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Towards Ethical and Competent Equine-Assisted Social Work: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Equine-assisted services have emerged as an effective complementary or alternative modality in many helping professions. Equine-assisted social work has not been studied carefully. This qualitative study examined the experiences of Master's level social workers certified in equine-assisted services ($n = 12$). Interviews were analyzed, using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged that were supported by rich and detailed experiences of social workers practicing in the field of equine-assisted services. Overall, the study results reflected the need to improve in three areas: (1) developing the core knowledge and skills necessary for equine-assisted social work; (2) enhancing ethics of equine-assisted social work; and (3) creating a competency framework of equine-assisted social work. Increasing acceptance of equine-assisted social work has implications for current and future social workers in practice and education. Future research is needed to improve the structure and utility of equine-assisted social work.

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Introduction

Social work sets itself apart from other helping professions through its emphasis on promoting social justice and addressing systemic inequalities that impact individuals, families, and communities. Its core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence guide the profession's mission to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, especially those who are marginalized or oppressed. Social workers aim to identify and address social problems that impact their clients, empower individuals and communities, and promote human rights and social and economic justice. The person-in-environment perspective, which considers the individual within their social, cultural, and environmental contexts, is a key component of social work's holistic approach to addressing the multiple factors that impact a person's well-being.

Social workers support client populations who are considered hard to reach, vulnerable, or resistant to treatment (Cortis, 2012; Eseonu, 2021).

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Nevertheless, social workers have an ethical responsibility to find ways to connect, meet clients where they are, and attempt to build a therapeutic alliance (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2022). To do this, social workers may need to be innovative to meet their clients' needs and preferences. This is a primary reason why novel, complementary, or alternative methods to connect a client to services are often incorporated in a treatment plan (Sirois & Purc-Stephenson, 2008). According to a study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (2012), 35% of adults living in the United States had incorporated complementary or alternative medicine (CAM) modalities into their healthcare (Clarke et al., 2015). The same report indicated that mind-body-spirit-focused-CAM modalities are sought commonly, the most popular of which are yoga, reiki, dance, art, music, massage, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).

Equine-assisted services (EAS) is a CAM modality that is gaining popularity. While there is a considerable amount of literature on EAS' mental health benefits, there is a lack of research that explores explicitly the role that social workers play in providing EAS (Acri et al., 2016; Berg & Causey, 2014; Buck et al., 2017; Burgon, 2013; Fine et al., 2019; Lee & Makela, 2018; Marchetti & Peterson, 2016; Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015; Stern & Chur-Hansen, 2019; White Lewis, 2020). Social workers bring unique skills and ethical values to the mental health field that differ from those in other disciplines (Carlsson et al., 2014). However, Wood et al. (2021) recent EAS position paper does not mention social workers' role in equine-assisted services, and they do not mention the social worker's role as a generalist practice.

The present study was performed to address this gap by exploring the experiences of social workers who provide EAS and identifying the facilitators and barriers to doing so. In addition, I sought to understand the ways that social workers integrate EAS into their practice and how it affects their work with clients, as well as determine the potential benefits of social workers' engagement in EAS for both clients and organizations. By filling this gap in the literature, the study results contribute to developing best practices for social workers who use EAS.

Literature review

EAS are services that incorporate horses to benefit people (Wood et al., 2021). EAS can occur on horseback, where neurological functions are transmitted from the horse's movement to the rider or it can take place on the ground, near a horse. The presence of a horse draws attention. The horse is large, usually moving, and will seek safety and avoid danger. There is clear communication between horses and humans, but it is nonverbal. Thus, it requires the human to be attentive to read and interpret the horse's communicative cues.

Building a base of peer-reviewed literature is challenging when the name and definition of the subject vary from one study to the next (Acri et al., 2016; Fine & Andersen, 2021; Fine et al., 2019). This lack of consensus in naming the treatment makes it difficult to establish best practices and protocols for EAS in social work. At the time of this study, the leading EAS accrediting organizations – the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, 2022), the American Hippotherapy Association (American Hippotherapy Association, 2022), and the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (Equine Assisted Growth And Learning Association, 2022) – do not agree completely with the definition suggested in Wood et al. (2021) position paper, which adds to the confusion.

EAS have gained recognition for their positive impact on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals. However, the lack of standardization in EAS terminology poses challenges. Firstly, there is no universally recognized term, leading to confusion and difficulty in communication among professionals. Secondly, the use of different terms to describe variations of EAS, such as Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine-Facilitated Therapy, creates misunderstandings and inconsistencies. Additionally, the presence of various emerging schools of thought with different approaches and terminology further complicates communication and research sharing. To address these issues, future researchers should work toward standardizing and optimizing EAS terminology, as suggested by Wood et al. (2021), and develop a commonly accepted theoretical framework for EAS. Standardizing EAS terminology promotes clarity and consistency across jurisdictions and facilitates the sharing of research.

Hence, EAS has been a subject of debate because of its inconsistent terminology, which has made it difficult for providers and consumers to understand its importance (White Lewis, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). Further, integrating EAS into various professions has complicated the matter because of different approaches and languages. A potential solution to this challenge is to have a common name that can be used across disciplines to facilitate a clearer understanding of EAS and its benefits.

The significance of having a common name for EAS is particularly relevant to research. For example, the lack of consensus on a name for EAS makes it difficult to compare different studies' findings and challenging to draw conclusive evidence about its effectiveness. Thus, a common name for EAS would benefit not only practitioners and consumers but also researchers who wish to explore EAS' benefits in a structured and consistent manner.

Another difficulty in advancing EAS as an accepted treatment modality is the inconsistency attributable to the variation between EAS programs (Wilson et al., 2017). Without a practice model, oversight, and accreditation, each EAS center operates as a unique entity that represents the practitioner's perspective

and the center's location. In addition, scoping reviews have revealed the diversity of names given to EAS programs, program model types, and descriptions of the clients who receive EAS (Carlsson, 2016; Fine & Andersen, 2021). As is evident from these varied sources of confusion, it is necessary to develop a standard nomenclature and construct general practice models for EAS. These inconsistencies and confusion point to a gap in the literature that has prevented EAS from evolving as an organized and professional modality. This is the gap that this study intended to fill.

Social workers' use of complementary or alternative modalities

Despite the consistency between social work and Complementary or Alternative Medicine (CAM) values, there is limited research on social worker's use of CAM modality (Gant et al., 2009; Henderson, 2000; Raheim & Lu, 2014). One study showed that nearly 80% of 321 social workers referred to or incorporated CAM in their practice, but referring professionals revealed a lack of understanding of CAM overall (Henderson, 2000). This lack of understanding highlights an ethical dilemma, as the NASW code of ethics requires social workers to be knowledgeable in the CAM service to which they are referring a client (NASW, 2022). While EAS has a clear code of ethics through the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) model, there has been no in-depth study of best practices of social work ethics and values or the NASW code of ethics as they relate to EAS. While the EAGALA code of ethics provides a set of guidelines for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine Assisted Learning providers, it is specific to these fields and may not encompass the full depth and breadth of social work ethics. As such, social workers who provide EAS may need to consider additional ethical considerations and guidelines beyond those provided by EAGALA. This is why the NASW Code of Ethics and other resources related to social work ethics and values can be helpful for social workers who incorporate EAS into their practice.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines Complementary or Alternative Medicine (CAM) as healthcare options that differ from traditional Western allopathic medicine, either as a supplement or alternative to conventional healthcare (Gant et al., 2009; Henderson, 2000). Generally, CAM modalities are considered holistic and often draw on wisdom from Indigenous cultures (Guillaud et al., 2019). According to Nahin et al. (2016), CAM modalities are often used as a last resort when conventional treatment methods fail, or when clients desire greater control over their healthcare and believe in treating the entire body rather than simply a specific area. It is important for therapists to be aware of these options and have a basic understanding of their potential benefits and risks.

In the context of social work practice in the United States, CAM modalities align with the values and ethics that guide the identification of connections and referral of clients to the most appropriate healthcare services (Henderson, 2000). Although social work operates from a person-in-environment perspective, its theories often neglect the importance of elevating non-human animals and the natural environment (Hudson & Koenig, 2021). However, non-human animals and the natural environment open the possibility to position EAS as a CAM modality (Hudson, 2019). EAS involves adding horses as the link between the client, social worker and the environment and provides a holistic experience for both the client and therapist. The horse can connect the social worker and the client to nature simultaneously, which allows a somatic, experiential, and often nonverbal therapeutic experience (Lee & Makela, 2018; Marchetti & Peterson, 2016).

Clients who are unsuccessful in an office setting in which talk therapy is used can engage in the therapeutic process via the horse, which serves as a social facilitator (Fine & Andersen, 2021). Touch, attention, narrative, and symbolic learning occur in an EAS session. The horse can read body language and energy, respond to the person's states of arousal, and provide immediate feedback through its own body language (Fine & Andersen, 2021). Although these factors would seem to make EAS an appropriate modality for social workers to use, there is no clear definition of EAS as a CAM, whom it benefits, and who provides it (Acri et al., 2016).

It is crucial for therapists to understand CAM modalities because of their potential benefits. Despite the lack of research on social workers' use of CAM and the ethical dilemmas associated with unclear implications of social work interventions, EAS has the potential to be a valuable CAM modality for social workers. It offers a unique therapeutic approach that addresses the entire person, including their relation to non-human animals and the natural environment. In addition, it provides experiential and somatic aspects that can benefit clients who have not benefitted from talk therapy. By incorporating EAS as a CAM modality, social workers can broaden their range of services, meet their client's needs better, and fulfill their ethical obligation to provide competent and appropriate referrals and services. However, further research is necessary to determine the best practices with which to integrate EAS into social work and develop ethical guidelines.

Equine-assisted social work: Recent developments and perspectives

Several recent studies on social work and EAS have framed EAS through a social work lens and supported the equine-assisted social work (EASW) construct. For example, Carlsson (2016) coined the acronym EASW and emphasized the need to separate social work from other mental health professions when animal-assisted practices are incorporated. In addition, Carlsson

(2017) examined the way that authentic relationships are established between a client and a social worker when a horse is included in treatment and the power dynamics between the client and the social worker are balanced.

Similarly, Legge (2016) applied an anti-oppressive framework in their work and noted that adding an animal into the treatment arena improves social worker practice by challenging power imbalances within therapy. The relationship between humans and non-human animals is tangible and metaphorical for human-to-human behavior. By promoting alternative approaches that prioritize the well-being of both clients and non-human animals, Legge's work can be seen to challenge traditional power dynamics in therapy. Lee and Makela (2018) examined mental health providers' use of EAS. They emphasized the importance of the space and location in which the session takes place and the challenge of training practitioners. Moshe-Grodofsky and Allasad Alhuzail (2022) also discussed the importance of space and place in social work practice and the way that it informs the therapeutic alliance and relationship between the social worker and client, independent of labeling, diagnosis, and prejudice, and highlighted the need to address power imbalances within the therapeutic relationship.

These scholars made significant contributions in expanding knowledge about human-animal, specifically, human-horse interaction, and how it can be incorporated into treatment in a social work practice context. Building on these past contributions, the current study was designed and conducted to empirically explore social workers' perspectives on EAS.

Methodology

This study addressed the research question: How do social workers employing EAS describe and understand their experiences? A qualitative research design with thematic analysis was developed to collect rich details about the participants' experiences. At the time of this study, no qualitative research had been conducted to understand the unique experiences of master's level social workers who offer EAS as a CAM modality.

Participants

The study participants were recruited based upon the following criteria: 18 years of age or older, United States residents, hold a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree at a minimum, and a current EAS certification and have practiced EAS within the past year. To ensure quality and consistency, the study only included participants certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) or the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). PATH is an international organization that offers accreditation, education, and resources to professionals who

provide EAS, including therapeutic riding, carriage driving, and equine-assisted activities and therapies (PATH Intl., n.d.). EAGALA is a global non-profit organization that provides training, certification, and networking opportunities for mental health professionals, equine specialists, and educators who partner with horses as a tool for personal development and psychotherapy (EAGALA, n.d.). These organizations were selected based upon their prominence and large membership, but other EAS accreditation bodies could be considered in future studies. This study and all protocols received approval from the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Study ID: Pro2021002055.

Convenience sampling (Padgett, 2016) was used to recruit participants. Convenience sampling is a technique in which participants are selected based upon their accessibility or availability. A recruitment flyer was emailed to over 700 centers in the United States that hold EAS accreditation and listservs that EAS organizations manage. In addition, postings were made on EAS specialty pages on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Social workers were also encouraged to refer other social workers to the study through snowball sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Twelve respondents out of sixteen who responded were deemed eligible to participate in the study. Their ages ranged from 30 to 57 years, with a median age of 38.5. Eleven were female, and one was male. Seven held a PATH certification, five had an EAGALA certification, and four held both. Four participants lived in the Western half of the United States and Hawaii, and eight lived in the Eastern half. The number of years of horse experience they reported ranged from four to 35, with a median of 19.17 years. In addition to an MSW, one study participant held a PhD in social work. Five had additional certificates in EMDR, veterinary social work, Pet Partners, reiki, massage, or animal-assisted play. One participant was the president of the NASW in their state, and two were university social work department faculty.

Data collection

The goal of this study was to collect testimonies about participants' experiences as social workers who practice EAS. Each respondent received an informed consent document before the interview and was given time to review it, ask questions, and opt-out if necessary. Consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Because of Covid restrictions, all interviews were conducted via Zoom using a Rutgers University HIPAA-compliant account. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each participant received a \$25 gift card for participating in the study. The interviews took place in January and February 2022. The study protocol included demographic questions to gather specific information about the participants and their EAS practice. In addition,

EAS certification information, as well as the participants' years of horse experience and social work paths and practices, was collected. An audit trail and logbook were kept, and memos were written throughout the study; these were referred to when data were analyzed. The contemporaneous notes were used as guidelines to establish boundaries between the understanding of the interview at the moment and at the time of analysis. Noticing and documenting participants' feelings, reactions, and questions in the logbook adds an additional layer of reflexivity and transparency that reduces researcher bias and positionality.

Data analysis

The interviews were evaluated inductively, systematically, and transparently using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for conducting thematic analyses. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The second step involved reading and rereading the transcripts to obtain impressions of content overall. The next step was open-ended inductive coding (Saldana, 2021). All 12 transcripts were encoded before proceeding to the next level of analysis. MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021), a qualitative data analysis software, was used for the first open-ended, inductive coding cycle and resulted in 3,400 codes. Next, the codes were analyzed for repeats and patterns and distilled to 78 codes that were repeated at least 10 times in all 12 transcripts. The codes were broken down further into seven top-level codes and, from there, into three themes. Saturation in qualitative research is the point at which new data collection and analysis no longer yield additional insights or themes, indicating that data collection is complete. In this study, saturation was likely achieved since all 12 transcripts were analyzed, and the codes were distilled to a manageable number. Finally, themes were discussed with academic colleagues and staff at the EAS facility where the researcher worked and reviewed by study participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This last step increased the rigor of the study

To minimize bias, it is important to disclose that the researcher is the executive director of a nonprofit, community-based EAS center who holds a master's degree in social work, has been PATH EAS certified since 2000, and has worked with horses for over four decades. Understanding the experiences of social workers who provide EAS and developing a model of practice for EASW is a passion for the researcher.

Results

The following three themes were identified:

(1) Developing core knowledge and skills of equine-assisted social work, (2) Enhancing ethics of equine-assisted social work, (3) Creating a competency

framework of equine-assisted social work. To support the findings, in vivo quotes were incorporated in the narrative. All transcripts were de-identified and assigned a participant number to protect confidentiality.

Developing core knowledge and skills of equine-assisted social work

The most prominent theme that emerged from the data focused on the point of contact between the social worker and the client. EAS brings to life the fundamental practice of social work. The social worker/client relationship is the heart of the connection. The social worker and client must establish an authentic relationship at the point of contact. Each of the 12 participants reported that EAS, combined with their social work practice, invigorated them and helped them create a genuine relationship with their clients. For example, P11 said, “Would conversation happen if the horse wasn’t there?” Their experience creates awareness of EAS as a tool that supports the connection process. P1 shared, “Connection and being part of whatever that might be is really helpful through the equine work which is always a group.” This response details the group nature of EASW, as the horse is a recognized group member. This mini-system or group provides insight; sometimes, it leads to cognitive dissonance when the client fails to recognize behavioral patterns related to the systems that constitute their environment (Carlsson et al., 2014).

Similarly, for the social worker, having the horse participate in treatment can open new avenues to a relationship that may not materialize in a traditional office setting that relies on conversation. P9 offered, “I think it [horse’s presence] creates more connection, more humanness from me because I really don’t share too much of my own.” In this case, including the horse in the treatment enhanced the social worker’s humanity and created a space to share and build a unique authentic relationship with the client. This relationship prioritizes interactions and self-discovery rather than adhering to a prescriptive model of social work in which the social worker is seen as one who has authority over the client.

Interestingly, P7 shared, “It’s a right brain-left brain connection . . . that’s what adding the horse does.” Here P7 indicates awareness of the primal or fundamental interaction required in nature, particularly when working with horses. Humans’ ancestral relationship with horses predates many social constructions such as race, religion, gender, age, ability, and socioeconomic status (Fine et al., 2019). Essentially, basic horsemanship skills speak to the fundamental aspects of social work practice. Interacting with horses requires a mindful awareness of the environment and the way it affects the moment. P7 summarized the essence of EAS by noting that “[EAS is] just so freaking effective” and that it adds color to the popular social work adage of meeting the client where they are.

Another aspect of EAS that participants discussed was that it is complementary for the client *and* the social worker. EAS as a complement or alternative modality helps bring the client through the gate and simultaneously helps keep the social worker at peak attention. For example, P1 shared, “Horses themselves bring a huge dynamic aspect to the work, and I do think that even just being out in nature can be very powerful and moving, you know, move a muscle change a thought” The same participant offered, “I know for myself, I love being outside my office . . . that office doesn’t even have windows; it’s pretty tough. So, I think being outside in nature is very helpful.” Clients often also prefer being outside, as P2 found: “If the person wants to be there, then it makes it so much easier.” The concept of connection is also complementary or bidirectional. For example, P12 detailed the experience of immediate connection when working with a horse in treatment. “[The horse will] take you out of anything going on in your head and bring you in with them . . . like clearing your palate . . . and I feel the client gets 100% of me versus the 50% or 60%. I love going to the farm, just for the animals”

Enhancing ethics of equine-assisted social work

EAS are consistent with the social work code of ethics (NASW, 2022), which emphasizes social justice, dignity, and the importance of human relationships. In this section, I discuss the way that including horses in treatment sessions can promote these principles and supplement social work practice, as highlighted in the NASW Code of Ethics.

The interviews revealed that after service was initiated, social justice, dignity, and the importance of human relationships were prominent ethical codes demonstrated. P7 reported, “Horses don’t care if you’re wearing prison blues, have a lot of money, or have been addicted for 10 years; they just care who you are right now in the moment.” Through their interactions with horses, individuals can relate with another being without attachment to labels and social constructs. Because most human-horse experiences are non-verbal and based upon instinct, the interaction values the momentary sense of safety in the presence of the horse. The horse models for the social worker how to be in the company of another being and how to connect in the present moment.

For example, P7 reported that the horse does not judge individuals based upon labels and social constructs but instead evaluates the safety of interacting with them. In other words, the value of the interaction is determined based on whether it is safe to be with the person. In addition, P10 suggested that the social worker’s role as a safety monitor in EAS sessions can reinforce an individual’s inherent value and support their dignity and worth. These experiences exemplify the way that EAS uphold the ethical standards that the NASW Code of Ethics sets forth.

EAS not only benefit clients but also enhance the social workers' practice. As all of the participants in this study reported, introducing a horse into the treatment session created a bidirectional experience for both the social worker and the client. This is consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics as well, which emphasizes the importance of human relationships in social work practice. For example, P3 reported that working with a horse helped them be present in the moment, which can improve the quality of the therapeutic relationship.

EASW can serve as a model for ethical partnerships between horses and humans that promote dignity and equality. As P8 noted, the horse responds to both the social worker and the client in the group and creates a space that models ethical partnerships. Moreover, P10 suggested that EAS returns agency to the client, which is essential for ethical social work practice. In this way, EAS can help promote ethical principles and support the values of the social work profession.

Many participants reported that EAS was offered as a last resort for clients who had been given the negative label of "treatment resistant" when traditional talk therapy failed. When a horse is added to treatment, the social worker approaches the client differently. Primarily, as a CAM, EASW creates a nonverbal and nonjudgmental interaction. Thus, there is an opportunity to tap into the essence of the client without a label. P7 revealed, "A common theme through all my social work jobs, like through my whole career, was this verbal processing was not the most helpful thing for a lot of people." P11 shared the way that the horse guides the social worker: "The horse just can, I mean, the horse is so quick at reading those nonverbals that they're just like, okay, I'm gonna respond in that way." This can cue the social worker to test the horse's congruence in reading the client's body language as a form of interpretation: "I'm seeing it; the horse responds in that way . . . we're not clear on the messages we're sending. We've lost part of that ability to understand how our bodies work. We are shut down, unable to read each other," P11 stated. This theme of employing horses to connect with clients beyond language, labels, and judgments supports building a framework for EASW.

Overall, EAS have the potential to support ethical social work practice by promoting social justice, the person's dignity and worth, and the importance of human relationships. EAS' nonverbal and nonjudgmental nature can help clients tap into their essence without labels and allow social workers to approach clients from a different perspective. EAS can benefit clients and social workers and serve as a model for ethical partnerships between horses and humans.

Creating a competency framework of equine-assisted social work

Participants frequently described gatekeeping and protecting the burgeoning practice of EASW. They expressed concern about others

practicing under conditions that are not consistent with ethical values and the need for a structure and guidelines to assess, practice, share, and innovate in EASW. For example, one participant stated, “I’m so glad we are having this conversation. I feel like I’ve been alone on an island. I know it works and aligns with social work practice, but I also see others hanging shingles and practicing under conditions that do not align with our ethical values” (P6). They spoke of how important it is for the social worker and client to have an experience with a horse, stating, “The horse affects your heartbeat, like that, to me, is a full-body experience” (P6).

Competency or expertise was another core tenet of social work practice that the participants mentioned. Horse sessions allow social workers to demonstrate their integrity, as referred to in the code of ethics. One participant described a horse session’s effect on their awareness, stating, “In the horse session, I’m definitely much more aware” (P8). Another participant emphasized the importance of authenticity in their interactions with the horse, stating, “If a horse is coming up to me . . . before we start, I will pet them because one, it’s natural and two, I think it shows the client how I am as a person, not just the therapist, but how I talk to the animals, how I treat the animals, they’re watching all of that . . . I’m not faking that” (P12).

As it has no formal structure, EASW currently lacks regulation. The participants spoke of the need for a formal structure to establish guidelines and ensure the safety and well-being of all involved. Some participants have begun to organize through local NASW chapters, universities, and EAS centers. One participant shared their experience creating a model at their EAS center, stating, “We are kind of creating our own little model” (P6). Another participant expressed frustration with the lack of a formal organizing body and nomenclature, and said, “I think there is a lot of difference when you name it EASW versus EAP [Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy]. I like the idea of there being something foundational to refer to” (P1).

EASW is a unique and valuable approach to social work practice that involves a three-entity therapeutic process with a client, social worker, and horse. This differentiates it from other CAM modalities, such as yoga, art, music, dance, and massage therapy, which typically involve only the client and provider. The participants emphasized the importance of establishing a clearly defined model of EASW practice that follows the social work code of ethics. One participant suggested, “Working on standardizing and credentialing so that people who want to go into the field really do have to have a certificate in hand, just like if you were going to be a substance use counselor, right?” (P4).

The participants also discussed the potential risks of not having a practice model for EASW. Some expressed concern about individuals without proper training attempting to work with difficult clients. One participant stated, “And you are asking people who aren’t trained in mental health to deal with the

hardest clients?” (P2). Another participant shared their frustration about untrained individuals practicing EASW, stating, “I’m really irritated about people doing the work who aren’t trained in it” (P3).

Discussion

The need to develop a practice model for EASW

The most prominent finding that emerged from the data analysis is social workers’ strong desire for the development of a practice model for EASW. By revealing the way that social workers understand and experience their work with EAS, this study clarified the components needed to eventually build such a framework. Building knowledge and acquiring skills is vital to effective EASW. The NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2022) might provide a helpful structure that guides EASW. Many people can learn the mechanics of a profession, but it is challenging to teach the nuance, feeling, and application of ethical codes of conduct. The experiential aspect of EAS complements the NASW code of ethics in several ways. Through their experiences with EAS, the participants in the study were able to improve their social work practice. They reported that they align EAS’ values and ethics with the social work code of ethics, and they wanted to standardize and credential EAS practitioners to ensure fidelity to service and accountability. EAS also offers a unique approach to helping clients as practitioners can engage and connect with clients in ways that traditional talk therapies might not. This can enhance the client’s experience and improve the quality of care overall. The study participants turned to EAS to improve their social work practice consistent with the social work code of ethics

The literature demonstrates that EAS are a valuable tool for social workers (Acri et al., 2016). However, more rigorous scholarly work is warranted to add knowledge and skills to this emerging EAS practice. Integrating the EAS experience with the structure of social work practice offers a rigorous approach that can elevate EASW from the fringes to the mainstream (Carlsson, 2016). The inclusion of horses in social work practice can align with ethical principles such as self-determination, informed consent, and confidentiality, and promote positive outcomes for both the social worker and client (Acri et al., 2016; Lee & Makela, 2018). For example, the experiential nature of the interaction can deepen the social worker’s connections with clients and promote the client’s sense of dignity and worth, empowering them and connecting them to their community. Moreover, horses can also help clients make informed decisions about their treatment, while maintaining appropriate boundaries and confidentiality.

Service delivery in social work can be transactional; often, the social worker makes suggestions or establishes links with other services. When

the horse is added, the treatment experience evolves from transactional to relational, and the code of ethics becomes animated, alive, and kinetic. Including the horse in treatment improves the conditions needed to build an authentic relationship. When considering the added value of a horse, the relationship components of social work ethics, which are often challenging to teach, appear naturally. For example, participants reported that including a horse in the session requires more than just talking; it engages the senses, has movement, and is guaranteed to be unpredictable. In addition, EAS requires full attention to be safe.

Professionalizing EASW delivery

A significant theme throughout the interviews was the need to professionalize EASW delivery, as emphasized in the literature (Fine et al., 2019). Given the specialized nature of social work practice and EAS, it is sensible to develop a unique competency framework that addresses their intersection and holds the practitioner accountable. The EASW practitioner works at the intersection of EAS and social work and must be an expert in both fields. This vital component speaks to the need for a highly qualified professional to ensure a client's physical and emotional safety during treatment. Thus, the unique intersection of social work practice and EAS deserves a specific framework to operate and be held accountable. This is supported by others who have emphasized the need to develop competency in EAS (Acri et al., 2016; Fine & Andersen, 2021; Lee & Makela, 2018; McDaniel Peters & Wood, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). The respondents in this study raised concerns about who should be eligible to practice EASW and how to ensure that only qualified practitioners are providing services.

The participants in this study expressed a strong desire to build a professional body of social workers dedicated to improving and professionalizing EASW (Fine et al., 2019). This pool of social workers appear to be interested in organizing and enhancing the quality of service by collaborating with other social workers who work with horses. Creating a professional organization specifically for EASW can also provide a space for practitioners to network, share best practices, and advocate for the profession. Such an organization could offer certification, continuing education opportunities, and a code of ethics specific to EASW. It could also serve as a liaison between practitioners and policymakers, and advocate for including EASW in health care policies and funding. Developing a model for EASW would require a commitment to the Code of Ethics on the part of the individual practitioners and the industry. The goal would be to create a practical framework for EASW that can withstand scrutiny and be

generalized (Carlsson, 2016). Only then can teaching materials be written, taught, and accredited.

The NASW code of ethics and EASW

The advancement of EASW involves the use of ethical guidelines and best practices, as outlined by the NASW Code of Ethics (COE). However, alternative frameworks or approaches may also contribute to the advancement of EASW, such as exploring the unique ethical implications of working with horses and developing specific guidelines for this practice area. By doing so, this study complements the existing literature on promoting the practice of EASW, which suggests that these frameworks are essential to achieve ethical and effective social work practice. As EASW is a rapidly evolving field, it is important to acknowledge that there may be unique ethical considerations that require further exploration and clarification.

The NASW COE has been a guiding framework for social workers in their practice. However, the COE may not be sufficient on its own to regulate the emerging field of EASW. While all social workers are bound by the COE, it is especially important to have a specific framework for EASW. The following are some reasons for this:

- (1) Unique nature of EASW: EASW involves a unique set of skills, knowledge, and practices that differ from traditional social work. The inclusion of horses as part of the therapeutic process brings in a new dimension of experiential learning, and social workers need to adapt their practice to this new setting. The COE provides general guidance, but it may not cover all the specific issues that arise in EASW.
- (2) Professionalization: As EASW becomes more widely used, there is a need for a professional organization that can oversee the training and credentialing of practitioners. This will help ensure that only qualified practitioners are providing services and that the clients' physical and emotional safety is protected. The COE may not be sufficient to provide the level of oversight needed for this professionalization.
- (3) Accountability: EASW practitioners must be held accountable for their actions, and there should be consequences for unethical behavior. While the COE provides some guidance, it does not have the teeth to enforce ethical behavior. A specific framework for EASW can provide more detailed guidance on ethical conduct and hold practitioners accountable for their actions.

While the NASW COE is an essential framework for all social workers, it may not be sufficient on its own to regulate the emerging field of

EASW. A specific framework is needed to address the unique nature of EASW, professionalize the field, and ensure accountability for practitioners.

Emphasizing the importance of the Code of Ethics in EASW practice, while also acknowledging the unique aspects of adding a horse and nature into the therapeutic process.

The importance of the Code of Ethics (COE) in EASW practice cannot be overstated, but it is equally important to recognize the unique aspects of incorporating horses and nature into the therapeutic process. By being mindful of these differences, both the client and the social worker can benefit from a more engaging and accountable therapeutic experience. Rather than relying solely on the NASW COE, ethical practice in EASW should consider the impact of working with horses. The experiential and nonverbal aspects of being with horses in an outdoor environment can serve as a catalyst for change and promote the expression of ethical practice in a unique and authentic way. Overall, this approach to EASW is comparable to having a supervisor or mentor present in the form of a horse and nature.

The COE is undoubtedly essential in any social work practice, including EASW. However, relying solely on the COE may not be sufficient in regulating EASW. Instead, a nuanced approach is required to account for the unique differences that arise when adding horses and nature into the treatment equation. This approach not only benefits the client, who may find the conditions more motivating, but also holds the social worker accountable during the encounter.

By focusing on the nonverbal and experiential aspects of how the COE is activated, both the client and social worker can benefit from a more energized and authentic approach to treatment. This unique approach can offer a deeper connection between the client, the social worker, and the horse. Ultimately, while all social workers are bound by the COE, EASW requires an enhanced use of these ethical principles to account for the unique and transformative power of horses and nature.

EASW, the field of EAS specific to social workers, is expanding and will require its own place in research. Excavating these research niches is exciting and necessitates establishing professional collaborations. This study's results support the importance of the relevance of professional education programs (e.g., University of Tennessee, Knoxville's certificate for animal-assisted interventions; Colorado State University's Human-Animal Bond Certificate Program; the animal-assisted intervention consortium in the University of North Texas School of Education; and the University of Denver's Certificate in Human-Animal-Environment in Interactions in Social Work) that provide essential opportunities for professional collaboration and support among EAS practitioners (Sterman & Bussert, 2020).

Study limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be considered. First, the sample consisted solely of social workers with MSW or PhD degrees and may not represent the diverse perspectives within the field of EASW fully. Future research could include the perspectives of clients, referring professionals, and even the behavioral responses of the horse, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of EASW. Second, the study recruited from only two specific EAS organizations, PATH and EAGALA, which may limit the ability to generalize the findings to practitioners from other EAS organizations. Thus, future research could include more diverse EAS organizations and global perspectives. Third, the study did not explore potential negative aspects or challenges associated with EASW. This limitation highlights the need for a more balanced examination of EASW's benefits and limitations, which could be a topic for future research.

These limitations suggest the need for future research to explore the topic of EASW further using more diverse and inclusive sampling methods to ensure a representative sample of participants with a wider range of perspectives and experiences.

Implications for social work practice

The findings of this study were consistent with the existing literature which indicates that the field of EAS, particularly EASW, is at a turning point. Establishing a framework of practice and standards is crucial, which can be accomplished through further research, education, and mentoring. As researchers gain more specific insights into how to incorporate horses into social work treatment, clinical approaches can be tested with specific populations and theories.

In addition, the study's results highlight the need to apply and test professional ethics and accreditation bodies, such as NASW, PATH, and EAGALA, in the context of EASW. The study's contribution lies in the fact that it explored the perspectives of MSW social workers who practice EASW. Such insights can inform the development of competency-building programs that increase EASW within the community and lead to referrals and insurance reimbursements.

To advance EASW further, it is critical to establish partnerships between EAS centers and university research departments. This collaboration can provide a stable platform to link education and practice, which will serve the EASW industry well. Pilot programs are also necessary to test, measure, and study EASW's application and benefits.

Conclusion

This study, which is the first of its kind, was designed to understand the views and experiences of social workers who offer EAS and hold a master's degree in social work and certification from PATH or EAGALA. The results reinforce the general belief that social work practice requires a set of tools that allows the social worker to find complementary or alternative ways to connect with a client that helps both parties remain open to participating in treatment. Further, the results show clearly that because of the high degree of specialization in both the practice of social work and in EAS, the intersection of the two, or EASW, requires a supporting framework. Building a foundation for EASW incorporates service and connection, core social work competencies essential to horse-human interaction. Only then can a framework for competent practice be defined. In addition, a framework for EASW is necessary for education, awareness, accountability, security, replication, research, and consistency. Once the EASW framework is in place, current and new social workers can be trained, mentored, and assessed against a practice model. Further, to enrich EASW practice, a community of practitioners can be established to share and develop best practices in the field.

This study synthesizes EAS with the social work code of ethics. The study's results also suggest that the social work profession should be approached differently in the context of EAS compared to other mental health professions. Two leading EAS accreditation bodies, PATH and EAGALA, have not yet recognized the fact that EASW is distinct from other EAS modalities. Future research on EASW should explicitly involve the knowledge and understanding of the social worker, client, and community to ensure ethical and effective practice. Developing a conceptual framework and practice model can improve education, awareness, and innovative approaches to authentically connect with clients in their own environment, which is a hallmark of social work practice.

Disclosure statement

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