requires participants to put their hands on the horse for an extended period of time to paint on the horse and to remove the paint off the horse; it is a big ask. The responses generated from that activity often yield really rich conversations about labels, self-confidence, and shame. However, the conversations also greatly depend on how safe it is to discuss such deep personal topics.

### *Other Activities*

We have several activities that hone in on goal setting, accomplishments, and working through obstacles. Those were a great fit for group activities, because these young men have goals they want to accomplish outside of their treatment center. They want to get out of the center, they want to finish school, and they have career aspirations. As a clinical team, we learned how important it was to check in with our participants so that we could tailor our activities in ways that were beneficial. It was more important to make sure we got feedback and implemented it than to follow a schedule of activities. This flexibility allowed the participants to feel heard and valued. The activities are not just recreational moments for participants to enjoy; rather, they are meant to have therapeutic impact on the lives of the participants.

While talk therapy is invaluable and beneficial, experiential clinical work presents unique possibilities for therapeutic change. When it comes to teenagers, the opportunity to engage in therapy in a barn setting, rather than a traditional office, makes a world of difference. Experiential therapeutic approaches like EFP “prompt discussions of situations in the lives of teens, their responses to these situations, and their analysis of the effectiveness of their responses” (Frederick, 2012, p. 5). Everything that occurs in session becomes useful and noteworthy. Because the experiential sessions unfold organically, EFP provides a non-threatening way of addressing issues and difficulties (Frederick, 2012). With the incorporation of the horses and the use of metaphors throughout the therapeutic process, clients are given the chance to make sense of behavior—their own, as well as the horses’—and witness shifts happening in the moment; these shifts can be translated into their lives without explicit conversation about change. As a result of these

experiential interventions, clients can come to their own realizations and interpret what is happening as they are experiencing it. This contributes to the group experience, making EFP a powerfully unique modality that allows clients to experience change in a tangible way.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The EFP practiced at Stable Place has a clear theoretical foundation informed by brief therapy principles. Since the therapists who work for Stable Place have all completed graduate coursework in equine therapy at NSU and are trained directly by Dr. Green, they are informed by the brief therapy approach and the various theories of systemic family therapy. As a therapist, I resonate most with theories that allow me to remain curious (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), explore the client's strengths (Berg, 1994), lead from one step behind (Haley, 1986), and make sense of behavior in context (Bateson, 1972). These are foundational assumptions of brief therapy, and they inform my work at the barn with each one of my clients.

When we work with clients at Stable Place, particularly marginalized clients such as the young men who come from the PYTC, we do not assume that they are pathological, criminal, or in need of correction. While their actions have landed them in a place where they are living out the consequences, it is our assumption that we may be more helpful if we approach therapy in a non-judgmental way (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993). As a therapist, I rarely ask these young men about what led to their incarceration. If I do, I ask about what led to the decisions that generated their actions. The question always serves the purpose of reflection, rather than judgment. Every client has a story worth hearing, and if we listen with curiosity (Flemons & Gralnik, 2013) and try to make sense

of their actions within the context of their lives (Bateson, 1972), we can get a sense of who they are, rather than prescribe a fix for what they did. It is with that respectful curiosity that therapists can explore what can be helpful alongside the client, or from a step behind. Clients are experts in their own lives (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), and it makes all the difference to give these incarcerated young men that sense of agency. When therapists preface sessions by exploring what works for their clients, they invite them into the clinical work, thereby allowing their voice and their goals to steer the therapeutic conversations that ensue.

In essence, the purpose of the work is to make a relevant difference in the lives of our clients. We never approach sessions with the assumption that we know what that difference is, no matter who the clients are. We discover what can be useful together, alongside the horses, and we offer it back to the clients (Haley, 1986). Many teachable moments come up during EFP sessions, but it is always the clients who decide what they will take with them. Such permissive validation makes it possible to lead from behind. The therapist may facilitate the process and follow a therapeutic agenda, but the client is always the one to determine what is useful (O'Hanlon & Martin, 1992). This idea stems from the brief therapy assumption that clients are capable people whose strengths must be honored (Berg, 1994).

The outdoor barn setting allows for the activities, the session themes, and the interactions with the horses to be metaphorical (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Brandt, 2013; Green, 2017); the use of metaphor is central to EFP work. Therapists make use of what the horses do and invite the clients to make sense of that metaphorically. Metaphors help clients find ways to translate the equine experience in ways that are relevant to their

daily lives. Metaphors elicit connections between what happens in session with the horses and what happens in clients' personal lives. As Karol (2007) explains, "EFP uses the client's 'actual' experiences with the horse as the foundation for therapeutic exploration" (p. 80). The outdoor setting also fosters mindfulness and paying attention, allowing the therapist to hone in on what the client notices.

We are not ignorant therapists; we are curious ones. We are unacquainted with our clients' lives, and we explore their stories, experiences, and conversations with respectful curiosity and a sense of priority (Green, 2012). Rather than imposing our own expertise, or our own judgement or psychoeducational moments, we embrace the clients' realities, allowing this work to become transformative in such a way that clients no longer need to be defensive. It invites clients to react, to respond, and to collaborate in the search of what will be beneficial or helpful for them. This therapeutic position allows for a collaborative and respectful interest, "the therapist joins with the client in a mutual exploration of the client's understandings and experience" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, pp. 28).

Facilitating a conversation about how the horse's behavior makes sense, given what is happening for the client in that moment, is very different than prescribing anger management via a lecture or didactic interaction. Incarcerated clients are accustomed to hearing what they did wrong or how they need to change. That is not how we make use of our time with them. Instead, if anger comes up, it will come up based on the nature of the activity or the group process; it is then our job as EFP therapists to be disarming, gentle and respectful, and to normalize how anger can be useful and offer the contemplation of when it can get in the way. The use of careful language (Cade &

O'Hanlon, 1993), validation (Berg, 1994), and reframes (Weakland et al., 1974) helps clients know that they need not protect themselves against us, against themselves, or against the idea that change can be beneficial.

Along with brief therapy practices, our EFP work at Stable Place is also informed by mindfulness practice. This approach emphasizes the awareness of the self, including one's internal emotions, needs, and desires within a relational context (Brandt, 2013). While our work is not directly informed by the family therapy models that directly emphasize mindfulness, it is certainly part of our EFP work (Gehart, 2010; Germer, 2004). Using a mindfulness-based approach, therapists encourage clients to focus their attention on the "present moment," rather than thinking ahead to the future or looking back at the past (Germer, 2004, p. 25). Germer (2004) describes mindfulness as "reorienting attention" to the "current experience" (p. 26). Inviting all EFP clients to pay attention in a non-judgmental way produces acceptance; it does away with resistance, because clients cannot be wrong about what they notice.

At Stable Place, we introduce mindfulness at the start of every EFP session. This invitation to be aware, to remain present, and to be in the moment is a large part of what makes this experiential modality so transformative. We ask our clients to maintain expectant of the experience during each session. The incorporation of mindfulness further encourages a non-pathologizing therapy experience, which can be disarming to a group of incarcerated young men. Instead, of prescribing solutions to problems, the EFP approach is personalized, experiential, and generative. We strive to make the EFP sessions feel safe and transformative, and we also allow the space for unexpected experiences to occur.

## Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the statistics and the literature that currently exists regarding incarcerated young men in South Florida. The chapter introduced the PYTC and the services it provides for the purposes of rehabilitation and treatment. The review of the existing literature presented in this chapter shows that reform must begin with programs implemented outside of the prison setting and within the community (Moffet, 2017). It also reveals how such community partnerships can serve to provide services for young people seeking treatment. This chapter also showed the unique form of EFP practiced at Stable Place and outlined its specific theoretical foundations.

The relational perspective that informs the EFP approach has also informed the research methodology I have selected for this study, which I will discuss in Chapter III. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the incarcerated young men from the PYTC who participated in EFP groups at Stable Place. As previously stated, it is my hope to add to the existing literature by contextualizing the experiences found in the previously mentioned study by Green, et al., (2019), using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology I selected for this study. In order to explore the unique experiences of the incarcerated young males who participated in EFP group therapy, I chose a qualitative research method. In particular, I utilized a phenomenological approach, as such research privileges the voices and stories of the participants. It was important to contextualize the findings of the funded study by asking the participants to share their experiences, keeping in mind that their time spent at the barn took place while they were incarcerated. By analyzing the participants' stories, and by finding themes that emerged from my interviews with them, I aim to provide an interpretation that accurately captures the young men's experiences. In this chapter, I will also describe the specific qualitative research method I selected to analyze the data: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I incorporated an autoethnographic portion in the study, as I performed the dual role of researcher and therapist in my interactions with the participants. This chapter also describes how my study utilizes and expands upon the archival data of the previous study conducted by Green, et al., (2019). It describes the sample size for this study and shows the steps I have taken to acquire the archival data. Lastly, I explain the ethical considerations that I made to uphold the participants' agency in this process.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe phenomenological research as research that reports on the "meaning for several individuals," (p.57). Phenomenological research also looks at the "lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" as describe by the individuals (p.57). Qualitative researchers identify a human experience as it relates to a

phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the phenomenon under study is the EFP group experience. The researcher then collects data from the participants, capturing their descriptions of how they experienced the phenomenon. Although the funded study aimed to capture what effects EFP would have on the population of incarcerated youth, it did so primarily through a quantitative research lens. In order to make sense of the quantitative responses, other researchers on the project conducted and collected semi-structured interviews from the participants who volunteered to be interviewed. The qualitative interviews yielded direct quotes from participants in order to supplement the quantitative findings. It is important to build upon what the previous study collected and explore the EFP Group therapy experience by using the data already collected and further analyzing the data. Given the relational and experiential nature of EFP, I found it essential to select a research method that is congruent with the philosophy that “empowers individuals” to share their experiences in a way that honors their voice (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). My choice to utilize a qualitative research reflects my desire to complement and enrich the quantitative data.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is “the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves through experiences” (Gallagher, 2012, p. 7). Creswell (2012) explains that phenomenology was originally popularized by the writings of German mathematician Edmund Husserl, who believed that *phenomena*—the Greek word for *appearances*—and, therefore phenomenology, “was a method that attempted to give a description of the way things appear in conscious description” (Gallagher, 2012, p. 8). In other words, once an experience is perceived by someone, the phenomenon can be studied, researched, and

analyzed. As Kafle (2011) explains, “Phenomenology is an umbrella term encompassing both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches” (p. 181).

According to Padilla-Diaz (2015), there are several different classes of phenomenology. Smith (2018) identifies seven in particular. The first, transcendental phenomenology, “studies how objects are constituted in pure or transcendental consciousness, setting aside questions of any relation to the natural world around us” (Smith, 2018, para. 35). The second, naturalistic constitutive phenomenology, “studies how consciousness constitutes or takes things in the world of nature, assuming with the natural attitude that consciousness is part of nature” (Smith, 2018, para. 35). The third, existential phenomenology, “studies concrete human existence” (Smith 2018, para. 35). The fourth, generative historicist phenomenology, “studies how meaning, as found in our experience is generated in historical processes of collective experience over time” (Smith, 2018, para. 35). The fifth, genetic phenomenology, “studies the genesis of meanings of things within one’s own stream of experience” (Smith, 2018, para. 35). The sixth, hermeneutical phenomenology, “studies interpretive structures of experience,” and “how we understand and engage things around us in our human world” (Smith 2018, para 35). The seventh, realistic phenomenology, “studies the structure of consciousness and intentionality, assuming it occurs in a real world that is external to consciousness” (Smith, 2018, para. 35).

### **Hermeneutical Phenomenology**

Of the seven classes of phenomenology identified by Smith (2018), the one that is most fitting for this study is hermeneutical phenomenology, which was developed by Martin Heidegger (Lavery, 2003). The focus of this approach is to “illuminate details

and trivial aspects within an experience” (p. 24). This specific type of phenomenology goes beyond attempting to understand participants’ experiences through their own personal lens; it privileges the meanings they create from the phenomenon under study. Other hermeneutical theorists include van Manen and Moustakas (Alase, 2017), whose writings influenced the research approach I will utilize in this study. According to Zichi, Kahn, and Steeves (2000), hermeneutical researchers seek to understand how “phenomena of the world is presented, how we understand the world as it is presented to us, and [how we] understand belief itself” (p. 5). Researchers using this approach essentially aim to understand participants’ interpretation of what is occurring in their lives, as well as how they make meaning out of that understanding.

A simplified definition of hermeneutics is the study or theory of interpretation. Interpretation is the foundation of this methodology; therefore, the researcher must interpret phenomena within “meaning-contexts” (Soule & Freeman, 2019, p. 858). Much like the relational lens used in EFP, this research approach allows for interpretation of meaning within context; “the experience *of* [phenomena] could relate to a material good, a relationship, a memory, prejudice, language, and the like” (Soule & Freeman, 2019, p. 859). Along with interpretation, hermeneutical phenomenology also utilizes intentionality. As the researcher studies participants’ experiences, he or she is thinking consciously and with intention, which ultimately contributes to the research. Relationships and previous experiences lend themselves to the introspection, intentionality, and interpretation of any given phenomenon. It is important for the researcher to remember that experiences do not exist in vacuums. People’s experiences are shaped by historical and cultural inputs. Therefore, the researcher cannot assume that

an experience is a thing to be discovered; rather, experience is relational, complex, and deserving of intentional exploration.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

The co-construction of understanding allows for research to be a collaborative process between the researcher and the participants (Lauterbach, 2018). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) conceptualized and organized the research tradition known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As a clinician working with a brief psychotherapy model, the notion of co-constructed understanding that is inherent to the IPA approach represents a solid theoretical fit for me. The EFP approach allows for collaborations among the clinician, client, horse, and equine specialist; the discovery of meaning and the understanding of experience are part of the therapeutic process that takes place in the barn. It makes the most sense, therefore, to apply that same lens to the research approach for this study.

According to Jeong and Othman (2016), IPA is founded on three theoretical principles. First, “it values the participants’ own perspectives on their experiences” (Jeong & Othman, 2016, p. 559). Privileging the perspective of the participant helps to contextualize their responses and adds value to the analysis, as they are the experts at describing the experience of the phenomenon. The second theoretical principal is about closely examining the “unique, particular experience of each individual participant” (Jeong & Othman, 2016, p. 559). Since each participant will generate meaning in a different way, the researcher can begin to identify themes from the participants’ responses and examine them through an interpretative lens. The third principle is that IPA utilizes a “double hermeneutic tradition” (Jeong & Othman, 2016, p. 559), that layers the

experiences of the participants with that of the researcher's interpretation. While these interpretations remain subjective, the findings can become objective; they have the potential to add universal or generalized value to the field.

Since IPA research is concerned with details, the approach tends to be extensive and thorough. It is important, therefore, that the researcher take a systematic approach. The ideography of IPA works on two levels. It pays attention to the "particulars" and how these can be understood from a "particular context" (Smith, et al, 2009, p. 29). It also looks at generalizations related to the phenomenon. While the experiences, the details, and the context may be individual and personalized, the phenomenon can also be viewed in a general, relational way. IPA is concerned with the details and peculiarities of a lived experience and it also aims to "enable experience to be expressed in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). Smith et al. (2009) also point out that IPA inquiry is an "interpretative process" (p. 32). In the context of this study, this methodology will aid in exploring how these experiences were interpreted by the participants and how they are to be interpreted by the researcher.

Interpretative phenomenology recognizes the role that social relationships and language play in shaping our understanding of the world (Finlay, 2009). In the same way that brief therapists acknowledge that no client exists in a vacuum, this research method considers context an important component to be included in the research (Bateson, 1972). The hermeneutic circle is a concept that connects this research approach with brief therapy principles. As Smith et al. (2009) explain, "To understand any given part, you look at the whole; to understand the whole, you look at the parts" (p. 27).

The circular process of interpretation that is utilized in brief therapy also applies to the qualitative researcher's way of thinking. Meaning becomes clear when examined in context. The IPA researcher uses step-by-step methods to approach the process of analysis and provide different ways of looking at the data. The researcher's relationship to the data also shifts throughout the process, as he or she can interpret meaning at a number of different levels and see "different perspectives of the part, but also of the whole coherence of text" (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 28).

As briefly covered in Chapter II, the research that has been conducted on equine therapy with incarcerated young people has been done to explore its effects on participant behavior. The funded study from which I obtained the interviews for my study explored ways in which EFP helped the participants. My goal was not to look for change, but rather to explore experience. As a therapist, and as a working member of the team that met with the participants in person, I saw change happen. However, my intention for this study was to explore what those changes meant for the participants. I wished to understand what it was like for them to work with the horses and what, if anything, was considered to be significant and transformational in their experience. Perhaps the things I noticed as a therapist were not the same as what the participants took away from their experience. Since I was also a part of the therapeutic experience, this further points to the purpose of capturing my auto ethnographical experience, adding an additional lens with which to view this therapeutic approach.

### **Autoethnography**

Research in the IPA approach involves the researcher's personal experience in the interpretation of data (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, it was important for me to

examine and include my own experience throughout this process. At the start of the original funded research project, I was selected to participate as a therapist. In order to be as transparent as possible and add richness to this research, it was important for me to incorporate autoethnography into this research. Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). As a therapist and researcher, it was critical for me to go beyond understanding the participants and immersing myself in the dialogue. By immersing myself in my own experiences with this project, I was able to further understand the role I contributed to this project. As a researcher and clinician I acknowledge that I also needed to make sense of my own experience throughout the research process. It was important for me to remain aware of how my experiences with the participants at the barn undoubtedly influenced my writing, my interpretation, and my analysis of what I came to learn. Along with utilizing an IPA approach, I also incorporated my own reflections of the process by way of autoethnography, as I believe this added value and context to the findings.

Both IPA and Autoethnography research methodologies were utilized in this study. Smith (2009) describes IPA as the researcher trying to “make sense of what is happening” (chapter 1, section 84, para 2). While I explored the experiences shared by the participants, I also recalled my own experiences at the barn. Looking back, I recognized that shifts were also happening for me as a therapist; I expected that growth to continue to happen for me as a researcher as well. This work allowed me to grow and sharpen my skills; it also allowed me to delve into data that contributed to the family therapy field and to the continued development of EFP practices.

I used IPA to analyze and interpret the experiences of the participants, and used Autoethnography to describe, analyze, and interpret my experience. While the research methodologies are slightly different from one another, I believe their differences helped to enrich the study. I incorporated my own learning, my own experience, and my interpretative lens into the findings of this research in a way that went beyond my role as a researcher.

This EFP work is like no other work I have experienced to date. I have worked in a variety of clinical settings with different populations. Working at a barn, alongside horses and other team members is already so different from traditional talk therapy work. Looking back, at the start of every talk-therapy session, I would experience some form of nervousness or anxiety. I understood the responsibility I carried as a therapist to make something happen for my clients. I approached my EFP work in the same way, until I realized that I shared that sense of responsibility with my team, with the horses and with the clients. I shifted my approach as a therapist as a result of the work. I no longer felt I was there to make anything happen, instead I decided I was there to invite participants to discover possibilities. I can look back and notice a difference in my clinical self, but it was my aim to use autoethnography, as delineated by Ellis (2004) and Chang (2013) to analyze the process of how I got to be that different self.

### **Data Collection**

After the EFP group sessions were concluded, Stable Place staff members interviewed the participants of the study conducted by Green, et al., (2019). It is important to note that the staff members who conducted the interviews were not involved in providing therapy to the participants. This was done purposefully so that the

participants would not feel pressured to respond in any particular way. While the staff administered quantitative questionnaires to all of the participants, in-person interviews were only conducted with those participants who volunteered to be interviewed. Stable Place staff members conducted the interviews in a private office space at the PYTC location. They recorded the interviews and uploaded the recorded files to a secure storage platform. As a Stable Place intern, along with my clinical duties, I also formed part of the research team for the original study. I was granted access to the recorded files in order to partially transcribe the interviews, using the ExpressScribe software, and extract direct quotes for the qualitative portion of the results. The audio files provided to me were de-identified; each was marked by only a participant identification number. Since the interviews contained no identifying information, I was allowed to use the transcripts for the purpose of this study.

As previously mentioned, I utilized the IPA qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of the young men who participated in the research project conducted by Green, et al., (2019). These experiences were based on the original data derived from semi-structured interviews conducted by Stable Place therapists a few weeks after the treatment concluded. Nine participants volunteered to be interviewed and recorded. The interviews, which were all conducted at the PYTC, lasted between 10 and 39 minutes, depending on “the dialogue that transpired” (Green, et al., 2019, p. 4). The semi-structured interview questions were developed by the original research team, who sought to explore specific characteristics pertaining to their study. I found that the questions they asked were relevant and could adequately allow for the exploration of the

participants' experience with EFP group therapy. The participants who volunteered to be interviewed were asked the following questions:

1. For some clients, it was important that they feel heard, listened to, and valued.  
Was there a time you feel as though the therapeutic environment at Stable Place did that for you?
2. Self-worth is the opinion you have about yourself and the value you place on yourself. An example is your belief that you are a good person who deserves good things. Do you feel as though your work with the horses helped increase your self-worth? If so, in what ways?
3. What activity made you feel really confident after completing it?
4. What quality or trait do you value most about yourself, after completing the therapy?
5. Do you feel as though this Equine (horse) Therapy style allowed you to feel safe enough to share in therapy? Did sharing with the therapist help you to think about yourself in a different way? If so, how?
6. In what ways did working with the horses help you think about yourself differently than "regular talk therapy?"
7. Some clients said the questions we asked helped them to think about themselves in ways they had never done before. Is this something you can relate to? If so, can you tell me about something that happened in session that you had never thought about before?
8. Did the therapy help relate back to your life outside of PYTC? If so, how will this therapy impact what happens outside of PYTC?

9. In what ways will going through this therapy program affect your decisions in the future?
10. How has your therapy time with the horses at Stable Place impacted the way you think about yourself? How about your interactions with others? Do you think people around you might notice a difference?
11. What did you like the most about working with the horses?
12. Was there anything that you disliked about working with the horses?
13. Do you feel participating in the program with the horses was helpful to you?
  - a. If yes, how was it helpful?
  - b. If no, how could we improve/ what didn't you like?
14. Was there anything unexpected that happened while you were here? Did anything surprise you about this experience?
15. Do you feel this experience has helped you in your relationships with other people?
  - a. Why or why not?
16. Do you feel this experience has changed the way you feel about yourself?
17. Is there anything you think would help make this program better?
18. Would you be interested in participating in a program like this again?
19. Would you recommend this program to a friend?
  - a. Why or why not?

Their responses provided me with more detailed information about their experiences in EFP group therapy at Stable Place. These interviews answered the central question of the study: What is your experience of going through this EFP group therapy?

I was also a participant in this research endeavor not only because I was the researcher interpreting and analyzing the data provided by the participants, but because of my recollection of the experience was data as well. I collected that autoethnographic data by accessing the case notes for the EFP groups I facilitated in order to recall what happened each week. I also relied on my memory of the time I worked with the participants (Chang, 2013). There were things I still remembered about sessions that stood out to me. In addition, the case notes allowed me to put myself back in that time frame, so that I could self-reflect and layer my personal experiences with my clinical experiences.

### **Archival Raw Data**

Using archival data from Green et al.'s (2019) study, my goal was to gather meaningful feedback regarding the young men's experiences in EFP. The original study was conducted through a collaboration between Stable Place and NSU funded by The Quell Foundation. The goal of the project was to "improve the quality of life of adolescent males committed to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, specifically, those receiving mental health and substance use services at the Pompano Youth Treatment Center (PYTC)" by offering EFP sessions (Green et al., 2019, p. 1). The therapeutic interventions were designed to "increase self-confidence and interpersonal relations and to decrease anxiety and depressive symptoms" (Green et al., 2019, p. 1). The ultimate goal was to provide therapy services to the young incarcerated males and to study the effectiveness of EFP with this population.

The first group consisted of seven participants who completed the baseline assessment and attended 90-minute EFP group sessions at Stable Place twice a week for

six weeks, totaling 12 sessions. The seven participants also completed a post-test assessment designed to measure the intended results. Each of the participants also had the option to take part in semi-structured interviews. Five of the seven participants volunteered to be interviewed by the Stable Place staff.

The second group that received the intervention consisted of eight participants. They also completed the baseline assessment and attended a total of 12 90-minute EFP group sessions at Stable Place; however, they attended the sessions once a week for the first four weeks, and then bi-weekly. Four of those eight participants completed the post-test assessment. Of the four who did not receive the post-session assessment, two were discharged before the assessment could be completed, and the other two did not consent to participate in the research portion of the treatment. Of the eight participants who received the intervention, four volunteered to participate in the semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted by Stable Place staff.

Fifteen boys received the EFP group therapy intervention. The results of the study showed that they “experienced a significant increase in self-concept,” and “significant decreases in anxiety, depression, anger and disrupted behaviors that continued 3 months after the program ended” (Green et al., 2019, p. 23). The findings are not yet complete, since this study is still underway. Once the third group of participants receives the assessment, the treatment, and the post-tests, a final analysis will be made. The original study determined the clinical impact that EFP had on the participants based on the quantitative scores and the qualitative interviews. The findings so far “illustrate the effectiveness of the program and show that working with the horses improved the quality of life of participants; it was truly transformative for the boys” (Green et al., 2019, p. 23).

I explored how these experiences were transformative and how, if at all, the intervention was personally significant for the participants.

The data was archival, as I did not collect the information directly from the participants by interviewing them myself (Mohr & Ventresca, 2002). I worked directly from the recorded interviews in order to interpret and analyze the information that was originally collected. The data was raw and primary, as it had not been previously interpreted by anyone else. The interviews were previously used only to provide direct quotes and comments that contextualized the quantitative findings. My intent was not to evaluate the program or to demonstrate the effectiveness of EFP group therapy; rather, my goal was to explore what the EFP experiences were like for the participants.

### **Design**

To study the experiences of the participants after partaking in EFP groups at Stable Place, I used IPA to analyze data from qualitative interviews that were previously conducted. “The primary concern of IPA researchers is to elicit rich, detailed and first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena under investigation” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). It was important for me to learn about what the EFP group therapy experience was like for the young men from the PYTC. Although I did not personally interview the participants, I did partially transcribe the interviews prior to my dissertation project. For that reason, I was able to make the preliminary observation that the responses they provided to the interview questions were rich, multifaceted, and profound. Since IPA is considered “descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretative because it recognizes there is no such

thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8), I anticipated that I would continue to derive rich and meaningful information from the original data.

According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA is characterized by certain processes and principles. It was not a step-by-step process, but rather a set of guidelines that informed the order of data collection. My plan was to follow those guidelines and move from the descriptions of the experience to the interpretation of it with each of the interviews. I was committed to gaining an “understanding of the participants’ point of view” and engaging in “meaning making” as I began to incorporate my interpretation of what I learned (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79).

My plan was to first immerse myself in the raw data by obtaining the recordings of the interviews. I listened and re-listened to each interview, in order to become familiar with the tones, the voices, and perhaps even the intentions of each participant. Once I felt I was familiar enough with the audio files of each interview, I fully transcribed the interviews, this time including the interviewers’ questions and comments in order to add a visual component to the audio version of each interview. According to Smith et al. (2009), it is helpful to do both: listen to the audio and read the transcript, thus making the participant “the focus of the analysis” (p. 82). It is important to note that this process was not about summarizing the information obtained from these interviews, but rather digging deeper into it by allowing the information to create a passage into the participants’ experience. As Smith et al. (2009) explain, “active engagement” with the data involves reading and re-reading the interviews, followed by conducting an “initial level of analysis,” known as “noting” (p. 82). In this step, the researcher “examines semantic context and language on an exploratory level” and “begins to identify ways in which the

participant talks about and understands” the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). This allows the researcher to start organizing the text into themes, or meaning segments, and produce a comprehensive—albeit preliminary—set of data.

In this step, it was important for me to remain doubly involved with the “process of engaging” the data, as I explored the data while also thinking about how it informed the study (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). This part of the analysis developed the next step, the description of comments, to identify what mattered to the participant and derived the meaning of it. This part of the analysis called for my interpretation, as I noted how I understood these phenomenological findings. As a relational therapist, I am trained to look for patterns, to note differences, and to notice when similarities occur (Berg, 1994; Cade & O’Hanlon, 1993; DeShazer, 1988; Green, 2012; Weakland et al., 1974). I used this skill in my analysis as well. The literature does not provide specific or structured ways in which the IPA researcher must make sense of the data. However, Smith et al. (2009) describe three ways to visually explore participants’ comments:

1. Descriptive comments focused on describing the content of what the participant has said, the subject of the talk within the transcript (normal text).
2. Linguistic comments focused upon exploring the specific use of language by the participant (*italic*).
3. Conceptual comments focused on engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level (underlined) (p.83)

Once the three levels of comments were identified and coded, the next step of the analysis could ensue. During this next step, the interpretative and reflexive use of IPA came into the fold, as the data analysis involved developing the themes that emerged

from the interviews. The themes were then grouped according to concept, to similarity, and importance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This process went from exploring in depth to reducing the volume of detail “whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). This portion of the analysis involved breaking up the narrative of each interview and reconstructing a new whole based on the parts collected from each. This process was no longer oriented by the participants, but rather by the interpretation of the data, and it relied on the organization that the researcher created. It was my aim to incorporate the “hermeneutic circle” previously mentioned, where the “part is interpreted in relation to the whole” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 95). The emergent themes reflected both the participants’ words as well as my own phenomenological interpretation.

Once I established and ordered the themes, I looked for connections across themes using charting (Smith et al., 2009). Guided by the research question for the study, I either incorporated or discarded the various themes, depending on their relevance to the EFP group therapy experience. I engaged in this process throughout each interview, and then across interviews. The aim was to find patterns across the different interviews and then explore what emerged.

### **Participants**

In IPA research, participants should be fairly homogenous (Smith et al., 2009). For this reason, the participants for this study included the young men who participated in the original study: a homogenous group of young adolescent males between the ages of 14 and 19 completing detention time in the PYTC who completed 12 EFP group therapy sessions at Stable Place. A total of fifteen young men participated in two cohorts of EFP

groups. As briefly mentioned before, their cultural makeup is as follows: 3 identified as Caucasian, 4 identified as Latinx or Hispanic, 7 identified as Black, and 1 identified as other. The participants for this study consisted of the nine participants from the original study who volunteered to be interviewed. The cultural makeup of the interviewees was unknown, due to the fact that their interviews were de-identified. Because of some scheduling conflicts, the results of the third cohort are still pending, as the intervention has yet to be administered. The compilation of results of all three groups have not yet been published. For this reason, participants for this study only included those who completed the process from start to finish in the first two cohorts. Each of the participants consented to take part in recorded interviews and participate in the research portion of the EFP therapy services offered by Stable Place.

### **Role of the Researcher**

At the time of the original study, I was a Stable Place intern, which means my role was that of a therapist, rather than a researcher, on the original project. Currently, my role at Stable Place is that of a Staff Therapist. It is important to make this distinction, because as I switched into the role of a researcher, I must disclose that my work was seen through the lens of a therapist who worked with the participants in the EFP experience. Although two years have passed since the first cohort of young men came to Stable Place for EFP group services, I remember each of them, and certain things still stand out to me. I am aware that I am influenced by what I observed as their therapist. I am also aware that I am influenced by my role of youth pastor at my church, I held this position for 19 years. That vocation has informed my work with clients at Stable Place just as much as my clinical training has. My work as a youth pastor has exposed me to working with

teenagers, and this population has become my favorite to work with for many reasons. They have an authenticity about them, which makes clinical work refreshing. They do not come to therapy expecting to impress their therapist, but rather to test whether the therapist is trustworthy, genuine, and able to help. Once that rapport is established, and once they realize it is safe to be vulnerable, they open up to all of the possibilities therapy offers. They are living in a crucial, pivotal time in their lives; the decisions they make today will affect them tomorrow.

While my professional role was that of a therapist and youth pastor, my role in this project shifted into that of a researcher. I mentioned the ways in which I was previously involved with the project because it undoubtedly informed how I viewed the data. I was there for the clinically relevant moments that were highlighted in the interviews, and I can recall sessions that stood out to me. All of those recollections influenced what I noticed and learned in the research process. My ultimate aim in this study was to explore their experiences in group therapy and analyze their responses in hopes of contributing to the fields of Marriage and Family Therapy and Equine Facilitated Therapy.

Given that I planned to include an autoethnographic component to my research, that is an additional role I must mention in this section. It is important to note that I was also looking to explore my own experience throughout this project. As I came across noteworthy experiences, and as I layered my experiences to the experiences of the participants, I searched for ways in which my experiences were documented in existing research. I was curious to find if other therapists conducting EFP found themselves grappling with similar themes. I believe that sharing my own account of the EFP

experience from the clinical perspective enriched the findings of this study. Given that my aim was to explore experience, adding the therapeutic experience can help contribute to the EFP field along with the Family Therapy literature. Sharing the personal and interpersonal experiences between myself and the clinical team, or between myself and the participants produced an even richer account of what the group EFP experience was for the duration of this project.

It was my intention to approach the autoethnographic portion of my research with respect to personal significance, as this project contributed to my professional development and the advancement of this professional discipline (Chang, 2013). The primary focus of inquiry was my experience going through this research project. My role as a clinician was influenced by the work, and that in turn affected the work. There was a reciprocity between my professional development and the clinical work I was doing at the barn. A research question I hoped to answer within the analysis of the autoethnography was: How did my experience working on this project shape me as both a clinician and a researcher?

Autoethnographic data can be taken from a past self as well as the present self (Chang, 2013). My plan to analyze this data was to collect it from two places: jotting down what I remembered chronologically and also to go through my case notes. This gave me tangible data, that I then organized, analyzed and interpreted. The organization process was labeled or classified by themes depending on time and context. This means I looked at session notes after the sessions occurred, and I recollected the sessions from memory. I had two different contexts to analyze and interpret the data. This classification

process allowed me to refine my data and narrow the focus to decide what was significant about this process.

This project permitted me to find my voice as a scholar and as a clinician. Ellis (2004) explains that autoethnography allows for learning through vulnerability and through exposure. My time spent facilitating sessions, listening to interviews and sharing my own experiences allowed for personal growth and learning, but my hope is that it will contribute to future research in the Family Therapy field as well. There is something significant about looking inwardly to search for what experiences transpired throughout the project and throughout this dissertation process. In part, I feel the vulnerability of exposure and anxiety of expectation to produce scholarly material, worthy of this project. I cannot help but note the possible similarities to how the brave young men who said yes to the therapeutic experience at the barn may have felt; there is a request for vulnerability and an unspoken expectation for change. The thing I had to keep in mind throughout this research process in order to understand the experience will be to answer the question, “How did I get to be who I am?” (Weil, 2001, p.25).

### **Ethics**

Qualitative researchers have the task of documenting the reliability and validity of their work, as the instruments typically used for quantitative research are not typically used in qualitative studies. Creswell and Miller (2000) explain that the researcher’s “assumptions and worldview shape the selection of procedures” (p. 125). Given how close and personal this project felt as I was working, I kept that in mind when I analyzed the data. In order to maintain quality and ethical standards, I employed the same guiding principles that informed my clinical work, remaining aware of my assumptions, biases,

and preconceived beliefs. Phenomenology is about the exploration of experience, which includes the experience of the researcher. My interest in contributing to the field established the context of the project as I moved forward with exploring the meaning of the participants' experiences. I undoubtedly drew from my clinical training, making sure to uphold the participants' agency, making my encounters with them meaningful, and privileging their experiences over my own. I worked to incorporate my own reflections while remaining fully aware of my biases and assumptions, all the while staying sensitive to what I learned about each experience. As a Latinx clinician and researcher, my own cultural lens has colored my experiences and my work throughout this project. It is not lost on me that most of the young men that participated in this project were African American or Latinx minorities. For that reason, I felt compelled to attend to my sensitivity to the particular challenges regarding these issues, due to their minority status. I hoped to continue to honor their willingness to share their experiences throughout the rest of this research endeavor.

### **Summary**

As a therapist, I am trained to maintain a heightened sense of curiosity about what is possible. That same curiosity informed my next steps in this research project. In this chapter, I detailed the IPA methodology that I used to explore the experiences of the participants who received EFP group therapy at Stable Place. I described my role as a researcher and the other roles that have influenced my work thus far. Next, I discussed the selection process for participants, as well as my process of deriving the raw archival data from the aforementioned study. Lastly, I described the way in which an autoethnography research component was added to my analysis in the hopes of enhancing

the complexity of the study. While I anticipated that I would face challenges in conducting the proposed study, I looked forward to what I would learn in the process. From my findings I discovered the two roles of clinician and researcher influencing one another. The roles provided me with different lenses from which to view the data. That vantage point provided me with multiple perspectives which I then analyzed with the autoethnography.

## **CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS**

This chapter details the analysis of this study, including the themes that emerged through the analysis of the nine transcribed interviews. Based on the qualitative methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, I describe the way in which these themes and subthemes developed, how they were coded, and the connections between them. I used a coding software, Quirkos, to assist with the visual organization of the data. Throughout the chapter I provide interpretations, explanations and excerpts from the transcriptions. The autoethnographic portion of the chapter shows how I analyzed my own experience and how that contributed to the study. The Quirkos software helped me visualize the themes that arose and it allowed me to view the different roles I took on throughout this project from a unique perspective. Using the autoethnographic component previously mentioned I was able to identify the connections, the events and the moments that inspired the clinical work I drew on when I led the EFP groups. The notes I took during this process will show my evolution as a clinician as well, and illustrate the growth that has occurred from the time that I ran the groups to now.

### **Participants**

The participants that volunteered to be interviewed were comprised of nine young men. They each completed 12 sessions of EFP Groups at Stable Place while enrolled in the Pompano Youth Treatment Center. The interviews consisted of semi structured questions, conducted by three different Stable Place employees that were not directly involved in the therapy portion of the project. The audio files that were provided to me were de-identified, and were differentiated by participant identification number. For that reason, I was unable to provide specific information on demographics for the participants

who volunteered to be interviewed. Going forward, as I offer direct quotes, I refer to the participants by a participant number in order to maintain confidentiality and to avoid the risk of revealing any identifying information. The interviews varied in length, and ranged between 10 to 38 minutes and varied by interviewer. The participants were interviewed by three different people that were involved in the original research project but were not therapists to the participants. Although each interviewer read the same questions, they varied in their style of asking. One interviewer would ask follow up questions, such as “say more about that,” or “what do you mean when you say that?” These questions invited the participants to tell a story or to be more specific. Other interviewers stuck to the script and did not ask for the participants to elaborate further.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

The data analysis process was not linear. I drew upon the methodology in order to keep myself organized throughout. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis did not provide a direct map, but it did give me a compass. As noted earlier, the purpose of IPA is to interpret the meaning and analyze a phenomenon. It was an interesting process, given that the interviews were recorded and carried out by someone other than me. I had to make sense of what was said without the opportunity for follow up questions. It was an interesting role to be in, analyzing experiences limited to the responses provided by the participants. Some participants were detailed in explaining what each response meant. Some participants had a hard time articulating what these Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy moments meant for them. I found that our questions were formed from the assumption that the group therapy would be transformative and helpful. However, I also found that it was difficult to pinpoint in what ways the therapy process was

transformative and helpful. It was interesting to see this come up across several interviews.

Several steps were taken to analyze the data for this research. The first thing I did was listen to the recorded interviews several times. I wanted to familiarize myself with the responses to the interview questions until I felt comfortable enough to begin the transcription process. Using a software application called Express Scribe, I was able to upload each recording, slow down the audio and use a foot pedal to facilitate the transcription process. I completed this process with all nine interviews. Next, in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions, I re-listened to the audio and simultaneously read the typed transcripts. This allowed me to become familiar enough to start the initial notation development. Once I had the printed transcripts in hand, I began engaging the data by reading and re-reading them, without the use of the audio files. It was important to have the transcripts printed and physically available, as opposed to having a digital copy on a Word document in order to participate in “active engagement” with the data (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83)

The next step was to begin the initial notating. This next level of analysis consisted of visually exploring the content of the interviews. I studied the text and the audio according to the three comment classifications previously mentioned by Smith et al (2009). First, I focused on the “descriptive” comments. I took note of what each participant said as they responded to the interview questions. Next, I focused on the “linguistic” comments paying special attention to the specific use of language. I also noted the how each participant responded to the language used by the interviewer. While the interviews were conducted using the questions agreed upon, I found that some of the

language may have made the questions confusing. The last step in initial notating included making note of the times the interviewer delved deeper into the questions. There were times in which the answers required further explanation. This helped me to note when the participants sat back and thought about what they were sharing, and these additional probes also gave them room to think back and remember their experiences at the barn. Once the initial notating was completed, I felt comfortable and familiar enough with the data to start developing themes.

### **Quirkos**

In the next phase of the analysis, I used a data analysis software called Quirkos to assist me in the organization of the data. Quirkos is a qualitative software program that helps to sort, manage and understand text data. After transcribing the nine interviews to a text document, I used Quirkos to code and sort the text. Quirkos can be used to tag or code any relevant sections of data and to compare themes across different sources. The software was useful as it acts like a visual data base that looks across interviews. I was able to run searches by phrase and by theme. I used the software to color code quotes and to group them based on theme. The software helped me to visualize the data and the interface helped me to see the color-coded connections across themes. The software visually facilitated the analysis process throughout this project.

### **Themes**

The next phase of the process required that I identify the emerging themes. During the coding and notation process, I made notes about what stood out to me as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis makes the researcher the instrument. At first I wanted to verify if there were thematic differences between cohorts As I began to code

for themes, I realized that it would be possible for me to identify the participant's interview by name if I used the Participant Identification (PID) key from the pilot study. The de-identified participant numbers did not detail which cohort the participants belonged to. The interviews were de-identified when they were provided to me. Their only identification was their PID; if needed I could refer to the PID key. I made a decision at that time: it was more important to protect the participant identity than to chart if there were any thematic differences between cohorts. For that reason I decided to rename the interviews and numbered them from one to nine. That way, even with a PID key, the interviews could not be identified. As I discuss the themes that emerged in the analysis, I will be including direct quotes that correspond with the different themes that I extrapolated from the interviews. As I listened to the interviews, I noticed similarities, and larger themes emerging from the recounting of their experiences. Four themes emerged from the participants' experiences in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy groups at Stable Place: lessons learned, traits, relationships and the future.

### **Theme 1: Lessons Learned**

The first theme that emerged, lessons learned, was one of the most surprising. Throughout the interviews the participants shared what they learned. Thinking back to the end of the EFP group sessions at Stable Place, we would end each group asking for the participants to share what they were "taking away" from the time they spent at the barn. The participants mirrored that same dynamic and shared a general "take away" with the interviewers. Since the questions were generated to learn about the participants' experiences, the participants chose to share what they learned from working with the horses. The participants shared different things about what they learned about

themselves, and about the horses. Two subthemes emerged within the theme of things learned: horsemanship and awareness.

### *Horsemanship*

A subtheme that emerged as one of the lessons learned, was about horsemanship. Horsemanship is an umbrella term referring to the art of handling, riding and training horses (Jarrell, 2005; Trotter, 2012). For the purpose of this paper, the term is used to refer to the handling of horses. Given that most of the participants did not have previous horse experience, most of them mentioned having learned how to be around horses. Even the participants who had previous horse experience mentioned how much they enjoyed getting to be around horses in this relaxed setting. All of the participants made mention of having learned something about horses and horse behavior. The interview questions were designed to explore whether or not the participants found EFP groups were beneficial, or helpful. The participants seemed to focus on the very obvious fact that this was a different type of therapy because there were horses involved. Some participants connected how the horses taught them something about themselves; however, most if not all the participants focused on what they learned about the actual horses. Sometimes the most obvious thing is the thing one fails to bring attention to. It was surprising to hear this theme come up, but it made perfect sense after I heard it repeated time after time. The participants learned how to harness horses, how to clean their hooves, how to lead them around, and how to feed them safely.

P1: Walking with the horses, or like even like getting them to walk. I never thought horses can like, be controlled by a human being when they are way

stronger than us. I don't know, it just feels cool when I feed them. I like feeding them. I like hugging them too. I like to clean them. Walk them.

I liked everything about the horses to be honest.

P3: just feeding them.

P5: just, being around the horse that was one big thing that I surprised myself with because like, I'm not gonna lie when I first went there, I didn't really trust the horses like that, because they were big and stuff like that.

P6: walking the horses. Um. Brushing them. Cleaning them, on the ummm... hoofs. Cuz like, I thought it was gonna try and like kick me. And I be seeing that on TV. But then I just thought, it's like dang, they are not mean horses. Seeing they aren't mean.

When asked about the sessions, the participants shared their experiences pertaining to horsemanship. That stood out to me and my interpretation was that the connections they established with the horses were just as significant as the bonds they made with the therapists, or with themselves.

### *Awareness*

Another subtheme about lessons learned was about awareness. As a direct result of interacting with the horses, the participants mentioned learning how to behave around the horses. This meant being aware of their physical proximity to the horses, but also being mindful of how they approached the horses. While their respectful approach was rooted in caution, so as not to spook or anger the horses, it resulted in self-awareness. As a researcher, this was also surprising to discover. It was not a connection that was made overtly at the barn. However, the participants mentioned having to have awareness while

around the horses for the sake of safety. They mentioned having to be measured in their tone of voices or in their use of swear words. They were careful not to bring “negative” energy around the horses. Some of that self-regulation came across in their interviews when they described their behavior outside the barn. This was a theme I interpreted based on what was said in the interviews as the term “awareness” was not uttered by the participants.

P2: The horse would actually listen what we got to say, well not what we said but our movement...And like our connection, and like our attitude

P5: Yea. Like, how to interact with them, like how to take, like how to control my anger when they get me mad, or how to just walk away from negativity

P7: It helped me learn to stop and think. If I didn't stop to think with the horse? The horse made me stop to think!

P8: You can't just walk up to the horse and automatically start interacting with them. You have to make sure that you approach the horse the right way. You let them know that you aren't a threat. You have to create a bond with any horse you interact with. And you have to follow them, listen to them, and you have to make sure they can hear you as well. When they hear you speaking to them with a gentle voice, they feel more reassurance that you are not going to pose a threat to them.

It is important to note that the participants did not directly attribute their behavior adjustments to awareness while at the barn. Nor did awareness explicitly come up during our sessions. However, during the semi-structured interviews, they alluded to gaining some sense of awareness throughout the process. One particular interviewer would

prompt the participants to elaborate. The interviewer would delve a little deeper in his questions, and the participants would respond with “yeah, exactly,” or “yeah.” It was when they were reminded of those times at the barn around the horses, that they would recall those moments of awareness.

### **Theme 2: Traits**

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was that of traits. When asked, the participants began to list the ways in which the sessions were helpful; they listed personal traits they noticed had improved or emerged throughout the therapy process. This was an easy theme to emerge, as there was a direct question that asks the participants about traits they value in themselves. The question implies that the sessions are beneficial. The participants connected ways in which the therapy was helpful as it related to them personally, how they saw themselves and their most valued traits. Based on the responses shared, along with self-awareness, the participants noticed how they grew or evolved. I chose to focus on the themes that were most clearly articulated by the participants.

### ***Confidence***

The most common trait mentioned by most participants was confidence. Among the questions asked, there was a direct question about self-worth and self confidence in the interview. However, participants also brought up confidence when asked about traits they value about themselves. It was interesting to note that when asked about self-worth or confidence directly, the participants did not elaborate much. However, when asked about what they value most about themselves after having completed all the sessions with the horse therapy, they noted that confidence was something they proudly claimed.

P1: My confidence. No matter what I did, like I always had confidence, like I never gave up, no matter how much I failed.

P4: It took me a long time to do it too. It took me like 20 minutes trying to do it. Everyone else got it. My goal ... I didn't complete my goal, but it still made me confident because I didn't quit, I never quit. You'll never catch me quitting.

P5: It make me feel more confident about myself.

P8: So I was getting out of my comfort zone, and the fact that I could do that I felt more confident.

P9: It gave me confidence. At first I would come close to the horses, but I didn't wanna do certain activities. But when I tried it, I felt like, if I can do that, I can do other things in life.

It was interesting to see how the participants became aware of increased confidence as a result of doing activities, when asked about this therapeutic modality. As previously mentioned, one question asks the participants directly: what activity made you feel more confident? They seemingly breezed over the question by describing an activity. Some mentioned walking the horses, or grooming the horses. However, when asked about what activity stood out and why, they frequently elaborated on what was impactful for them and that resulted in increased confidence.

### ***Focus***

When discussing how EFP was different from regular talk therapy, the most obvious response related to being outside with horses. The therapy setting was already very different. In describing how the setting made a difference, the participants made note of how equine therapy personally affected them. Along with feeling confident or

accomplished when completing activities, they also mentioned how focused they became as a result of the environment. As a therapist, observing from the outside, I want to attribute the focus to the mindfulness we invited the participants to engage in. Selfishly, I am hopeful that the interventions that were offered made a difference in the participants' lives. However, as a researcher, my priority is to honor the participants' language and attention to their focus. The participants shared times they focused while at the barn.

P1: Like. It put me in my own zone. I would be able to like, focus. Like I'd be determined to do what I gotta do. I'd be like, they'd give us an activity and I'd be determined to do it. And I'd just do it.

P2: don't rush it...take your time ...and focus.

P5: I remember motivation and, um stay focused.

P8: I began taking my time to look at everything from a bigger picture, instead of having tunnel vision and focusing on certain things. I guess the way I look at things. My perspective. My perspective on everything.

Not all participants elaborated on their focus while at the barn. In fact, when asked about their time in session during the interview the participants mentioned how hard it was to articulate what they experienced exactly. The inability to explain how this therapy had impacted them was almost a theme in itself. This was interesting to note, and I expound on it in chapter five.

### **Theme 3: Relationships with Others**

A third theme that emerged was one about relationships with others. Throughout the time in session, the clinical focus was to be helpful in ways that reverberated past the current circumstance the young men were currently in. It was our hope that this work

would be useful to the participants while they were in the PYTC. We also aimed for the benefits to extend to their relationships, and into their future selves. While the clinical team did not determine what lessons would be learned during their time with the horses, we were confident that teachable moments would ensue. The interview questions inquired about ways in which the work with the horses affected their relationships with others, if at all. The participants shared the ways in which their relationships were affected as a result of their work with the horses in Stable Place.

### *Communication*

I limited the number of subthemes that could emerge in regards to relationships with others. Improvement in communication was an extensive theme, and for that reason I decided to limit this section to one subtheme. The participants attributed the improvement in communication to their learning about how to interact with the horses. Each participant shared how the relationships among those at PYTC and the relationships with people on the outside were impacted by what they were learning at the barn. The sessions did not directly focus on communication and improvement in relationships. However, interactions with the horses required the participant to practice respect and self-control. These directly impacted the way in which they communicated with each other at the barn, and evidently with others outside of the barn.

P1: Yea. Like, how to interact with them, like how to take, like how to control my anger when they get me mad, or how to just walk away from negativity. I feel more open, like, to people now. I feel like I can take in criticism, and not gonna take in negativity and not just wanna fight and do something.

P2: When I was home I didn't really used to be like, too much of a friendly person

but like, since I came to Stable Place, everybody out there nice, you know? They, like communicate, they help you out, like, just make sure you're straight. I just got off the phone with my friend, and I like, talk different.

P4: Now I connect with other people better, cuz it falls into life. The horses trust me so you have to get the horse to trust you. It's about trust and relationships just like any other individual in the world.

P5: It helped me a lot with family and different peers. Just... like I said just respecting boundaries, and just its helped me grow in that.

P8: I never really looked at my mom as supportive or motivating to me. But it's come to an age where that mentality is like, "ok they were doing this for my own good." And I can see that from my mom. I got that from the horses. They weren't trying to see me fail.

It was times when I felt like just walking away from the horse and just screw this. I was personal with her as well. And she got a really like, she got kind of worried about me. Concerned about me being so personal because I would never tell her about anything

But the fact that this program helped me to open up to my mother.

And um. Let her know about my opinions.

P9: This helped with my baby mama, I am able to communicate better with her. The right way. I treat her with more respect. I don't hold on to past experiences, and I don't want them to affect this. This is how I worked with the horses. At first they didn't listen to us. Then eventually they learned to trust.

While the participants shared how their communication improved, or ways in which their personal relationships have bettered as a result of their work with the horses, they folded in other elements into their responses. Communication improved because of respect, trust, or openness. These are all bi-products of working with the horses, as they too deserve our respect, trust and openness.

#### **Theme 4: The Future**

Many of the clinical conversations that occurred in session were future focused. There was a mutual understanding that whatever was happening in session with the horses could potentially translate into any area of their lives outside of the barn. In many ways, what the participants were learning directly impacted their behavior and their interactions within the PYTC. The clinical team also challenged the participants to consider how these sessions might also translate to their lives in the future. The participants were invited to consider possibilities about what their lives outside of PYTC could be like in the future. The last theme to emerge from the interviews was about future talk, which makes perfect sense as this was one of the most frequent topics brought up in the sessions. The interview questions did explicitly ask about future plans, so naturally the responses regarding EFP groups were riddled with talk about the future. From my analysis of the data, three subthemes developed regarding the future: the immediate future that included life outside of PYTC, the distant future that allowed for career aspirations and the last subtheme was about possibility.

#### ***Life Outside of PYTC***

The participants were all looking forward to going back home. None of the participants we worked with were looking forward to staying on in the PYTC for longer

than the determined time. When asked about how working with the horses relates to life outside of PYTC every participant had a thoughtful response. Even though they did not express their responses with verbosity, they did convey sincere and thoughtful answers. Some participants elaborated more than others; it was important for me to include each of their responses.

P1: Hmmm. I probably just learned from other people's mistakes and learn from my mistakes.

P2: This made me be like, more careful, about decisions I make, like in a quick second everything can go wrong.

P3: It will let me know how to think better, like if something comes up that's bad or good, like I can learn how to get around with it, by not doing something bad. Like think before I act.

P4: Cuz I feel like, I have been working harder. Like, I know I put a lot on my aunt. And I know my aunt, she, I mean this is sad. Cuz my aunt she do a lot for me and I just throw it away. So this did help me a lot. She did everything she can for me and like... it relates to me cuz I could... you could work. And it's not about oh how much you... How can I say this? It's not about ... for example... I just wanna work hard. That's all. And I worked hard with the horses. So I feel like I still work hard, and I can do that when I go on the outside. It'll affect it because now I know always think before I speak.

P5: Yea. Um. That the same activity that I've been talking about the one chasing the horses and the connection. Even though you may get into arguments with your parents or someone that you know on the outside or something like that, you

always end up coming back together cuz it's like a good connection. That's how I look at it. You come back together.

P7: I feel like I get to like... people always say you gotta learn from other people, learn from their mistakes. Some people gotta learn the hard way so I can learn from myself

I feel like when I get out, I'm gonna already know the things that I'm not supposed to do. So like, knew when I was out but... yea, think of them differently. Like, cuz, what people really said, it really happened. So like, I can't, it definitely made me think that they won't accept me doing the same thing and expecting the same results.

P8: I'm sure when I get out of here I'm gonna apply most of everything I learned there in Stable Place. I'm hoping, I'm sure I'm gonna apply it to my life because I don't wanna go back to being that kid that kept to himself. He never actually told you how he truly feels, that kid that blocked the world.

Each participant received the question about how this EFP group therapy is different, and they all had really thoughtful responses about how this work could potentially affect their lives outside of PYTC. Whether the EFP translated into their own actions, or it directly impacted their relationships, each participant was thinking about how this might be beneficial to their lives outside of PYTC.

### *Careers*

All future talk led to talk about careers. This was a really important topic for the participants. These young men were motivated to change their lives and to fulfill some sort of life aspiration. Working with the horses gave them the space to connect to hopes

and dreams about what the future might look like. The future for them meant jobs, money, school, and careers. So each of them wove their career into the conversations at the barn during sessions and some of the participants shared the importance of thinking about the distant future during their interviews as well.

P1: This is gonna help with my music career. It will helped me keep focused. It helped me like remember those times when people were doubting me. I just remember times I was with the horses, how I just sang to myself and just kept to my own zone. I wanted to go home and make music. And when I went to equine, me being with the horses, walking with the horses put me in my own zone. Cuz like, I was following the horse's footsteps. Like even me having to walk the horse. Me being able to pull them, telling them which way I wanted to go, just helped me figure out what I wanted to be in life, and like which way I wanted to go, leading the horses.

P2: Cuz the stuff I used to do... I used to do some crazy stuff, but now I be like 'naw' like we gotta try to do this, like get a job or something, focus on taking care of our families, like watch out for our sisters and stuff.

P4: so it was kind of weird. So but, other than that, I would recommend this program to a friend because I wanna open them up to know that they are better. And when I get back, all the friends I had, see, I'm gonna have to push them to the side, cuz I wanna focus on football. I'm not gonna be able to make it to the football make a good team without smoking without doing all this. So, I can better myself and be successful so I would recommend this to a friend cuz you can do the same thing you can be successful. You don't have to live this life. You don't

have to prove that you bad, do good. You don't have to do all this. See, sometimes, I'll go crazy and things like that but I have to remember the bigger picture and what I wanna do in life. I wanna make it to the NFL and that's what I am gonna continue doing, I'm going to make it to the NFL.

P8: So I wanna go to college, which I was scared to do. I'm not scared to apply. I'm not scared to put myself out there for applications and jobs and stuff because I don't know, but I was kind of scared to walk into a job and like ask for a job. I don't know why, I just felt like I had social anxiety I was scared to talk to people. But I'm not anymore. And now I'm free to like, have a conversation with anybody. I am definitely more open because if you had met me before this, I would be sitting there, I would be posted up...trying to like... show you how quiet I am. I definitely can express my emotions more thoroughly. I can be more descriptive with how I feel about people and how I feel about certain obstacles that came my way.

These were connections the participants made in session and in the interviews. It was interesting to see how they were continuing to make these connections weeks after the program concluded. They stayed in a future thinking mode and connected what they learned at the barn to their future selves in regards to next steps.

### ***Possibility***

The last subtheme that emerged in regards to the future was about possibility. The interviews showed that there was a sense of hope about what the future could hold for these participants. These quotes were about what the participants imagined could be better for them. It allowed them to imagine what life could look like outside of the PYTC

and outside of their old lives. It also reflects how this work changed their perspective about themselves.

P5: but the respect part, um, is helped me grow more respect for my parents and stuff like that. There is a reason why they tell me to do certain things... There is a reason why um, that they tell me to follow different directions and stuff like that. And it's just not to get me in trouble and stuff like that, it's like they teach you how to work with the horses and stuff out there. You gotta like be able to take in what they are trying to tell you. Because it could end up... it can help you in the long run, in the end

P6: I got a lot of potential. I can use my potential, instead of using it in a bad way

P7: They're gonna notice like the way I think now, cuz before I was like, I was just like....? I didn't believe nothing was wrong. I would do this and that. I didn't think it was wrong... now I'm in here . It gave me time to think. Like dang, I was doing dumb stuff

and it's like, when I get out, I'm gonna be more cautious. To have another mindset

P8: My perspective. My perspective on everything. It's different because before I came into the program, I was very personal, and I was scared to step out of my comfort zone

But now, the fact that I've grown out of that shell, and I can... I don't have to worry about having trust issues. I don't have to worry about being pessimistic towards different opportunities that I feel like that's not gonna work out for me. And being trapped inside of a cage almost. My own cage. A cage that I built

around me. I don't have to worry about that anymore. I can finally say that I am open minded. I am an open minded person. I like to meet new people and I like to see where their heads are at. If they share the same interests. If they share the same interests as me, I like to try new things now. I feel like that's very good thing in my life because, because if that had never happened for me. I would still be stuck in one place.

P9: It helped me with my kid communicating with her. Showing her how to trust and how to build that confidence for her too. I can pass this on to her.

The EFP group work translated into what is possible not just regarding their personal goals, but also for what is possible in their relationships. It was clear that the participants saw themselves in a different way than when they started the sessions at Stable Place. It is special to see these quotes come through an interview, because it is a genuine and sincere connection the participants made regarding what they learned about themselves, and what they experienced as possible going forward.

### **Autoethnography**

This portion of the analysis was somewhat more difficult to get through. It was clear that all of my research was informed by the fact that I was also a therapist. Each theme and subtheme emerged because of what I knew occurred during session. Some elements were surprising to hear, but even those were viewed through the lens of the clinician. At times, the project felt personal and vulnerable, and as I began coding my journey, I felt somewhat exposed. When I began the IPA portion of the analysis I had a separate worksheet that I used to jot down what came up for me as I was analyzing the participants' data. It was important for me to note what themes came up for me and why.

Going through each interview and listening to the re-telling of the events that occurred helped me put myself back in those moments and allowed me to connect to the data from a whole new perspective. Although I was not a part of the recorded interviews, I was listening to the participants describe moments that happened in sessions I was a part of. It was interesting to hear how they interpreted the activities versus what my therapeutic intention was. Sometimes they matched up and sometimes they did not. As I listened and coded the themes for the IPA portion of this project, I took note of what autoethnographic themes emerged from this additional level of data.

At first, I was simply making note of personal impressions and reflections of what I was experiencing. However, it was important for me to anchor my analysis in my clinical training and to view the data through a research lens. Although this felt personal, I did not want this portion of the analysis to feel like a mere reflection of my journey. It was important to me to recognize what was significant and to make the covert obvious as it relates to this field. This work is not obvious to everyone. My clinical lens and the training I received to do this EFP work is a therapeutic modality that is unique to the work in Stable Place. It was vital for me to explore the data with this in mind, and to be explicit about what I found. Delving into the data of my own recollection, my clinical notes, and the thematic coding I did alongside the IPA, helped me to identify the themes that felt significant and relevant to the field and to this EFP work.

### **Utilization**

One of the most important things I learned about myself and about my clinical self was that I grounded myself in the Ericksonian principles of utilization (DeShazer,1988). This term is about “utilizing the problematic behaviors, thoughts, and

feelings as part of a therapeutic solution” (DeShazer, 1988, p. 113). I learned about utilization along with other relational and systemic ideas in the doctoral program. I found that I wasn’t able to apply those learned principles until I was seeing clients at the barn. At the start of my clinical journey in the doctoral program I was not comfortable working in the therapy room with my clients, as I felt almost paralyzed with anxiety and crippling fear of making mistakes. When I began to see clients at the barn, I learned how to apply the clinical models and how to make use of everything that I was learning. It was at that time, that I understood how to incorporate whatever was happening in session. After my time at the barn, talk therapy in a room changed too. This autoethnographic process helped me realize that I incorporated utilization in therapy as I was learning to manage chaos in EFP sessions. Because I learned how to manage chaos in a barn, I leaned to manage emotional chaos in a therapy room. I didn’t make those connections at the time they were happening, but as I look back I see that I was no longer afraid of what the client would discuss, because I was prepared to make use of it. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy invited me to put utilization to practice, and to make use of anything that happened in the session. The EFP sessions are so organic because of their setting, and because of their relaxed outdoor nature. The sessions take place in a barn, with large animals. No amount of pre-planning can determine how the sessions will unfold, and that prepared me for unexpected occurrences. They normalized exploration and curiosity in a tangible way.

Equine psychotherapy sessions are a perfect fit for this relational therapy model that I sought to practice. The therapy process and this research project have helped me to unlearn what I thought needed to happen during sessions. This clinical modality allows

me to be a collaborator and a contributor, instead of requiring me to always be an expert. That removed the pressure to have to make all the right things happen, and it invited me to curiously discover what could happen instead. I learned to make use of what was happening each week, and learned to make it therapeutically relevant somehow. That therapeutic posture helped me relax because everything was useful, even when things did not go as planned. When the participants came in with a less than enthusiastic attitude, that was useful. When the horses reacted or responded in animated ways, that was useful. When the weather was not cooperative: the sun was beaming down on us or the rain decided it was time to downpour during session, that was useful too. I learned to incorporate whatever was happening in the moment into our sessions, and that made them relatable and metaphoric.

This clinical stance allowed me to make use of everything that could be helpful, and it allowed me to relax. I didn't have to check off the boxes in my head anymore. I didn't have to have a specific order of progression of activities with the participants. I learned through supervision that the essence of this work was not to teach the participants how to lead horses or how to improve their horsemanship skills. These sessions were not meant to teach them how to execute certain activities. Rather, they were meant to have clinically relevant moments (Green, 2018) . There was so much freedom in knowing that I didn't have to determine what those were ahead of time. The utilization principles of using the "patients' own process," helped me figure out what was useful and we capitalized on it with the help of the horses (DeShazer, 1988, p.113). It wasn't about horsemanship either; rather, it was about experiences, shifts and transformations for the participants, and for me.

That same freedom challenged me to think outside of the clinical box I was mentally trying to check off. I had to unlearn that therapeutic goals did not have to fit my personal clinical narrative, even when research outcomes were attached to them. I had to be flexible enough to consider what the client wanted to work on, and to have integrity as a researcher. I had to accept that not every activity would be a good fit for this population. What works for couples doesn't necessarily work for groups. I also had to learn to be flexible about what the activity would accomplish. I went into sessions hoping to work on a certain theme, but that theme would organically develop into something else, and I learned to accept that over time. I progressed from a rigid micro-managing clinician to a relaxed therapist that learned to go with the flow and made use of anything that came up in session. As long as safety wasn't compromised, it became exciting to see what would happen for the participants. That made the work much more enjoyable and organic, which made the participants more engaged.

### **Connecting from Past to Present**

The second theme that emerged was that of connection from past to present. This project began back in 2016. As I mentioned, I was a very different therapist then. I wanted to do well because I was riddled with insecurity, uncertainty, and the need to make good things happen for my clients. While those were good intentions, they were selfish ones. This project has allowed me to reflect on who I was and who I am now, and I am pleased to see my evolution as a therapist. I see how my stance went from rigid to relaxed, from determined to open to possibility. This is important because the work at the barn taught me to be present and this project taught me to be open. These lessons had an

effect in my work clinically; looking at the past helped me connect to the present and even to my future self.

My present thoughts are rooted in the past events of my clinical journey. I had to make peace with my mistakes, and utilize them to make me a better therapist going forward. This spills over into my personal life as well. As I was coding my responses to the transcribed interviews I made note of how much I've grown over time. I give myself more grace and more patience now, because of the EFP work I did back then. I was more critical of myself and now, I have learned to be open to discovering what can happen even when things do not go as planned. I am much more comfortable using my intuition along with my clinical training to accomplish therapeutic work. Although I started as an anxious, insecure, self-conscious clinician who was concerned with specific outcomes, I am no longer that person. There is still much to learn and experience, and I can use the past to make a difference in who I am today, and who I will be in the future.

### **Culture**

The last theme that emerged during this research process was that of culture. Culture can be defined as the “customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I found culture surfaced for me as I developed this research project. I found myself visualizing the sessions; as I was listening to the interviews, I would close my eyes and remember the events the participants were describing. When the project began, I knew it would be important to publish research about this population. Not only because it is underserved, but also because the groups were comprised of mostly black and brown young men. It was important to me to privilege their voices back then, more so now that I am completing

this project . When the sessions began, I drew from my work in student ministry at my church. My work with the students in ministry at church helped to keep me up to date, teaching me the language of the young people. More importantly church work taught me the nuances of neighborhood kids, from black and brown communities. As a Latinx therapist I felt right at home talking to the participants using their language. I was able to code switch between the slang I spoke with the participants and the translation I provided to my co-therapists/equine specialists. As I coded my own experiences I found that I was interpreting what the participants were saying, and I was weaving that back into the EFP work, as I prepared for future sessions.

I also found that while I felt perfectly comfortable among the participants during session, this research showed me that I am not like them. Even though I grew up in a black and brown community, I am no longer fully existing there as an adult. I partake with members of my Latinx community in church every week, but I am no longer living in the community that brought me up. This project made it so that I was confronted with my own privilege. I am an educated white woman who was in a position of power during the sessions with mostly black and brown young men. The participants saw me as such, respectfully calling me “miss” and “ma’am” during sessions. My fair skin and my green eyes made me different from my clients. As much as I wanted to relate to them, I learned that they saw me as other. I was fortunate throughout the sessions, to be able to connect with the participants the way I did. But I am keenly aware of my position in relation to them. I am a professional, a therapist, a pastor, and I am also removed from the neighborhoods that brought me up.

The participants revered me as an authority figure, they viewed me as a white lady and they were not wrong. This project helped me to view my privilege, and also to evaluate whether or not I was operating from a place of a white-savior or as an ally. I am also a white Latinx therapist. I feel very much responsible to make a difference for members of my community. My Latinx upbringing helped me to relate and understand what the participants described when they explained how their culture influenced the decisions that ultimately landed them in the PYTC. As I listened to the interviews I recognized how good it felt to know that the work was helpful. And I made note of that feeling, because I want to be cognizant of the fact that I need to be careful not to get comfortable with the “othering” that the warm and fuzzy feeling can bring. The work of an ally is ongoing, often uncomfortable and constantly revealing hard truths; the work of a clinician matters even more in that context. It was important for me to make note of this theme in an overt way. Culture and privilege are themes that require careful unpacking but must be considered in all of what we do as therapists.

I have been attached to this project for many years. This group is my favorite population to work with, especially in the EFP field. As much as I enjoyed working on the groups and delving into the research, I knew I had a responsibility to bring attention to the participants’ experiences. There was no doubt, that I wanted to highlight their perspective, as it is often lost or silenced. That was important for me to do this in the sessions and it was important for me to do it in this project as well. As a scholar and as a clinician, I have had the great fortune to learn about the intersections of my privilege from academia and not from disparaging experiences. “Intersectionality provides an analytic framework for critically examining transecting social identities such as race,

ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, ability, religion, nationality, and social class in an academic context” (Case, 2017, p.153). As a woman, I have indeed experienced my share of injustices and I have lived through life altering traumas. But in this context it was important, especially during the research portion of this project, to be intentional about highlighting privilege. It was my responsibility to understand and navigate my clinical privilege in a way that made it explicit and obvious. “Privilege operates within an invisible system that normalizes the dominance of one group over another regardless of their intention or desire” (Case, 2013, p. 116). This project, and the past several years, have made it abundantly clear that regardless of intention, it is the responsibility of the ally and person in power to make the difference. Black and brown men are incarcerated disproportionately in the United States, and their experiences have been reduced to hashtags (Nellis & Fettig, 2019). As a clinician who wants to make a difference in the lives of her clients, this reality informs my work, my writing and my research. I cannot work from this invisible place expecting to make things different. It is important that this work informs the field of Marriage and Family Therapy as well as clinicians who work in the EFP field. There is much work to be done. At the start of this project I made the assumption that it was known: we have a responsibility to privilege the marginalized voices of our clients. In spite of many good intentions, I had to do the hard work of taking a close look at what I was doing and make my covert assumptions explicit. As a result, the way in which I interpreted the experiences of the participants, and the way I interpreted my own growth throughout this process was informed by my commitment to be an ally in every space I find myself in now and in the future. It is my hope that all that

I was able to learn throughout the analysis of my own experience can translate into my EFP work, my clinical work with Family Therapy and in every area of my life.

### **Summary**

This chapter consisted of the analysis of this study. The chapter delineates the themes and subthemes that emerged using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology. The chapter also describes the themes that developed during the autoethnographic analysis portion of the project. All of the themes reveal the nature of this Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy group work as it relates to the experiences of the participants. The final chapter will include the discussion of my findings along with personal reflections about future research about EFP, as it relates to the Marriage and Family therapy field.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: What were the experiences of incarcerated young men who participated in EFP groups? This study also allowed me to explore my own experiences and helped explore how my experience working on this project shaped me as a clinician, an IPA researcher and as an Autoethnographic researcher. The project was grounded in the existing literature regarding incarcerated young men, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, and Family Therapy principles. This research project allowed me to merge two passions: EFP and working with young people. It afforded me the opportunity to study the experiences of nine fascinating young men, whose stories are comprised of much more than going to the PYTC. It was my honor to work with them, to know them and to hear about their experiences with the horses. This research was without a doubt, colored by my own experiences at the barn. My interpretation of each experience, including my own, was filtered through my memories of the work with the horses. This final chapter will detail my discussion regarding the findings of the research, the connection these findings have to the Family Therapy field, the connections of the findings to the existing literature, the limitations of the study, implications for the future and my concluding thoughts.

### Reflection of Research

Both of the selected methodologies make use of the researcher as the instrument that interprets the data and both IPA and autoethnography require that data to be filtered through the researcher (Smith, et al, 2009). I discovered the emerging themes from the transcribed interviews, and attempted to interpret what I learned as I simultaneously recalled my own experiences as one of the therapists at Stable Place. There was a visual

remembering that occurred as I conceptualized the themes. Adding to those memories was my recollection of my own experiential moments with the horses as an Equine Therapy student and as a clinician in training. These vivid memories created a lens for me to look through as I searched through the experiences shared by the participants. I made note of the way in which my own memories were highlighted throughout the process. This was important to pay attention to because I was curious about the autoethnographic component, as I strived to learn how the participants experienced this work. I viewed their experiences through the lens of my own recollection of the sessions. The findings helped me to see what was reinforced and what did not happen as expected. In the same way that I had to approach the clinical work with flexibility and openness, I found myself having to approach my findings with the same level of respect.

### **Findings**

I approached the findings of this research with the same level of curiosity and respect as I approached the participants' interviews. My intention was to explore the experiences of the participants and to explore my journey as a clinician and as a researcher. The themes that emerged were grounded in the literature and in the nuanced training that this field has provided me. This provides relevance and contributes to the Marriage and Family Therapy field and to the EFP literature. The findings for both IPA and Autoethnography truly highlight what I have learned about this work, about the participants and about myself.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

This research project tasked with me exploring the data in stages, first with interpreting it from a general perspective (Smith et al, 2009). I found that all nine

participants had something to gain from participating in the EFP groups at Stable Place. Each participant offered significant feedback regarding their time at the barn. Because I was in attendance for some of the transformative moments mentioned by the participants, I grounded myself in those vivid recollections as the themes emerged. This allowed for me to delve into that “double hermeneutic tradition” by interpreting the meaning of the emergent themes (Jeong & Othman, 2016, p. 559). I watched four themes emerge: lessons learned, traits, relationships and the future. Next, I connected the themes from the individual interviews in order to find the subthemes that corresponded with the primary themes. The themes reinforced the idea that EFP groups are like no other therapeutic modality (Brandt, 2013). The participants vehemently expressed their affinity and respect for the horses. They made connections to the work at the barn as they responded to the interview questions.

At first my search was simple and visual. I utilized the Quirkos software to help me see what was repeated across all the interviews between both cohorts. Next, I used the IPA methodology to make determinations about the interviews as nothing would remain uninterpreted (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I had to decide what relevant themes would emerge based on the responses regarding the experiences of the participants. I searched for a range of things: things that surprised me and elements I fully expected to emerge. Both unexpected and expected components helped to shape my interpretation and the findings.

As I began to interpret the themes and patterns, I organized them and grouped them based on what made the best sense to me. I then opted to utilize my own language when describing the themes. For example, I named a theme “lessons learned.” Based on

the participants' responses, I operated under the presumption that the participants were learning something from their time around the horses. I did the same with all of the theme names; they were not based on phrases directly expressed by the participants, they were based on my interpretation of their experiences. A challenge of interpreting data that I did not directly collect was to search for meaning from the responses provided by the participants and select what was significant to this research. Their responses were rich, and they were sincere, but at times they were brief and concise. I was at the mercy of the interviewer to ask for the participant to elaborate and say more. At times I got more, and other times, I did not. It was my responsibility to sift through those responses, and accurately organize the data.

I used my interpretation to decide how to categorize the themes as they emerged. Like Smith et al., (2009) mention, I found ways in which the responses were similar or parallel to each other. The points of connection were almost chronological in organization. In my mind I categorized the themes in the order they were experienced: they began with what they learned at the start of their sessions and ended with their futures. What I found reinforced my belief that this clinical intervention was beneficial. However that same belief challenged me as well. There were moments when the participants responded with vague or short answers that did very little to describe their experience. When the responses were inarticulate or vague, it revealed that not every moment was clinically relevant. As a therapist, I don't have to know the solutions to clients' problems, and clients do not have to take on any clinical suggestions. As a researcher, I employed the same posture as I do clinically: the participants' experiences do not have to match up to my expectation; rather, the participants conclude what is

significant or not (DeShazer, 1988). This was an important shift for me, to researcher, as I was operating from a clinical view point. I had to continue reminding myself that although I was present for many of the moments described by the participants, their experiences would not always match my interpretation of the experiences. Respectfully, I accepted that they made sense of their work with the horses in their own way. Their experiences were significant to them and they chose what they shared with the interviewer and how much detail to provide.

### **Autoethnography**

I knew that I wanted to add an autoethnographic component to the study because I watched myself evolve over time. I knew that this work with horses changed me and it influenced the ways in which I practiced therapy inside the barn and inside the therapy room. I made the assumption that an autoethnography would be fairly easy to explore, given that it's an exploration of my own experience. Although I did arrive at some realizations, I was surprised to find how difficult it was to analyze my experiences. The difficulty arrived with the awareness that I was both the data and the instrument (Chang, 2013). It was much easier to dissect the experiences of the participants of the study than it was to look at my own experience because I was removed from that situation. Even though I could think back to the moments they described, I was on the outside looking into the experiences and interpreting them with a certain degree of separation. The autoethnographic process was much more introspective, and it invited me to explore my own experience in a way I had never done before.

My work with horses began at the start of my Master's program at NSU, seven years ago. I enrolled in the Introduction to Equine Therapy course, and that class changed

my academic trajectory. Fast forward to when I began working for Stable Place, I was an intern who was eager to learn. I had no intentions of making this work a specialization, I just loved working with the horses. At that point in my academic career, I was almost finished with my course work and transitioning into the next phase of the doctoral program. I was a terrified, insecure therapist who had no idea what she was doing. I had very little confidence in myself, and very little confidence in my clinical skills. The autoethnographic process revealed that, and it was hard to look back at that much struggle. I wanted so much to fast forward to the part where I found my clinical confidence, I found my voice, and I found success in my clients' triumphs. However, just as I sat with discomforts and growing pains as an emerging clinician, I learned to sit with discomforts as an emerging researcher.

Autoethnography engaged me in a “constructive interpretation process” (Chang, 2013, p. 140). I searched for meaning in the data collection of my journey and my experiences; but there is a constructive building, a transformation that occurs during the process of self-analysis. In other words, I am growing and learning all over again as I look back at my process, and as I analyze the meaning of the process. I looked at the professional trajectory I took, I looked at my growth as a clinician, and I looked at all the growing I have yet to do.

As I previously mentioned in chapter 4, I had to take a close look at my intentions behind my work with this population. As a clinician, I worked hard to avoid the white savior trope, and not position myself as the white therapist helping the black and brown young men. Throughout the autoethnography process, I had to sit with the intersectionality of privilege in which I benefit. I am a white, Latinx, Christian,

professional, and with that identity comes a significant amount of privilege. As a therapist, there was a certain amount of power that came with the role as well. The analysis allowed me to explore how I navigated my clinical experiences, and to think back on how I positioned myself in regards to privilege. I also learned to explore identity complexities, in order to contribute to my findings regarding the experiences of the participants, and my own experience as a therapist-researcher (Case, 2013). While I know I would not approach clients any differently had they been a group of white boys, I did find that I worked hard to make sure the participants felt heard and understood. This was important during sessions and it was important as I listened to the interviews. It will continue to be important as identity is complex and personal. Attention to intersectional identities will also help avoid oversimplifications, generalizations, or stereotyping which can do more harm than good (Case, 2013). If the aim is to be a helpful clinician, then I will incorporate what I learned as I was navigating the clinical experience and incorporate what I learned through the research process as well.

### **Connections**

The IPA research methodology was the most fitting for two reasons: the first is I wanted to privilege the perspective and experiences of the participants. The second is the interpretative analysis would be filtered through the systemic lens I have been trained to look through. It was imperative for me to be intentional about what I labeled as significant because my priority was to explore the meaning within the participants' responses within the context of my clinical lens. The EFP model brings attention to mindfulness and self-reflection (Gehart, 2010; Green, 2017). That attunement really helped me to make connections between what the participants were sharing and how I

chose to convey that by way of themes. As I listened to each interview response, it was important for me to consider the context each participant found himself in, because that helped me to establish meaning (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Bateson, 1972). The young men who participated were already in a different place at the time of the interviews, and the interviewer was asking them to recall details of their experiences with the horses. As the researcher, I too was in a very different place, three years after the interviews were conducted, attempting to interpret the experiences conveyed by the participants. These contextual layers of time and place allowed me to make my interpretations because I was able to narrow what themes were most relevant to this research project. In the same way that I find opportunities in session to be useful, I looked for relevance within the data (DeShazer, 1988). I had to make critical decisions about what would be included in the themes, because not every single response helped convey meaning regarding the participants' experiences. My clinical training informed my research posture, and it helped guide me as I made my way through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014). It also informed how I analyzed my own experiences as a researcher. I made certain identifications of intersectionality regarding gender, privilege and culture during the autoethnographic analysis. I also recognized the intersection between roles in this research project: I was both a therapist and a researcher. With that came a certain level of understanding, but it also brought me some unexpected frustrations.

I was not the person tasked with interviewing the participants at the end of the EFP group sessions. This was frustrating as I was listening to the responses because of the follow up questions I wanted to ask them. Some interviewers asked their own follow

up questions, which were helpful to listen to as they provided context for the responses. However, the follow up questions did not always line up with what I wanted to know. As I was going through the coding process, I found myself switching between the therapeutic curiosities that emerged from the responses and the research curiosities that I had in regards to the emerging themes. I knew what I would ask if we were back at the barn, in a clinical setting. I also reflected on what I would be curious about if I had not been the therapist assigned to the groups; as a researcher I had questions about their experiences as well. The limited data required that I make do with what I had, and although it wasn't as detailed as I would want, it was still very descriptive. Research and clinical practice do not always come together the way they did here, often they are on opposite ends of the academia spectrum (Bartholomew, Perez-Rojas, Lockard & Locke, 2017). I am grateful that this project allowed me to merge the two practices and collaborate between the two roles making this a more interesting study.

### **Limitations**

This project allowed me to explore the experiences of the participants. It revealed what I suspected would be obvious: the EFP groups were beneficial and educational. The project helped me to highlight the voices of the participants by retelling their experiences and making them the focal point of the research. The responses I explored were sincere and profound and they contribute to the field and to the existing literature. However, like in every study I found some limitations I wish to discuss.

The first, is that I made assumptions regarding the benefits of this EFP work. The research challenged those assumptions because things I thought were obvious were not. This realization helped me to see that perhaps my commitment to and belief in this model

could get in the way of me hearing anything negative regarding their experiences. Some participants' responses did not demonstrate adulation regarding the work with the horses. One response conveyed that while the interventions were fun, the experience was just ok. He expressed that the time with the horses wasn't necessarily life changing, even when he found it beneficial. That was not obvious to me at first glance, because of my love of the work. This helped me to reflect on how that might impact my future sessions. I will keep this in mind during future sessions at the barn, and also during future talk therapy sessions as well. Even when beneficial, interventions will not always be received the way I intend them to.

Another limitation was that the access this population may have to this type of intervention is scarce. According to the literature, the possibility of providing this population with this kind of intervention is not the norm, but the exception. EFP groups for the young men at the PYTC were made possible by the financial contributions of The Quell Foundation. There are many underserved communities that lack the opportunity and the access to this level of service. The participants shared how much it meant for them to have this opportunity. It meant more to them to have this opportunity than I imagined it would, which allowed me to confront my ideas about privilege. Access to horses, therapists, equine specialists and a 15-acre rural setting for twelve sessions is privilege. Access and opportunity are not afforded to all, in spite of the growing need for therapeutic interventions.

An additional limitation was the inability to point to causality or direct correlation to EFP activities to specific therapeutic outcome. The intervention as a whole is transformative and incredibly helpful, but we do not know what specific nuances make it

a success. When asked, the participants had a resoundingly similar response: It's hard to say how it was helpful, it just was. It is difficult to pinpoint in what ways the interventions were transformative. This was true for me as a clinician and researcher as it was for the participants. We can all say this clinical modality is helpful, and each participant had a different take regarding what helped them. The experiences were unique and diverse, and they pointed to different aspects of the therapy. That was surprising to hear even though I can personally relate to these transformative moments that are difficult to articulate. As I think back to those moments in session, and as I think back to the moments of transcribing the interviews, I recognize my own assumptions about the value of this work. At times it coincided with what the participants were sharing, but there were times where it did not. Every Stable Place staff member can attest to the fact that we truly believe in the effectiveness of this EFP work. There is an explicit expectation that it will be beneficial in some capacity. It was surprising to find that the participants didn't always feel the same way. This reminds me to keep my assumptions in check. My assumptions may be helpful to hold on to, but when they are not, then I will remain open and curious about what is helpful (Castro, 2016).

### **Future Research**

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy is not a new clinical modality. It is practiced all over the country with an array of populations. However, few studies have highlighted the experiences of the participants regarding EFP: there is much room for further exploration. Delving into the literature, it surprised me to find there are not a lot of treatment opportunities for the adolescent male incarcerated population; there was even less literature in regards to culture or race as it relates to treatment access. This study focused

on the experiences of incarcerated young males in South Florida. Future research with this population with specific attention to race, culture and gender as they relate to EFP could greatly contribute to the field and to the communities they assist. While there is much literature regarding Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and at risk youth, it mostly pertains to white youth. Making this kind of clinical intervention available to more communities of color could be beneficial and it can add richness to our field as future researchers continue to add to the existing literature.

Future studies can build on this research by providing this intervention to facilities across the state. The PYTC is not the only detention center in South Florida. How would EFP groups fare in other detention centers in the state of Florida? Another way to expand the EFP work would be to see how a group of young women would experience the EFP group intervention. It would be fascinating to see what the differences and similarities between groups of young men and groups of young women would be. I would also do a longitudinal study how the EFP group experience impacts the lives of the participants over time. It would be amazing to check in with the participants of this study, and to inquire about their lives two years after participating in the program. Perhaps they are benefiting from their time at Stable Place, perhaps they are not. As a result of the findings, I would say future studies should be approached with curiosity and openness. The possibility that the participants aren't blown away by the interventions exists. In the same way that not all sessions are ground breaking and transformational, not all studies will reveal life changing results. There is beauty in the possibility that our work will have transformative benefits, and when we find that the results are not what we intend, there is room for growth and improvement.

### Personal Reflection

The autoethnography portion of this project helped me to explore past the participants' experiences and take a look at my own. There was a learning trajectory that began at the start of this project, and that continues on, past this project. I learned that it was okay to give myself permission to have things shift during sessions and during this research. EFP taught me to give myself the space to evolve. Looking back, there may have been a clinical intention at the start of any session; however, the organic development of the work always revealed a richer outcome. I don't know that I would have experienced that kind of introspection had it not been for this work. This project allowed me to focus on my strengths as a clinician. I focused my relational lens and I found the flexibility necessary to make use of everything. I practiced patience with myself, finding comfort in my own skin, being okay with my own soft voice, my calm demeanor, and learned to be proud of my ability to make sense of chaos. I went from self-critical and controlled to relaxed: making it okay for things to unfold and develop organically. This work helped me to normalize my own experiences, much as I did with the experiences of my clients.

This work is personal for me. There is something about this population that makes me light up with joy and curiosity. Young people are special because they are in the process of phasing out of childhood but have not yet reached adulthood. I learned that through my experience as a youth pastor for adolescents in my church community. Being a youth pastor gave me a unique vantage point at the barn. I was familiar with the slang the participants used. I understood what they said when they spoke amongst themselves. That layer of understanding helped me to join with them and it also helped me to be

intentional about how I facilitated the sessions. I saw a lot of parallels between the young men who participated in the EFP group sessions at the barn and the young people I worked with at church every week. While my work as a youth pastor did not require that I provide therapy services, it did give me opportunities to bond and to have very personal conversations with adolescents. Pastoral work did require a certain amount of counseling. Although there were similarities between the participants in this project and the teens I worked with at church, I found myself being surprised at how different the two groups were. That really sparked a curiosity in me, which informed my clinical work with at the barn.

Looking back this work really changed me as a therapist. I know it did because when I conducted talk therapy sessions, I would imagine myself back at the barn. I would think back on things that occurred with the horses. It was much easier for me to draw upon metaphors in the therapy room, as a result of my work with the horses. The EFP work sharpened my skills. The horses allowed me to be transparent, they made it okay for me to be flawed, in a bad mood, excited, and intentional. Prior to my work with Stable Place, I would never have dared to be vulnerable with clients. I felt I had to have all the answers and the most effective interventions up my sleeve or I would be failing my clients. The horses made it okay to fail. Failure was useful, and all of the teachable moments I experienced at the barn helped me to relax in the therapy room. I also learned to value physiological experiences in the same way I valued emotional ones. I found myself asking clients about their physical experiences, I asked about physical shifts, I was curious about the mind-body connection. I gained a lot of confidence as a clinician as a result of my work with the horses because I understood that I didn't have to have the

answers ahead of time; I was free to discover them along the way together with my clients. As a therapist, I certainly have intention and an agenda, but not at the expense of the client, rather in collaboration with the client.

The EFP work changed me personally as well because it changed my worldview. Experiential therapies invite participants to experience shifts in real time. Whether those shifts are relevant to clients is subjective, like in all therapies. However, that experiential shift that I have learned to work with has led to a paradigm shift in my life. I didn't seek out this work with EFP, the work called out to me. It was never my intention to make a career out of an internship. However, I was learning to be open to possibilities; this work taught me to practice what I was preaching to my clients. Now, the way I see the world is filtered through the lens of possibility. I set goals for myself, I work hard and then I allow for things to unfold in my life. I no longer force things by planning every last detail. I choose to take the path of discovery and experiences are now stepping stones to the next opportunity rather than quantifying experiences by labeling them good or bad decisions. That shift has freed me up as a clinician and as a researcher by allowing me to discover what comes next, instead of having to control outcomes. Although this journey was not easy to look back at, it was necessary for me to explore and analyze my experiences throughout this project in order to identify where I am now. Looking back, several things contributed to the shift in mindset: I learned to orient myself to possibilities as a way of relating myself to clients, to sessions, to change, to myself and to the world (Flemons, personal communication, 2018; Green, 2013). I have been able to incorporate these shifts both in my personal life and in my professional life without losing the essence of who I am.

## Conclusion

There are many reasons I chose to focus my research on the experiences of the participants. The collaboration between Stable Place, NSU, The Quell Foundation and PYTC continues to have the potential to contribute to the MFT field and the Animal Assisted field as a whole. I knew then that there were many ways in which this project could be approached. I hope that many more projects emerge from future collaborations like these. My involvement began as that of a therapist and evolved to that of a researcher. It was a joy to go to work with rambunctious horses and rowdy teenagers. However, I knew then what my findings confirmed: these young men deserve to be heard beyond what we do at the barn. It is my hope that this work will continue to highlight and privilege the voices of the clients we serve; it is a privilege to serve and it is a privilege to get to be part of the experiences they share and contribute to our field.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Cynthia Vanessa Penalva was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. She immigrated to Miami, Florida at the age of 7. Cynthia attended both public and private schools, but graduated from The Glory of God Christian school and earned the salutatorian award as top 2 of her class. After high school Cynthia worked to help her single mom support her two younger brothers. She made a career for herself in corporate America for several years while slowly enrolled in community college, pursuing her Associates Degree. Concurrently, Cynthia began her ministerial volunteer work as a youth leader in her local church in Hialeah, FL. It was that very work that inspired her to acquire professional training in counseling. She pursued her bachelor's degree in Psychology with a Minor in Christian ministry from Trinity International University in Davie, Florida. After earning her bachelor's degree, she decided to delve deeper into her education by pursuing her master's degree in Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

It was in the Master's program that Cynthia took her first elective course, and she chose to do something outside her comfort zone, not knowing the profound impact it would have on her life. She took the introduction to equine assisted therapy course, a hybrid course available for Masters and Doctoral students. It was her experiences in that course that set her off into a different academic journey than the one she had intended. In 2015 she was also ordained as a Youth Pastor and that led to working with middle, high school and college aged students but also starting a Young Adults ministry in the church. She worked in this capacity until 2021.

The Equine Therapy course sparked her interest in continuing her education and Cynthia enrolled in the PhD program for Family Therapy. She also got more involved in

Equine Therapy by enrolling in the Advanced Equine Therapy course. As a PhD student she also delved into the different therapeutic modalities taught in the program. She worked as a Graduate Assistant for the Department of Family therapy; working with Dr. Douglas Flemons cemented her fascination with hypnosis and Ericksonian relational therapy. She assisted him in transcriptions, editing for the Korean Family Therapy Journal and, simultaneously, Cynthia was offered the Graduate Internship role in Stable Place, allowing her to obtain her required clinical hours in that site. The internship work consisted of conducting Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy with a plethora of populations, including substance misuse groups, couples, corporate groups, foster children, at risk youth, and individuals. It was that internship that led to a full time position as staff therapist and opportunities for research projects, co-authorship in book chapters and her dissertation. Thanks to her Stable Place colleagues, Cynthia also was granted an opportunity to work at the Brief Therapy Institute, the Family Therapy Clinic at NSU and the Medical Family Therapy clinic at NSU. As she concluded her PhD student career during a pandemic, she helped the clinics transition into Telehealth therapy to continue to offer services to the community. Cynthia hopes to get licensed in Marriage and Family Therapy in 2021.