

“They are part of what made my treatment positive. And maybe more meaningful.”

*Participants’ experience of horse-assisted therapy in addiction treatment.*

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II

**Abstract:**

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Title: “They are part of what made my treatment more positive. And maybe more meaningful.”  
Participants’ experience of horse-assisted therapy in addiction treatment.

Supervisors: Katrina Røn and Ann Kern-Godal

Addiction is an increasing societal challenge with a wide variety of treatments. Research on complimentary or alternative forms of addiction treatment is scant. The present study explores the experience of horse-assisted therapy (HAT) as part of addiction treatment, from the perspective of the participants. The thesis is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight persons participating in a HAT program within a hospital treatment setting. The aim of the study has been to explore participants’ experience of HAT as part of the overall treatment context, and their understanding of the horse-human relationship as part of that treatment. The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, and are understood within a social constructionist framework. Participants’ expressions of HAT focused mainly on perceived therapeutic value, and are organized into five themes: motivation, emotional effect, relationship with the horse, mastery, and break from treatment. Suggested underlying themes throughout the results are the stable as context for the construction of a positive self; the horse as facilitator for participants’ construction of self and as emotional support during treatment; the significance of the specific hospital context for understanding the participants’ accounts. I argue that the main implication of the participants’ accounts are the need for motivational breaks from “mainstream” therapy to substantiate retention in treatment. I further suggest that horses can be useful contributors to treatment because of the emotional and motivational impact described by participants, and how their presence in a milieu can be the focal point of an environment characterized by shared positive meanings.





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## Introduction

The study presented in this thesis is about horse-assisted therapy (HAT). It was conducted within the context of an ongoing PhD project on the impact of HAT on treatment and dropout of young adults undergoing addiction treatment at Oslo University Hospital's Department of Addiction Treatment – Youth (AUA). In 2012, a preliminary study of 18 months data (n=126 cases) found a highly significant association between working with horses and retention in treatment. The non- Norwegian speaking researcher sought assistance in exploring patients' perceptions of HAT.

In equestrian discourse, the therapeutic effect of horses is an accepted truth. Clinicians require more substantiating evidence to be convinced. Nevertheless, during the last half century, recognition of the contribution of horses to physical, psychological and social wellbeing has gradually spread in health and welfare arenas. The inclusion of horses in human psychotherapy is expanding in western societies, although surrounded by controversy (Hallberg, 2008). The controversy usually concerns the therapy's effectiveness, the costs involved, and the lack of a methodologically sound evidence base to support the many claims of efficacy in the growing volume of popular science literature. There is consensus about the need to validate the emerging assumptions concerning *how* and *why* the therapy works. The participants' view are needed when evaluating a therapy, to give "insider understanding" of the therapy, to help improve the treatment and to identify what aspects of the therapy make the participant want to invest in the treatment (Bende & Crossley, 2000; Längle et al., 2003; Siqueland et al., 2004).

Although the subject of the present study is therapy, it is not a clinical study. I take a social constructionist position when I look at participants' experience, the meaning they make of an activity they participate in, and of their own participation. During data-collection, it became apparent that central aspects of the participants' experience were connected to the general context of their treatment at AUA. This includes how they make sense of their role as a patient and of their participation in their treatment. Previous research in the field of HAT has tended to focus on looking for evidence that the therapy actually works. I want to offer an analysis of the meanings and experiences that become part of the participants' treatment process - how they make sense of their relationship with the horse in terms of therapeutic value, the healing process, and their human relationships. It seems to me that how people make sense of their relationship with the horse is as psychologically relevant as how they make sense of human relationships. The underlying principles for my analysis are the recognition of participants' experi-

ence as constructed through the words they use, rather than a static and objective source of information; and the recognition of participants use of language as a social action – how they use words to construct certain realities.

### **Research questions**

In particular, I aimed to explore with the participants, their:

- expectations of HAT
- experience of HAT as part of the AUA treatment and of their own healing process
- views on the relevance of HAT to remaining in/dropping out of treatment
- understanding of the role and the significance of the horse in their treatment process

A further important incentive was to contribute to the field of HAT with methodologically sound research, and by so doing to set the parameters for more soundly based qualitative studies in the future.

### **Horse-assisted therapy**

To spend time with animals has been claimed to have therapeutic value for centuries, but only in recent years has this belief been developed into the formalized, academic field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Despite skepticism from academic communities, AAT have gradually gained status as a promising field within the so-called complementary therapies (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). There are numerous claimed benefits of AAT, ranging from lower blood pressure in humans being correlated to their interaction with dogs (Friedman, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980; Friedman, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983) to animals providing acceptance and support (McNicholas & Collins, 2006). Practitioners of AAT also claim that animals can act as confidants, and that they encourage responsibility, empathy, moral development, growth of self-esteem and control of behavior (Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

Intertwined with human history for at least 6000 years, the horse's position in human society is unique compared to any other animal. By its "pivotal role in shaping the modern world" (Burgon, 2011, p. 167), horses are central to human history and development. In addition to working with humans, horses have provided comfort and contributed to our well-being. As early as around 400 BC, Xenophon, a contemporary to Socrates, wrote about the beneficial outcomes of horse riding (Xenophon & Morgan, 2006). Horse riding has been utilized as treatment for various physical disabilities for thousands of years, but especially during the last century, horse riding has gained credibility as an effective complementary treatment for various physiological issues (Debusse, Gibb, & Chandler, 2009). The history of therapeutic horse riding contains numerous references to psychological benefits as well as the physiological (Selby,

2011). However, only since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has scientific interest been directed towards the claimed socio-psychological benefits of horsemanship (Burgon, 2011).

The emergence of a structured form of psychotherapy including horses began to appear in literature in the early 1990's, particularly in Germany and the US (Selby, 2011). However, it is interesting that the Gaustad psychiatric complex has used horses in its psychotherapeutic programs since the mid 1970's. There has been little consistency in the role of the horse as well as the theoretical base the therapy is founded on. HAT has typically been based on the theoretical standpoint of the individual practitioners (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011). The claims range from explanations more or less founded in renowned psychological theories, such as attachment theory (Klüwer, 2009) and psychoanalysis (Yrjölä, 2009), to explanations that focus on the characteristics of the horse (Burgon, 2011). AUA has chosen to use the more neutral term horse assisted therapy (HAT), from a range of possible widely used terms (such as equine assisted therapy (EAT); equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP); equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP)) because the latter are often indicative of specific schools of thought and practice to which AUA does not necessarily ascribe. As my study related to AUA I have chosen to use AUA's preferred term throughout my thesis when referring to their work.

Regardless of theoretical basis, HAT can be defined as psychotherapy that in some way or another includes horses. HAT is thus not limited to riding, but may also consist of communicating with the horse from the ground, or watching a herd of horses interact with each other (Bachi et al., 2011). Indeed, learning to ride is often an inferior goal or not a goal at all. HAT is believed to be beneficial for people with behavioral, cognitive, mental, physical, or social problems (Hallberg, 2008). Practitioners of HAT claim that it presents unique opportunities to work within a therapeutic relationship involving not only the patient and the therapist, but also the horse. It has been claimed that animals in general can act as 'communication mediators' within the therapeutic environment (Burgon, 2011).

In addition to the benefits already recognized from research on AAT in general, HAT practitioners believe that interaction with horses brings other dimensions to the therapy (Hallberg, 2008). Some of these benefits are believed to be an effect of the sheer size and power of the horse compared to other therapeutic animals like cats and dogs (Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008), but other suggested benefits are believed to be a result of inherent characteristics of the horse. Burgon (2011) suggests

*“because it is a prey animal, the horse has developed highly effective communication systems based primarily on body language, and is finely tuned in ‘picking up’ on human emotions and intention. Horses have strong social bonds, and herd behavior is based*

*on a co-operative form of living with each horse having a 'place' but with a leader, rather than a boss, who is usually an older, wise mare (...) Additionally, in order to work effectively with horses, it is necessary to model behaviors to which the horse will respond positively — qualities such as calm, confident and fair leadership (...) —and this can provide opportunities for learning new forms of behavior and feelings of self-efficacy.” (p.167)*

The horse is also claimed to be useful as a metaphor; non-judgmental and motivational; useful for building self-esteem, confidence and mastery; and effective for building trust and attachment with both the horse and therapist (Bachi et al., 2011; Burgon, 2011; Koren & Træen, 2003; Selby, 2009). It has also been suggested that social interaction with the horse can shed light on human interactions and its meanings, and on own possibilities for behavior (Koren & Træen, 2003).

**Research on HAT.** This section aims to present a picture of the field as it appears today, and to highlight aspects that are of particular relevance to the present study. It is not a comprehensive review of the field.

The field of research on HAT is comparatively new and limited, and can be characterized as somewhat arbitrary in method and focus. However, the body of research on HAT is growing, and HAT has many strong advocates, including clinicians (see FAPP & DKTP, 2009). HAT inevitably carries the label “alternative”, with all the connotations this implies. An important goal of all types of AAT practice has been to gain status as a “serious” complementary therapy (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Much focus has been directed on quantitative studies, to prove a measurable effect of the therapy. HAT is accepted as a field with promising findings in this respect, although there are rather few published studies, and of varying methodological quality. While there are a number of published reviews of relevant literature, only Selby's 2009 systematic review of the effects of psychotherapy involving equines is methodologically sound. She identified 103 studies from 16 major search engines. Using PICO and Grade methodology she reviewed 14 peer-reviewed articles and found only two studies provided a moderate level of evidence for effectiveness but concluded in the abstract that “the evidence is promising in support of the effectiveness of psychotherapy employing equines”.

As to qualitative studies, much of it can be described as qualitative only by not being quantitative - descriptive or anecdotal rather than “measuring something”. The qualitative research on HAT is often of a poor methodological standard, and rarely published in peer-reviewed journals. Much of the research is based on anecdotal data and descriptive case studies,

which while useful in many respects, often lack the methodological soundness to be taken seriously by for example health administrators (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). A more theoretical approach to qualitative research in the field is sorely needed.

“Currently, published literature about EFP consists primarily of anecdotal reports and case studies which suggest a common trend and illustrate the need for a unique theory for equine therapy, rigorous research to examine the human-horse bond, and evaluation of EAA/T effectiveness” (Bachi et al., 2011, p.1). The challenge is not unique to horses. Marino (2012) in a comprehensive review of animal assisted therapy aimed at assessing the importance of the animal, highlighted the lack of adequate construct validity in all such therapy. As “horse-assisted” implies the horse is intended to be an essential part of HAT. Therefore, considerable effort and ingenuity has been invested in trying to understand what aspects of the horse’s character and activities contribute to any effect of the therapy. However, the horse’s role is usually investigated by measuring different factors, namely of the horse-human interaction. This confusion could be reduced using qualitative methods. These are rarely used, despite their applicability for exploring experience and meaning making.

Of the qualitative research that does exist, the studies usually explore practitioners’ perspectives. Studies exploring participants’ experience of the therapy are rare. This is in contrast to studies of healthy populations (Forsberg, 2007; Hauge, 2013; Koren & Træen, 2003). Burgon’s (2011) ethnographic study is a rare example of a study which looked at experience of therapeutic horsemanship from participant’s view. Burgon’s study followed seven young people that were participating in a therapeutic horsemanship program, and was based on field notes and interviews with the participants against the background of risk and resilience literature. The primary focus of the study was the relationship and interaction between the horses and the young people, and how this relationship might result in the young people developing strength and resources needed in their respective lives outside the therapy program. Of particular relevance for the present study is Burgon’s identification of themes relating to mastery and self-efficacy, and participants’ relationships with the horses.

Other studies on non-clinical populations gain insight from a perspective on the horse-human relationship. In Scandinavia, Koren and Træen (2003) and Forsberg (2007) have conducted studies on girl’s experiences in typical riding school environments in Norway and Sweden, respectively. Both studies focus primarily on gender issues. While not directly relevant to the present study, both nonetheless contain pointers relevant to the present study. Koren and Træen emphasized mastery as an important aspect of the girls’ accounts, and suggested that the

experience of control over the horses may give the girls a sense of influence on their social environment. Forsberg used a social constructionist framework for understanding the process of identity creation. Although her study focuses on girls' gender identity, it also sheds light on how responsibility and readership over the horse contributes to the participants' experience of power to act (Forsberg, 2007).

### **The study context**

**Addiction in Norway.** Norwegian drug policy has from the emergence of the “new drug problem” in the 1960's been focused on a restrictive and punitive drug policy as a preventive measure. At the same time, there has been emphasis on providing help and support for people who develop problems because of drug use. A major trend in understanding drug abuse has been the move from the so-called symptom theory to a disease perspective (Skretting, 2013). The symptom theory implies that abuse of illegal intoxicants to great extent is consequences of societal and structural conditions - as a symptom of underlying conditions or problems. In a disease perspective, abuse of illicit intoxicants is labelled with a diagnosis “addiction”, with medical connotations and consequences (Skretting, 2013). The move from symptom theory to a disease perspective was accompanied by an increased focus on harm reduction (Skretting, 2013). In 2004, people with problematic use of illegal substances were given patient rights and the term “addiction” gradually replaced “drug abuse” (Skretting, 2013).

The focus of the most recent Norwegian white paper on substance policy, “Se meg”, is on harm reduction among the overall population (Meld. St.30 (2011-2012)). In it, the government emphasizes that people with substance related problems are in need of help and treatment, not punishment. However, there is also the explicit goal of complete abstinence from illegal intoxicants.

**Addiction treatment.** Addiction treatment is typically understood as a three-phase process: detoxification/stabilization, rehabilitation and continuing care (McLellan, 2006). AUA offers assessment and intermediate services, and in-patient and day-patient based rehabilitation treatment for those who have undergone detoxification and no longer suffer from acute physiological or emotional effects of substance abuse. This treatment is based on the assumption that addiction is a disease. At the same time, AUA endeavors to offer treatment that focuses on the patients' mental health and social conditions (<http://www.oslo-universitetssykehus.no>, 2013). The overall treatment is in accordance with the official discourse of abstinence from illegal drugs as the ultimate goal.



The participants in the present study were offered treatment in a structural system, which is based on the assumption of their motivation for a treatment, with the eventual goal of abstinence (ref website). Skatvedt (2011) notes that people who do not show improvement after treatment often are dismissed as “resistant to treatment”. The very labelling of addiction as a disease can be argued to create and maintain an understanding of the existence of a corresponding treatment, which should cure all patients with the diagnosis (Skatvedt, 2011). Because the professional opinions regarding the underlying causes for problematic drug use differ, no consensus exists about adequate treatment for addiction (McLellan, 2006). Different types of treatment have been proposed and tested, but few proved sufficiently effective to replace other kinds of treatment, or form a basis for a general treatment model for addiction (Carroll & Miller, 2006). Preliminary findings for HAT at AUA are promising. Therefore, it is worth exploring aspects of why and how HAT may be effective in addiction treatment.

**AUA during present study.** While the present study was conducted (autumn/winter 2012/13), AUA at Oslo University Hospital offered a range of different levels of treatment, targeted at young adults between 16 and 26 years, with substance related problems (<http://www.oslo-universitetssykehus.no>, 2013). The hospital units connected to the present study include the day treatment department, the in-patient department, the assessment/intermediate department and the stable with its horse-assisted therapy. All departments connected to the present study are located in an area adjacent to the stables, where the horses are visible. The in-patient department is in a house formerly known as “Veksthuset” (the greenhouse), and is commonly referred to as “huset” (the house) by participants.

In the months prior to data collection, the hospital had undergone significant restructuring processes, including changes in the department structure. Participants in commenting on the general atmosphere and their treatment context, referred to the restructuring and the uncertainty and instability, which they attributed to it. In the words of one participant, “the entire house was shaky and used drugs”. Other participants said the restructuring affected both patients and staff negatively. Some expressed concern about drug use, or rumors of drug dealing at the department prior to their stay. Negative media coverage of AUA prior to data collection was also a common topic among the participants. However, in the later part of the data collection period, the atmosphere seemed “lighter”, more focused, positive, and in the words of the participants: “they’ve finally got a grip”.

**HAT at AUA.** Horse-assisted therapy is offered to all persons undergoing treatment at AUA<sup>1</sup>. It is a complimentary treatment integrated in the overall addiction treatment plan or as an independent polyclinic treatment (<http://www.oslo-universitetssykehus.no>, 2013).

**The horses.** The stable houses five horses, of different breed, appearance and temperament. The horses range from experienced (retired) competition horses, to heavier draft horses and a Norwegian fjord horse. Albeit different, they are all described by the HAT therapists as being “safe, but present”. In the words of the HAT therapy team, calm and sedate horses preferred in for example therapy for physically disabled are unlikely to be as effective with persons being treated primarily for psychological diagnoses. An important aspect of the therapy is that the horses display behavior that is typical to horses, including reactions to participants. The HAT therapists also state the importance of choosing horses who are friendly and socially oriented towards people, to ensure a pleasant and constructive experience for both participants and horses. Each horse is carefully selected, trained and exclusively used in therapeutic work with patients.

Although the AUA setting contains a traditional stable, the horses live outside in a considerable area and with necessary walk-in shelters. The horses are normally brought in to the stables prior to therapy. The horse are kept, handled and trained in a way consistent with traditional horse keeping in Norway. In evenings and weekends, the responsibility for feeding the horses lies on the patients and staff at the in-patient department. The horses take part in the therapy up to four days a week. Then the HAT team exercise and train the horse for the therapeutic work.

**The therapy.** Experienced therapists, who are also qualified riding instructors are responsible for the HAT program. During data collection, the HAT team consisted of two HAT therapists and two qualified horse personnel. Participants in HAT at AUA work with a therapist and a horse in a structured program over twelve sessions. During the first four sessions, participants become familiar with horses, learn about equine behavior and safety and get an introduction to the basic skills of horse care, handling and equipment. All participants, including those with previous experience with horses, participate in these introduction sessions. In the subsequent eight sessions, the participant and therapist work through activities and exercises with the horse, which are directed at agreed goals. The purpose of the goal can for example be

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<sup>1</sup> This was true at the time of the data collection. There is now a randomized control trial of the impact of HAT on in-patients.

the management of anxiety or aggression, or the need to set and maintain safe limits. For the in-patients, the time in the stable is a carefully planned part of their overall treatment plan. In contrast, participants from the intermediate unit usually come in a group, and the time spent in the stable is more an activity than therapy. According to the HAT team, this is because the intermediate patients usually do not stay in this unit for long enough to have a meaningful therapeutic program.

The HAT therapeutic team emphasizes that the activities with the horses are intended as therapy, and not recreation. The activities the participants take part in vary from day-to-day work in the stables, like feeding and grooming the horses, to groundwork or mounted work with the horses that have a specific therapeutic idea behind it. Although it is acknowledged that such activities involves physical exercise and that many people find them pleasant, the HAT therapists stresses that this should be considered bonus effects from the therapy. Horses have been part of the treatment at the hospital for over 30 years. Hospital administration and clinicians generally regard the HAT program as beneficial. Budget constraints demand a better evidence base.

### **Theoretical framework**

Social constructionism serves as a theoretical meta-position, by providing certain premises for the analysis and interpretation in the present study. The primary premise is the constructed nature of the participants' experience through language. Thus, the objective of the present study is not whether HAT works, but how the participants make sense of and construct their experiences in therapy. In support, I will present human-animal studies, Wetherell's (2012) review of theory of affect and emotion, Honneth's theory of recognition, and emotional geography.

**Social constructionist theory.** One of social constructionism's primary claims is that social processes, particularly language, are central to everyday life and experience (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). A social constructionist approach focuses on the ways in which individuals and groups participate in construction of their perceived social reality, on how certain descriptions become "the truth" (Parker, 1999). In addition, in keeping with Parker, I also focus on possibilities for change. "Social constructionism draws attention to the role of language in the construction of explanatory categories" (Willig, 1999a) p.37), thus language is seen as constructing rather than reflecting social realities.

A social constructionist view of the participants' experience of HAT implies to explore the meanings they make of the horse and its role in their treatment, as well as their own role as

a patient undergoing treatment. These meanings and experiences are part of the treatment process because they are experienced as characteristic of the relationship between horses and people, and as characteristic of the social reality of undergoing treatment. The meanings the participants assign to their interactions with horses, and the feelings they experience when with horses are aspects that may contribute to the understanding of the role of the horse in HAT. Likewise, the participants' expressions and reflections of taking part in therapy may help identify how addiction treatment in general may be structured to promote a treatment process that is experienced as successful by the participants.

Parker argues that human beings “conduct most of their psychological activity through speaking” (Parker, 1999, p.25). Thus, it is a goal to “give voice” to the participants by providing detailed and comprehensive descriptions of their accounts, how they are structured and with what consequences (Willig, 1999a). However, Parker also argues that in order to “challenge the dehumanization of the “subject” experience, and the meaning people attribute to things should not be unconditionally accepted” (Parker, 1999, p. 26). It is necessary with a theoretical approach to deal with “the interpretative gap” that emerges between people’s accounts of experience and the researcher’s interpretation. This needs to be a theoretical understanding of how expressions are structured, where they come from (historically and socially) and what role they play in culture (Willig, 1999a), because social constructionism is incompatible with an acceptance that psychological phenomena exist the way they appear to us through behavior or discourse (Parker, 1999). Rather, the experience and meaning making is understood as constructed through the expressions the participants use, and can therefore not be understood as a static reflection of an objective “true experience”. The only thing we really can say anything about is the descriptions – not the phenomenon in itself. In the context of the present study, this means exploring how the participants’ accounts construct the limitations and possibilities they experience as patients undergoing treatment, and how their accounts construct an image of the horse as a part of their treatment. It also involves exploring what historical and cultural aspects might influence these constructions. Reified and consensual forms of knowledge in the society is what give the participants in the present study frameworks for understanding themselves and their experiences (Parker, 1999). I aim to explore this framework in the light of chosen literature.

## **Epistemology**

The epistemological basis of a study outlines what the researcher considers it is possible to know and how it is possible to know it; thereby also providing guidelines for the research design, the choice of method and the interpretation of data. It will, inevitably, also influence how I position myself as the researcher, and how I view my own role in the research.

With a social constructionist position, the present study is grounded in a postmodern, relativist understanding of data. This implies an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of knowledge, as opposed to knowledge being discovered (Burr, 1995). Thus, each participant's account is understood as a product created between the participant and me as a researcher – a social situation with its own implications. A social constructivist perspective also implies that people's understanding of the world is historically and culturally dependent; we live in a certain context that creates certain understandings (Burr, 1995). Thus, the participants' statements are understood as representing their constructions of therapy and of horses in a particular historical and cultural context. This context is also understood as the specific AUA setting.

It has been important to me that the object of the present study is profoundly phenomenological. I wanted to develop and broaden my understanding of the experience of HAT, not to study the people who experience it. Thus, the people I have interviewed are participants in the present study. They hold the unique information necessary to explore my topic of interest, and their expressions of their experience are the object of the present study, not themselves.

In one important aspect, the epistemological position of the present study diverges from traditional social constructionism: In accordance with Parker's (1992) suggestions, I hold a critical realist ontological position. That means that I acknowledge, "There is a real world beyond the text, but what we can know of the real world is a sub-world restricted by the physiological, sensory apparatus of our species. Within those restrictions, our world is always constructed – again, primarily through language". (Harré in Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). By taking this position, I want to avoid the apathy often described as the ultimate consequence of a fundamentally relativist position (Parker, 1999).

While the epistemological basis of the study often is most prevalent when designing and conceptualizing the study, it is relevant through all phases of research. In the analysis of data, epistemology "guides what you can say about your data, and informs how you theorize meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although I acknowledge the importance of theorizing the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the participants' accounts (Burr,

1995), I also believe that participants communicate a more pragmatic description of their experience and motivation in treatment through their accounts.

### **Reflexivity**

Qualitative research has an established tradition for integrating reflexivity in all phases of the research process. It is often said that qualitative research is about the researcher being the instrument, by taking the position of an engaged insider rather than a detached outsider (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The epistemological position of the present study as well suggests the necessity of reflecting actively on how my own experiences and subjectivity affects all parts of the research process.

It is impossible (and not very constructive) to explore every value, interest, bias and conviction of mine for the purpose of the present study. I will therefore limit this discussion to include my concerns about the social consequences of drug addiction, the implications for the therapeutic practices, and also my unease about the role of non-human animals in our society. In my view, these are the main issues influencing the angle of my exploration, and my analysis and interpretation of the data. Reflexivity means more than just recognizing that personal biases exist; it means that we need to acknowledge the way our place in the same field of experience as the research object directs the knowledge that can be produced (Parker, 1999).

The marginalization and social consequences of the Norwegian illegal drug policy is one of my most passionate concerns, personally, academically and politically. In the present study, the participants being my own age further intensified my view of this situation as well as their situation within it. Until I undertook the present study, I would have assumed that the strength of my concerns about addiction policy and treatment was comparable with my concerns about the place of non-human animals, particularly horses, within our society.

Animals, horses in particular, have held a central position in my consciousness for as long as my consciousness reaches. Conducting a scientific study concerning horses has inevitably led to certain challenges for me. Clearly, my extensive experience with horses has both strengthened and weakened the data and the analysis. My knowledge about spending time with horses may have made me more aware of relevant themes and questions concerning participants' experiences with horses. However, the same lifetime with horses has led me to certain convictions within the "horse universe", and this has inevitably influenced the dialogue with the participants as well as the basis of my analysis and interpretation of their answers. Extensive knowledge of a field also bears a curse of blindness: There are many unasked questions in

the interviews in the present study because the answers seemed obvious to me, even when they were not.

Horses are a taken for granted part of humanity's history and culture; to the extent that it seems difficult for humans to realize that certain aspects of the horse-human relationship not necessarily is right, just because it has "always been that way". The process of conducting the present study without diverging into a discussion of the fundamental ethics of utilizing animals for human therapy has been a challenge for me. However, I am also a firm believer in the beneficial and stimulating effects of horses on humans, and may thus have been particularly inclined to search for such statements both in designing the study, creating the interview guide and in analyzing and interpreting the participants' answers. On reflection, it would seem that my concerns about Norwegian addiction policy and treatment are of a more intellectual nature than my concerns about animals, which are more fundamental and sentient.

Reflexivity also concerns how the subjectivity of me as the researcher affect and interconnect with the participants' subjectivity, and what forms of agency that are facilitated or prohibited in the process (Parker, 1999). Parker further states that subjectivity should be considered a relational issue. The participants' answers to my questions are affected by me, my manner of speaking, their assumptions about me or about my reasons for doing the research; and my appearance to them are likewise affected by my own reactions and assumptions about their person.

## **Literature**

Literature for understanding and interpreting participants' accounts include but are not limited to human-animal studies, Wetherell's (2012) review of theory of affect and emotion, Honneth's theory of recognition, and emotional geography.

Human-animal studies (also known as anthrozoology) is an interdisciplinary field focused on interactions and relationships between humans and other animals (DeMello, 2012). While human-animal studies include such diverse fields as philosophy, medicine, ethology and psychology, the literature used in the present study is mainly of sociological and anthropological origin. Human-animal studies focus on the lack of scholarly attention to human-animal interaction, despite other animals' omnipresence in human culture, history and society. Thus, it directs the attention to sides of human-animal relationship that are not typically recognized in academic literature, but highly relevant in the participants' expressions in the present study.

In her (2012) review of theory of affect and emotion literature, Wetherell rejects traditional psychological differentiations between affect and emotion by defining emotions as a personal, conscious experience, and affect as a priori to consciousness – or even unconscious. She draws on a diverse range of theorists from current neurobiology to critical feminist theory and argues that affect contains both conscious and non-conscious, bodily and cognitive elements that are linked together in complex ways. She proposes that affect should be understood as embodied meaning making, and suggest that this meaning overlaps to a considerable degree with the common understanding of human emotion. Thus, she argues that it does not make sense to draw a dividing line between body, talk and text when approaching affect and emotion. She also suggests the use of the concept “affective practices” for further social science work on affect and emotion.

In describing and analyzing a resident collective for young people with substance related problems, Lie and Granly (2011) uses social philosopher Honneth’s theory of recognition. It offers a framework for understanding the importance of intersubjective relationships of recognition in understanding social relations. Based on recent qualitative studies on persons undergoing addiction treatment as well as participants’ responses in the present study, Honneth’s theory of recognition offers an important perspective on the experience of addiction treatment.

Emotional geography is a sub-field under human geography, concerned with the relationship between emotions and place (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005). It sheds light on how emotions may construct and be constructed in relation to physical locations, and offers interesting perspectives on the relevance of the stable in the participants’ accounts.

### **Methodology**

In this chapter, I will describe the design of the present study, explain the methodological decisions I have made, and provide an account of the procedure of the present study.

My interest for the assumed healing properties of the horse-human relationship was the initial motivation for the planning of my master project. Fortunately, I was introduced to the Ph.D. researcher, and learned that she was looking for an independent, Norwegian researcher to explore the participants’ perspective of HAT in her project. While the most important incentive for the present study has been to make it a product of my own theoretical and personal interests, it has also been important for me to contribute to the Ph.D project in a constructive



way. I decided it most applicable to design the present study as an interview-based, qualitative study.

The data collection period lasted for approximately two months, and was mostly spent at the AUA premises. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted and transcribed by me in Norwegian. HyperRESEARCH software was used for coding data. The data material was analyzed primarily using thematic analysis.

As a consequence of the participants' situation and the ethical guidelines for the study, recruiting participants, conducting and transcribing the interviews required that I spent considerable time at the AUA premises. Recruitment took longer than planned, but this enabled me to spend time observing therapeutic work in the stable, taking part in some work with the horses (particularly when participants were not around) and talking to the HAT therapeutic team. This led to a certain familiarity about the place and the therapy, which I eventually realized could contribute to the analysis. Thus, the study ended up with an ethnographic aspect to it, through my knowledge of the setting and the therapy, as well as conversation with the HAT therapeutic team and the participants outside the interview settings.

### **Choice of method**

Qualitative interviews are about “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9), thus highly applicable for the purpose of the present study. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) qualitative interviews not only provides a method for generating qualitative texts rather than quantitative data, but implies alternative perceptions of social knowledge: about meaning, reality and truth within social science research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Qualitative interviews can also be a good way to evaluate a program (M. Q. Patton, 2002), although this is often not a primary goal (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The purpose of the present study was not a traditional evaluation of the service. However, others interested in the practice of including horses in psychotherapy can find useful pointers.

From the beginning, the most important incentive for the study was to explore the participants' experience of HAT. This included their perceived therapeutic value of HAT, why and how it helped them, but also how the participants made sense of HAT as part of their overall treatment process. In addition, I believe the horse's role is essential to gain a more thorough understanding of HAT, and that it needs to be explored from different angles. As a way of including this aspect in the project, it was of particular interest to explore how the patients expressed their experience of the relationship with the horse, and how they expressed their thoughts about the human-animal relationship. How the participants experience horses, the

feelings they experience with the horses, how they make sense of their interaction with the horses are important aspects of the therapeutic process of HAT, precisely because they are expressed as inherent to the human-horse relationship. All aspects of the research questions were considered topics that could be explored through qualitative, semi-structured interviews, as they are “(...) permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. vii).

A variety of methods was considered, including focus groups. In the end, my interest in the insider perspective of treatment proved critical. While focus groups may be useful in exploring such issues, they are general considered most applicable for exploring social processes in meaning making (Hyde, Howlett, Brady, & Brennan, 2005). I wanted to hear the participants’ perspective as experts on their own experience of treatment, and ultimately decided that a group setting might dampen some participants’ individual accounts.

Additional or auxiliary types of data, and other techniques for collecting them were considered. This included interviews or focus groups with the HAT team at AUA, and with clinicians at AUA not connected with HAT. This kind of additional data would have enabled triangulation of knowledge, and further strengthened the scientific rigor of the study (Denzin, 2006). Due to the main focus of the project, interviews were judged to provide the most relevant data for the thesis, given the scope and boundaries of the present project. Because the present study is part of a PhD project, the present study in itself will contribute to methodological triangulation in the overall project.

### **Procedure**

During the initial phases of designing the present study, I spent several hours in the stable at AUA, talking to the HAT team, observing and participating in work with the horses, and (after the ethical permissions were received) talking to potential participants. This period gave me a sense of the AUA context as well as a notion of the HAT work, and served as an essential foundation for designing the present study.

**Participants.** The study sample consisted of eight participants, aged 20 to 30 years. Average age of the participants at the time of the interviews was 24.75 years. Four of the participants were women, and four were men.

The participants in the present study were recruited from amongst people undergoing treatment at AUA, who had agreed to participate in research, and were in the Young Addiction Treatment Evaluation Project (YATEP)-database. The participants were diverse in terms of their duration of treatment at the time of interview. Six participants were under treatment at the

in-patient unit. Two participants were resident at the assessment/intermediate unit. One participant was in treatment at the day-treatment unit.

The primary criterion for participating in the present study was at least one hour of experience with HAT at AUA. It was of interest to explore the perspective of participants with different extent of experience in the stable, thus some participants were experienced riders with a long history in the AUA stable, while others had no previous experience with horses, and few previous hours of HAT. Most participants were approached when they were in the stable for HAT (or some other reason), where I was introduced by either the Ph. D researcher or one of the HAT team. I explained about the purpose of the project, and communicated that I was interested in exploring the patients' perspective, that is "an insider expert" of the experience of participating in HAT. Those who agreed to participate in the study set a time and place for the interview. Snowball sampling was used insofar as some participants talked with others, helping to recruit them into the study.

**Interview guide.** In keeping with Rubin and Rubin (2005), the interview guide was primarily constructed with a single broad subject of focus, but with certain examinations of more narrow concepts, such as the relationship with the horse. The process of developing the interview guide started early in my project. I started with a draft of topics of interest, derived from participants' comments, discussions with the PhD researcher and the HAT team, and my own experience and assumptions about the horse-human relationship. The more structured list of questions was developed in cooperation with the project supervisor. As "semi-structured" indicates, the interview was open, but not without focus (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). My intention was to use the interview guide primarily as a summary of the topics of interest. However, as I developed the guide, it contained questions and prompts, but also follow ups, to help refocus on the topics that was (initially) of most interest, and as suggestions to how the topics could be explored. "The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms" (M. Q. Patton, 1980, p. 205). The scope of the interview was rather narrow, namely HAT, but sufficiently open for participants to elaborate, such as their experience of their overall treatment and experiences prior to their participation in HAT. (See appendix 1 for interview guide)

**Interviews.** One trial interview was conducted, to observe how the interview guide worked in the interview setting, and to consider practical issues. The participant in the trial interview had been participating in the HAT program for some time. The trial interview resulted in no major changes, but indicated the need to rephrase some of the topics, and to modify certain parts of the interview guide. The trial interview is not included in the data material.

The interviews were conducted at the AUA premises, at a time of the participants' choice. All interviews were conducted by myself and recorded on a digital audio recorder. At the beginning of each interview, the terms of agreeing to participate in research were repeated, including the participant's right to withdraw from participating at any stage, and that all information was treated as confidential. More detailed information about the project was offered, and it was stressed that the main purpose of the study was to explore the participants' view of the therapy. It was also suggested that the interview might be an opportunity for them as patients to voice their opinion about treatment.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggests that the research interview involves an asymmetrical power relation per se, by the researcher deciding what issues to explore and to a certain extent directing in which way the questions should be answered. They further emphasize that all relations involve some kind of asymmetry in terms of power, and that it is not necessarily a requirement to eliminate power from the interview setting. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge that these asymmetries exist, and to reflect on epistemological questions connected to the knowledge that is produced based on the interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

It was important for me to conduct interviews that resembled a natural conversation. In line with Toma (2000) I believe that involvement in the participants' situation can enhance breadth and depth in the data. I also recognize that my personal interest in the structural conditions the participants in the present study live under made it particularly difficult to assume the role of a detached researcher. Although I deliberately directed the interview through the themes I wanted to explore, I also welcomed diversions from the interview guide. I did this mostly out of respect for the participants, and to maintain a natural feeling to the conversation; but also from a conviction that such managed diversions could lead to additional, important information of which I was unaware.

After each interview, I wrote down my initial thoughts and reflections about the interview, such as the "mood" in the interview, my reaction to the participants and their reaction to me, in addition to my present thoughts about possible themes based on the interview. These notes formed an important input to the subsequent analysis.

***Transcribing the interviews.*** While it is usually acknowledged that the analysis of qualitative data involves active interpretation, it is not always acknowledged that transforming audio data to written data also involves some degree of interpretation. Although transcribing data

means to structure and prepare it for analysis, transcribed data is also, “weakened, decontextualized reproductions of direct interview conversations” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 187. My translation)

In the present study, I transcribed all interviews. This ensured consistency in the procedure of transcription. Interviews were transcribed as close as possible to the spoke record. I did not judge it useful to mark intonation and pronunciation. However, I did include variations due to dialects and included “eh”s, repetitions and hesitations, because these aspects could suggest alternative interpretations of the meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, where they were not interpreted to carry special significance, they are omitted from the quotes presented in the thesis.

*Use of quotes.* As a consequence of the differences between spoken and written language, written accounts of spoken language often seem less coherent and potentially stigmatizing to the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The quotes presented in the thesis have been rephrased slightly where necessary, so the language in the extracts is more like the written language. This also often meant that much of the participants’ “personal touch” disappeared by translating their spoken language into written, and was an important measure to assure anonymity. All directly identifying expressions were removed during transcription. Sentences that gave potentially revealing information about the identity of the speaker have not been quoted in the thesis. My own questions or remarks in the quotes are in brackets.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Norwegian, and the coding and initial analysis were conducted while the data material were in its original state. After choosing quotes to be presented in the thesis, these were translated to English by me. After my initial translation, a member of the HAT therapeutic team read the translation to ensure that the meaning of the quotes were sufficiently well communicated. However, the translation of the quotes led to a risk of losing meaning.

Transcribing the data enabled me to become aware of aspects of the interview that were lost in the real interview setting. In many ways, I was discovering the interviews anew. To me, a transcription approach close to the spoke record also had the added benefit of helping me remember the more subtle aspects of the interviews, like the mood and the participant’s body language in the interview when reading the transcripts later.

**Analysis.** In accordance with Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) suggestions, content and purpose should be considered prior to method when deciding how to analyze data. Thus, I needed to consider “how the interviews can help me develop my knowledge about the phenomena I investigate” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.200, my translation), rather than deciding on

a fixed method for analysis. Thus, I have used analytic theory eclectically to explore the topics of interest.

I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) article on thematic analysis as the basic guidelines for my analytic work. Braun and Clarke argue that "thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis" (p.78) and emphasize that identifying thematized meanings are one of the shared characteristics across analysis of qualitative data. They also note that thematic analysis is flexible in terms of the epistemological position of the researcher, and an approach that is well suited to combine with other types of analysis. Certain principles from discursive analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis were kept in mind throughout the analysis in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the participants' expressions of the human-horse relationship, and of their experience of treatment. By drawing on both traditions, I open up for "experience" being understood as both a discursive construction and as a result of discursive constructions (Parker, 1992). Discursive analysis focuses on discourse as social interaction, how people use discursive resources in order to achieve interpersonal purposes; while Foucauldian discourse analysis focuses on what kinds of objects and subjects are constructed through discourses and what kinds of possibilities and limitations these objects and subjects make available to people (Parker, 1992).

I used Braun and Clarke's suggested six steps to be followed when conducting a thematic analysis: Getting familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

***Getting familiar with the data.*** As I transcribed all interviews myself, this process provided an early opportunity to get familiar with the data – an important aspect of the following analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After completing the transcripts, I once again wrote down my thoughts about possible codes and recurring themes I recognized in the material, as well as my thoughts about the data material in its entirety.

***Generating initial codes.*** The coding process is supposed to identify specific features of the data that are of interest, and to label these for later stages of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes can also be understood as the most basic elements of the analysis. Qualitative analysis is generally associated with inductive coding – codes that are generated from and grounded in data (M. Q. Patton, 2002). However, during the initial coding process, I soon realized that my previous knowledge of the topic directed my coding to a certain extent. I tried to maintain focus on the participants' accounts, while recognizing how my previous knowledge influenced my coding. Braun and Clarke (2006) notes that it is unreasonable or even naïve to assume researchers free themselves completely of theoretical and epistemological views.

I coded the data using HyperRESEARCH, a software for handling qualitative data. HyperRESEARCH provides a clear overview of the codes in use as well as possibilities for organizing and administering chunks of data. Applicable use of computer software can be a positive advantage in managing complex qualitative data (Richards & Richards, 1994).

The coding process also raised the question of whether to apply a semantic understanding of participants' accounts, or to search for more latent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The discursive approach implied a search for latent content of meaning-making and experience (Burr, 1995), but it was also important for me to "stay true" to participants' accounts to as great extent as possible. HyperRESEARCH allowed me flexibility in coding data repeatedly and inclusively without losing the general overview.

The coding process was particularly valuable to me because it enabled me to see rather comprehensive parts of the data material in a different light. My previous experience with horses made me almost blind to participants' expressions about the horses, and one of my initial responses to the data was the scarceness of talk about horses. Coding the data made me aware of the abundance of horse related talk, and once again gave me the opportunity to reflect on how my own experiences influenced the process of analysis and interpretation.

**Searching for themes.** According to Braun and Clarke (2006) "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set." (p.82) The significance, or "keyness" of a theme is not necessarily dependent on how frequently it is mentioned or by how many participants, but in terms of whether it is believed to capture important aspects to the research question.

After a preliminary coding of the data set, I outlined an overview of possible themes consisting of clusters of the codes generated in the previous stage, organized as a diagram to explore what I saw as their interconnectedness. At this stage, I continued to relate to the codes I created without much support from literature. The first overview of the codes was to a certain extent based on my previous notes and reflections about the data material. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that the process of searching for themes not should be understood as themes "emerging" from data. They argue that the language of themes emerging "denies the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80).

**Reviewing themes.** The first outline of possible themes led to a new and more thorough process of coding data, paying closer attention to what I at that moment considered the main themes. After the second process of coding data, the map of tentative themes was revised and reorganized, some themes split into more themes while others were merged together to form

new themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that this stage involves both considering whether the coded extracts for each theme form a coherent story, and whether each theme fits into the developing overall story.

***Defining and naming themes.*** The analysis to this point resulted in a number of themes I believe illustrate important aspects of the participants' accounts of HAT. However, the analysis also revealed several disruption points in the participants' overall accounts, which I also believe capture essential aspects of the material. These disruptions fit in with my understanding of the data material as a holistic entirety, and underline what I see as the main outcomes from the material. After the second, more thorough coding of data, I also got the impression of some main or underlying themes in the data material, connected to these disruption points. Some of these themes occurred to me early in the process of conducting the interviews, while I identified and refined others during the coding process.

***Producing the report.*** Braun and Clarke's final stage is about creating a convincing story presenting the results of the analysis. Included in this process is to choose excerpts from the material to illustrate the points made. The final write-up presents the results of the analysis, but also contribute with a convincing story to support the discussion of the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The social constructionist framework suggest the researcher as the author of knowledge rather than discoverer, in line with the constructed nature of knowledge (Burr, 1995). Although a thematic analysis inevitably implies a fragmentation of participants' accounts, it was also important to me to retain a holistic understanding of each participant's account as well as my general "feeling" of the entire data material.

Aware of my presumptions about the topic, and aware of the bias that is an inevitable result of engaging in a process of analysis, I wanted to avoid a one-sided view of the data. During the process of analysis, I continually discussed my coding and my interpretation with other people, in particular those without previous experience with horses. This always made me see different sides of the data. My supervisors also gave my valuable insights. After finishing a complete draft of the results, I presented them to a group of three of the participants, and got their feedback on the main points of my analysis and interpretation. While this was a useful and evaluation, it did not lead to major changes in the results. Receiving positive feedback from the participants was a particularly gratifying experience. Although the analysis inevitably is a product of my active interpretation of the participants' accounts, an important principle through the analysis has been to anticipate and stay true to the opinions voiced by the participants.

## **Ethical considerations**



The present study is covered by the ethical permission for the PhD project. Before undertaking the present study, updated information about the inclusion of the present study was sent by the PhD researcher to regional ethical committee (REK). Confirmation of the present study's inclusion in the ethical permission was received 30.11.2012 (appendix 2). Participants had already agreed to participate in research (through agreeing to being included in YATEP), and had signed the necessary forms for this, administered by the hospital. The participants in the present study also signed an informed consent form for the overall Ph. D. study (appendix 3).

**Sensitive issues.** Although the present study was not designed with the intention of exploring particularly sensitive questions, I was aware that some questions might lead the participants to touch upon sensitive or difficult areas. I told the participants both before and during the interview that they decided which questions to answer, and how much they wanted to say. However, I was aware that all participants were in a difficult treatment process, and that some could feel obligated to say more than they really wanted, and kept this in mind when deciding what questions to ask and how to follow up their answers. In general, participants' responses directed what direction the interview would take for each theme in my interview guide. When participants touched upon particularly sensitive issues, I deliberately did not ask follow up questions, and let the participants decide how much they wanted to say. Sensitive areas were generally connected to experiences prior to their stay at AUA, and to how they got into treatment. All participants were in treatment in AUA at the time of their interview. This meant that if necessary, they had the possibility to explore difficult themes connected to the interviews with a competent therapist after the interview.

**Anonymity.** To ensure anonymity in such a small sample is a challenge. In the present study, participants and parts of their stories, and their participation in the present study were known to several of the AUA staff, covered by hospital laws of confidentiality requirements.

I do not refer to participants by either fictitious name or case number in the present study. I present quotes and stories from the participants with the information needed to understand its relevance, rather than present comprehensive stories of each of the participants. This is to ensure as much anonymity as possible. Any reference to name or place is anonymized. The AUA horses unquestionably play an important role in the participants' accounts. The participants' relationship to certain horses are of individual character, and may be an identifying feature to their accounts. Thus, the AUA horses are anonymized as well. When referred to, I provide the information necessary to understand its relevance.

**For whom?** Ethical considerations for the present study also included the question of for whom the study is written. I admit that I wanted to present the participants' perspective as

persuasive as possible, and to contribute to improvement of their treatment and overall situation in every way possible. There is, however, also the omnipresent third part in this kind of therapy – the horses. Activities that may be good for humans may not be as beneficial to the horses. The only way I considered it appropriate to include my interest in animal ethics in the present study has been to discuss the participants’ perspective on HAT, while balancing it up against the implications this might have for the utilization of horses in therapy in the future. “(...) Adopting a more respectful, egalitarian relationship to animals is also imperative because doing so is profoundly right and not doing so is profoundly unjust.” (Balcombe, 2011, p. 287)

**Animal ethics.** The ethical considerations concerning the horses is not limited to their possibility of identifying the participants. Animals in animal assisted therapy are generally well taken care of, not excluding the AUA horses. Even though I on personal basis do not agree on every aspect of the inclusion of horses in the treatment of humans, it would be impossible for me to conduct a study including animals if I in any way suspected that the animals suffer. The therapeutic work the horses take part in does not differ from normal handling of horses in Norway, and the discussion of ethics concerning traditional horse keeping is not an objective of this study. Although a largely neglected area, there has been conducted a study on the impact on horse used in HAT, which found no significant negative consequences for the horses (Suthers-McCabe & Albano, 2004). However, this is an unexplored area with very little systematic knowledge.

## Results

In this chapter, I will present the results of the analysis. Through analysis, I identified five main themes I believe capture essential aspects of the participants’ experience of HAT: *motivation, emotional effect, relationship with the horse, mastery and break from problems*. The results form the basis for a final discussion, in the next chapter. I view the themes as interconnected, and provide an illustration of these relations (figure 1). However, I also interpret the themes as characteristics of one common story, or development the participants communicate through the interviews. Thus, the themes are presented in a certain sequence to illustrate what I see as the most meaningful order of their relationship to each other.

### Theme 1: Motivation

Few of the participants had heard about HAT at AUA prior to treatment. Most participants described having an interested or positive reaction when they first heard about the horses. Two participants came to AUA with a very indifferent or downright negative attitude to horses. Both described how they gradually had become more open to the possibility of participating in HAT, and how their attitude to the horses had changed when they had spent some time in the

stable. Both participants expressed a similar change in their attitude to HAT as part of the treatment, and identified aspects of HAT they considered of therapeutic value. Two other participants had extensive previous experience with horses, and were aware of or familiar with the opportunity of participating in HAT at AUA. These participants were the only who said they specifically wanted to come to AUA. Both cited the horses as the reason.

I was really happy about it. And I immediately started saying that “shouldn’t we arrange it so that I can start riding?”. I remember I ran down here one of the first days, because someone was about to go riding. But I had to wait, I had to talk to the people in the stable first. But I started with it pretty early. It was like, in fact I think it has been, much of the reason why I’m still here. Other participants said that the horses had little to do with their motivation for succeeding in treatment, or for seeking treatment in the first place.

I would still be here. I would still be here even if there was no horse therapy. So it wasn’t like it was what made me choose. That it was crucial. Like you can see now, I’m not going to be with the horses anymore. But I’m still going to be at the “house”. The horses and HAT were usually described as a motivational factor, or as a pleasant aspect of the therapy. Some participants explicitly stated that the horses were both the most effective and the most pleasant aspect of their treatment, while others expressed a more moderate position, and highlighted HAT as a pleasant variation in their treatment at AUA.

**Therapy or activity?** Although participants varied in their perception of the therapeutic value of HAT, every participant expressed their understanding of HAT as predominantly beneficial, and identified at least one aspect of HAT as important to them in their overall treatment. An initial question of interest was whether they actually thought of the time they spent in the stable as therapy. Some participants merely described HAT as an interesting activity, which made time pass more enjoyable.

Actually, I became quite happy. I think it is fun. I’m just not quite secure with the horses and that stuff yet. But it is funny to ride, it is. And I thought that at least I would have something to do. Not just boring meetings and such. That you can do some. Some other things. Although similar statements were common among the majority of the participants, most of them also had thoughts about more profound therapeutic value of HAT. Some attributed greater therapeutic effect to the observation that HAT made their overall treatment more enjoyable than the participant cited above did. Others observed that the activity itself could be therapy, or have therapeutic purposes and effects.

*(Q. Do you think of it as therapy?)* Yes. *(Q. Or an activity?)* Both, actually. Because it is therapy at the same time as it is kind of pastime. And it is something I think is fun. So. It’s both. I don’t know what it is most of.

In particular, participants from the assessment/intermediate unit were less explicit about therapeutic effect of HAT, and were those who most often described HAT as an activity, or as varia-

tion. This observation was confirmed by the HAT therapists, who deliberately do not plan specific therapeutic outcomes for this group, due to their short stay at the unit. In contrast, all participants from the in- and day-unit had explicit thoughts about the therapeutic value of HAT.

Most participants expressed strong motivation, and a desire to complete their treatment. Conversations with AUA staff suggested that people in treatment at AUA that are not interested in doing HAT also are the ones that displayed least motivation for treatment in general. This is particularly relevant to one of the participants in the present study, who said that he initially was negative to the horses and HAT. However, as he became more motivated to succeed in treatment, he also became more open and curious about the therapeutic effect of the horses.

Any factor that made their treatment more enjoyable, or endurable (like HAT) may also have contributed to the participants' sense of being able to finish treatment. However, many of the patients also had thoughts about a more specific therapeutic effect of an activity they found enjoyable.

## **Theme 2: Emotional effect**

Consistent with their overall positive view of HAT, and regardless of their further reflections on therapeutic effect, participants were unanimous about a general positive emotional effect of HAT – feeling better. According to participants, key emotional effects include “*feeling good*”, *safe and calm*, *nervousness* and *emotional regulation*. These emotional effects were often described in relation to each other. Some participants linked the emotional effects specifically to the horses, while others talked more generally about the experience of being at the stable.

**“Feeling good”.** Expressions of happiness occurred frequently and robustly through all the participants' accounts of their interaction with the horses, and in relation to almost every other identified theme. Although frequently mentioned, the participants' accounts in this respect are characterized by a certain vagueness. In the interview setting, the participants' meaning came across unmistakably, but upon reading the transcripts for analysis, their expressions seemed less clear. For example, the feeling of happiness was often described as a feeling of uncertain origin. Many participants linked it to the interaction with the horses, while others attributed it to specific activities, like riding, or to the atmosphere in the stable environment. Participants also varied between describing happiness as some kind of general feeling connected to the very experience of being in the stable, to describing particular moments where they described to have felt happy. Examples of the latter ranged from the exhilarating experience of an exciting gallop, to a silent feeling of joy when the horse put his head upon the participant's shoulder. While participants generally were unable or unwilling to say anything about why it

made them happy to be with the horses, the majority of the participants expressed great concern about communicating the pleasant experience of being in the stable.

It makes me happy, to be in the stable and do things. Just groom the horses or take a walk with them or that kind of stuff.

I don't know what it is, the only thing I know is that it helps. It helps. Not just me, but all the patients. , Last time as well, everyone I managed to get to join me for the ride, they were very happy afterwards, and very bubbly compared to what they were like before they went to the stable. They were really happy to come along.

But I felt it. When we finished the ride as well, it was (there). It eased the pressure, in a way. Kind of fresher, or it was a bit refreshing. Got a good feeling by doing it.

Participants often mentioned other perceived therapeutic effects together with happiness. For example, some participants highlighted the positive experience of feeling better as a pleasant experience of being in the stable combined with the positive feeling of participating in an activity of perceived therapeutic value.

It is very positive. I am always kind of, yes pleased, afterwards. Because I can feel that this time each [day] means something. It makes a difference. So yes, I think the horse therapy is very good.

One participant expressed explicitly that he had not experienced any therapeutic effect of HAT. However, he still talked positively about HAT. He expressed the same experience of a positive emotional effect of HAT as the other participants.

Generally, I have always been positive when I've been coming down here. I can think of maybe two times when I've been a bit downcast when I was coming here. But then, then it got better very fast, just as soon as I came out. Out to the horses.

Several participants also highlighted that to look forward to being in the stable acted as a motivational factor. In these descriptions, the feelings described in the stable were in contrasted to a less pleasant reality. Overall, participants presented the time spent in the stables as a consistently positive experience.

Overall, the horses and the riding have been much of the reason why I'm still able to be here. I have struggled a lot now the last month. Every day has been a huge fight, and I just sit and clutch the table. It's obvious that those days, I ride here three days a week, and then the day passes faster. And I don't think about the fact that I'm here. You know, that I have to be here, then I do something I actually want to do and look forward to. So I do look forward to those days.

Yes, I know that it is the people that ride and are with the horses that stay here the longest. Then you have something nice to look forward to as well, and not just hard groups and things that aren't as all right, then you have something to look forward to.

By having something to look forward to, participants expressed a sense of structure to their experience, contrasted to an otherwise negatively connoted mere "existence".

**Safe and calm.** Participants often mentioned how being in the stable environment made them feel safe. Some linked this to how the HAT team made them feel safe in an environment

with the horses with whom they experienced some initial nervousness. The HAT team were described as considerate and experienced, thus able to make even the most nervous participants feel safe when interacting with the horses. The general atmosphere in the stable was described as safe. The participants pointed to other connotations as well, by providing an environment where the participants felt that they could “be themselves”, and be accepted. Participants’ descriptions of the HAT team will be discussed in further detail in a subsequent chapter.

Many participants also described a calming effect from being with the horses. Some felt especially safe with one particular horse (often their favorite); while others associated the feeling of safety to being with horses in general. Most participants were intent on determining the origin of this feeling, but expressed difficulties in doing it. Those who did, described it as a feeling that was generated by the horses.

I look forward to go down to the stable. And yes, just standing beside a horse. I don’t know what it does, it just makes me really safe and happy, in a way.

I just like to be with the horse. Because. It is really fun. It is kind of playful. And. you can think of other things. To be close with a horse, I think it is really... Really good. I just become happy. Get some tranquility and, yes, it simply feels good.

Most participants described their feeling of safety as a positive emotion that not necessarily were in conflict with excitement, or the “interestingness” of the activities. Thus, it is possible to interpret their statements about safety as an expression of their relationship with the horses. Safety may also, as mentioned in relation to the HAT team, imply the feeling of being accepted and tolerated.

One participant described the calming effect of the horses similar to the effect of medication on anxiety and depression.

It is because of [horse’s name] that I get rid of my anxiety. My anxiety and unrest and depression, it is. It is the worst thing in my life. I have been through pretty tough times because of it. It disappears and eases up really a lot when I’m with [horse’s name] or [horse’s name]. Or any horse, really. So.... So it means a lot to me. The horses means a lot to me because it is them that.... They are the reason that I don’t get anxious. I was given tranquilizers, [name of medication] and different stuff when I was here last time. But to be with the horses makes you just as calm. In a better way.

The same participant described a similar calming effect of the horses in stressing situations, and defined spending time in the stable as an “investment for the rest of the day”. Even though she could experience some initial lack of motivation for going out, she stated that the calming effect of having been to the stable would endure for the rest of the day, and make her able to regulate her own emotions and cope with the challenges of the environment. Another participant described how he was able to meditate when riding, and compared it to listening to music. He also stated that music was an important and much enjoyed aspect of his life, and stressed that his comparing riding to listening to music meant something special to him.

Both participant described the calming effect of the horses by comparing it to other calming activities, but while the first emphasized the positive effect of the horse by stating it as “better” than medication, the last participant highlighted the positive effect by comparing it to activities he found enjoyable and beneficial.

**Fear.** Participants described a rather limited range of emotions in relation to HAT. The most frequently mentioned emotion apart from happiness and enjoyment were nervousness, anxiety and fear.

Usually, participants cited the horses’ size and strength as the reason for their nervousness. Fear or nervousness are usually considered healthy reactions among people without experience with horses. Neither is it a surprising reaction, as horses are large and potentially dangerous animals. Moreover, horses are kept and socialized in a different, more detached manner than other (live) animals that humans interact with on a daily basis, like cats or dogs. Also, unlike cats and dogs (and humans), horses are prey animals. They display distinctly different behavior and often more “wild” appearance and rapid reactions. Thus, to the uninitiated and fearful, more foreign, and initially perhaps more difficult to understand.

If they get startled and become scared, I’m afraid they will thread on me. That’s what I fear the most, to be kicked or thread upon. But from what I’ve seen of the horses here, they are very kind. So it isn’t the first thing that strikes me, that they will walk over me.

Nervousness or fear was usually described as a feeling the participants only experienced when they first met the horses, or a feeling they saw as a manageable challenge to overcome. The participants’ expressions of fear would have been interesting to explore further. However, I detected a certain unwillingness or resistance in many of the participants when asked about negative experiences at the stable, and I was hesitant to press sensitive issues too far.

**Self-regulation.** One of the most frequently mentioned claims in HAT literature is how the interaction with the horses may promote regulation of both behavior and emotions (Hallberg, 2008). One participant stated that the horses unconsciously might have helped her relate to other people more easily. This participant emphasized that the interaction with the horses had an emotionally beneficial effect, but also described how socializing with the other people in the stable were helpful. The activities in the stable were described as a unifying factor that promoted a sense of care and helpfulness towards each other, as well being a shared positive experience among the participants. Another participant stated that HAT had given him more patience and better command over himself in challenging situations with other people. In the words of a participant: “instead of getting mad and sit on your hind legs so to speak, you find the solutions.” Other participants also described better awareness of their own emotions, and better body control as a result of the interaction with the horses. One participant reflected

that the responsibility he achieved through taking care of the horses might result in him becoming more caring and dependable towards other people as well.

### **Theme 3: Relationship with the horses**

All participants emphasized their relationship with one or more of the horses as one of the most important positive characteristic of HAT. Based on the participants' accounts, I believe *exclusivity, mutual affect, human comparisons, communication, the horse as a mirror* and *leadership* capture essential aspects of their relationships with the horses.

**Exclusivity.** Most participants said that they had a favorite horse, or that one horse meant more to them than the others. Every participant expressed that his or her relationship with the horse was important to him or her. Some talked of a special communication with one specific horse, compared to other horses. Several participants described their first meeting with their favorite horse as "choosing one another". Many participants also explicitly stated that they chose a particular horse (or the horse chose them) because of similarities between them. "I could see a lot of myself in him, to put it that way. So it was him I chose." Many of the participants described the match between themselves and the horse as being of special importance. Most participants said they prefer horses with whom they felt safe. The notion of choosing each other is another prevalent notion in HAT literature (e.g. Hallberg, 2008)

*(Q. Do you have a favorite horse?)* Yes, actually I have two. We argue a bit, over whom I'm going to choose in the end. First it was. Emotionally it's [horse's name]. She was the one that I for some reason was drawn to. And they. People here say that they saw that [horse's name] behaved, that she was really... That she liked me.

The participants' descriptions of their special relationship with one particular horse may seem a paradox, given that the participants are fully aware that other people interact with the horses. Surprisingly, jealousy over the favorite horse's relation to another person was not mentioned by any of the participants. One participant described a sense of failure by not being able to ride her favorite horse as well as she wanted to in the arena. She also described how one of the HAT team was able to ride the same horse very well. While acknowledging this, she did not express any particular resentment or envy, but reflected that the reason might be a result of an unfortunate combination of hers and the horse's pasts. The participants in general mediated an understanding of the fact that they "shared" their favorite horse with other people. However, they still described their own relationship with the horse as unique. Interestingly, this is a point largely ignored in HAT literature, although the situation where several people "share" the same favorite horse with high probability is a common occurrence.

**Mutual affection.** All participants described their relationship with one or more of the horses as an emotional relationship. Several participants expressed that they saw the horse as



the main component of the therapy, or as the “real therapist”. In this regard, the horse-human relationship may be compared to that of an alliance between therapist and client. In clinical literature, alliance is suggested as one of the variables most profoundly connected to a successful outcome of therapy (Crits-Christoph, Gibbons, & Hearon, 2006). However, most participants described their relationship with the horses in more emotional terms than would be expected for a description of a therapist. For example, many participants mentioned “kos”, and close physical contact with the horse as important. For some participants, the most important aspect of their relationship with the horse was the mutual care they experienced.

I can give a lot, and I get a lot back as well. (*Q. What do you give and what do you get back?*)  
Hm, love. It is. It's, yes, to take care of the horse and feel ...that he's fine. And then I'm fine too.

Others highlighted that the communication and interaction with the horse involved a sense of humor they described as mutual. “It's funny when they push you with their nose and mess with you. You can feel that the horse likes it.” Many participants described the horse as a friend. Several participants mentioned moments where “something special” happened with the horse: A special sense of communication or connection. A “closeness” that not necessarily has something to do with the physical contact.

Otherwise, he's like, he likes to have you in front of him, so he can lay his head upon your shoulder and have you there, and you really feel that. Or I feel that. The chemistry that's in the air. Which I feel in my chest and stomach. Which I don't get with [horse's name] for example, because I don't know her the same way. I think that's something other people, who don't know anything about horses and don't have anything to do with horses, that they don't understand. How close they are, in a way.

**Human comparisons.** When asked, most participants had thoughts about how their relationship with the horses compared to human relationships. Participants often mentioned that relating to the horses was different from relating to humans. This difference was described as part of the horses' appeal. All participants expressed an image of the horses as animals with personality, but not necessarily a human personality. At the same time, participants often used terms and expressions about human relationships when they talked about the horses.

They are friends. Really good friends. I don't know if I can use those words, but I feel ... attached to them. Especially to [horse's name], I do. It's just like, like your pet, in a way. (*Q. Can you compare it to what people mean to you? Or have done for you?*) Yes. I think of them with happiness. Care, in a way. I'm sure there's someone, but...maybe my girlfriend. The closest comparison you get.

Even though several participants compared their relationship with the horses to human relationships, they also described aspects of how the horse-human relation differed from human relations. Frequently mentioned was the physical contact with the horse, and the difference in communication. Another important aspect for many of the participants was their feeling of being unconditionally accepted by the horse.

**Communication.** A sense of special communication was common for all participants' expression of their relationship with the horses. Several participants mentioned that they talked to the horse, and felt that the horse understood them. This understanding was not necessarily expressed by the participants as the horse's semantic understanding of what they said, but as an understanding of their emotional state. The participants also described a feeling of consolation and support from the horses. Some participants stated that they felt horses understood them better than people did.

Yes, I feel that the horse can understand us better than many humans do. Because. I feel that because when I was in the stable here, when I asked if I could go and talk to [horse's name]. She was lying in the stable. And then. Then I had a pretty bad day, so I wanted to go down to [horse's name]. And I was leaning over like this, and I talked to her, and then she got up and came over to my face and then I felt that. Something's happening here.

Many participants also emphasized an enjoyable experience of being able to communicate effectively without using words. To some people, the notion of talking about oneself is not necessarily comfortable.

It's about how compliant they are. It's possible to communicate with the horses in a very easy manner. You have to be present and be very clear in your body language. So it's really fun because the clearer the body language, the less I need to use my voice. So it's possible to communicate in two different ways.

**Horse as a mirror.** Many participants expressed an additional, specific dimension to their communication with the horse. Most participants described the horse as a mirror to their own behavior and emotions. Horses are assumed to respond to more subtle behavioral signs from other beings than humans normally do, and may thus be perceived as acting like a mirror to human emotions. This is a common notion in HAT literature (Hallberg, 2008), and in horse discourse in general (Birke, 2008). The underlying therapeutic assumption is that to learn about why and how the horses' respond to human behavior make the participants more aware of their own behavior, and their underlying emotions that may affect their behavior. This is an integral part of AUA's HAT program.

They (horses) care more about how you feel than what they do up here (the "house"). They (horses) can feel how you feel and express it physically, in a way.

Participants described that when they learned more about the horses and their reactions to human behavior and emotions, they also experienced how the horse could teach them something about their own behavior, by reflecting their emotions and behavior in a physical and visible way. While people may carry unknown emotional "luggage", which will influence how we relate to each other, horses are assumed to generally act based on their fellow creatures' immediate appearance.

It's just like it's possible to see yourself in the horse and learn. Or get to know yourself by looking at how you influence the horse. That's been kind of exciting for me. If I am calm then the horse is calm and if I suddenly make a sudden movement and think of something else, and

appear to be unfocused or bustle, the horse will be like that as well. So horse therapy means a lot to me because it requires that I am present and consistent. And when I am, that's a pretty good state of mind to be in.

Participants expressed that the horses respond to their behavior in a way that makes their own behavior easier to understand and regulate. Participants described that by learning about how their own behavior affects the horse, they recognized that it is possible and even manageable to change their own behavior. This description of the horse-human relationship was intertwined with reflections on the emotional impact it induced.

It is just like the horse understand what the human feels when the human acts. And based on that, it's possible to think the other way around as well, that you can see on the horse when it expresses its own emotions. And if both horse and human recognizes it, that means it's a pretty firm bond already. So, yes, that can be very valuable to the human also. Then it's possible to think that it may be nice for the horse as well. Then it's even better for the human.

The interaction with the horse were not only expressed as a reflexive response from the horse, but also as active two-way communication. Participants described a growing awareness both of their ability to act appropriately and constructively towards the horse, and of their ability to understand the behavior of the horse and thus assume the horse's intentions and emotions. By engaging in a communication they understood as affecting the horse emotionally as well as physically, participants described how they also could be affected by the horse's behavior. The horses' ability to "sense" the participants' emotions was not always described as resulting in a response from the horse that were similar to the participants' state of mind. Participants described the horse as an understanding and responsive partner in the relationship. Thereby, the horses were seen as being able not only to reflect, but also deliberately to act in certain ways to meet the participants' emotional state. Thus, the participants described the responsive behavior of the horse as not only educative, but comforting and consolidating as well.

The horse is like..... They sense fear in the air in a way, so that's very deep in their nature from the time when they were wild horses. When they can sense fear in the air they can definitely sense your state of mind. That's what special with me and [horse's name] and [horse's name], that I know them and they know me. The way you know people. That you know how that horse and that person is.

**Leadership.** Although all participants described their relationship with the different horses as mutual in terms of affection, most participants also expressed an implicit idea about the necessity of their dominance over the horse. Human dominance over the horse is typically labelled leadership, and is another common topic in equestrian discourse (Birke, 2008; Patton, 2003), including HAT literature (Hallberg, 2008).

Many participants believed that human dominance over the horse had to be based on mutual communication and respect to be successful. Some participants also expressed the necessity of their dominance for the horse's sake as well as their own.

I feel that it is an interaction. First of all, if I let the horse do what it wants to do, it will do what it wants to do. But if I take too much control of the horse, become too aggressive, powerful, that won't work either. So it has to be a line in the middle. So you know, I think, like, if I'm kind with him, he's kind with me.

I'd say that I'm in charge, but sometimes it goes both ways. I try as hard as I can to be in charge, though. I manage to do it pretty good too. (*Q. Do you think it is important that you are in charge?*) Yes. It is. So I try to be strict. When I lead her around, I try to walk in the front and so on. I feel that it is important that I am in charge. For her sake as well as mine. That I don't let her control me. It is about teaching me something. Learning to be strict and decisive.

Participants expressed a sense of learning something about themselves by learning to lead the horse. One participant expressed explicitly that she thought her successful leadership was essential for a good therapeutic outcome.

I need to be in charge, because if I'm not, the therapy will become wrong as well. But she is in charge as well, sometimes. You have to be decisive when you lead them and so on. You have to pay attention. (*Q. And if not, what happens then?*) Then she'll become stressed and pull the rope and then she might feel that I become nervous and scared as well. Maybe she'll become so stressed that she'll step on me or run somewhere.

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#### **Theme 4: Mastery**

When talking about the previously discussed themes *emotional effect* and *relationship with the horse*, participants differed as to whether they explicitly described the beneficial effect as therapeutic. Some participants stated for example that the feelings they experienced when with the horse were the most important aspect of HAT to them. However, the most frequent answer to explicit questions of what the participants saw as therapeutic value was *mastery*.

All participants at some point used the word mastery (“mestring”) to describe important aspects of HAT. However, it was apparent that their meaning of the word varied. Some participants described a rewarding experience of controlling an animal of such size, thus using mastery synonymous with “control” or “leadership”. Others emphasized succeeding in tasks through cooperation with the horses, thus indicating a meaning of “achievement”. The participants that described feeling nervous or afraid when with the horses conveyed a third meaning of mastery, namely coping with their own nervousness, and overcoming fear. All three meanings capture a sense of success – with the horse, with a task, with self..

**Control.** The participants who emphasized controlling the horse described both a sense of power by being in control and a sense of mastery.

*(Q. What do you look forward to the most, with the horses?)* To get to know them better, and kind of....create something with it. Come along for a ride. Learn to ride by myself. To be able to handle an animal of that size. It’s a challenge. And I like challenges.

He was completely different from the other horses. So at first, when I started with him, I felt like, wow, really huge. But me and him, like I said I gained control over him pretty fast. And it was the first horse I managed to ride properly. Where I managed to sit properly when he galloped and everything. Felt that this is what is right.

**Cooperation.** Other participants had specific ideas about how the cooperation between the human and the horse constitutes the essence of HAT.

That horse therapy is a cooperation between human and horse, and that it can be the humans mastering with the help from the horse that’s the focus. Or just play.

They give you a pretty good feeling of mastering, I’ve felt that when I am able to be with the horse by myself and experience that it is...yes safe and...and that I’m safe at the same time. It creates this kind of personal space, which feels very good. Where I can team up with an animal that is. That (the horse) is with you, in a way.

**Coping with nervousness.** The perception of the horse as a large, possibly frightening animal mentioned in “emotional effect” may be connected to another dimension of the participants’ sense of achievement. Several participants communicated an idea that mastering a large horse may be experienced as gratification which is proportional to the size of the horse. Many participants also expressed that they had some concerns about the overwhelming prospect of mastering a horse when they first started therapy. However, they also expressed relief about

learning how to communicate with the horses, and a gratification for being able to manage the tasks they were presented in the stable.

*(Q. How do you feel when you walk away from the stable? Do you feel different from when you came there?)* I still feel happy and puffed and kind of, “haha, now I’ve been down there and taken another challenge”. Because I am nervous every time I walk down to the stable, at the same time as I’m happy. I feel that I have mastered...mastered a fear in a way, because I am a bit afraid of them.

*(Q. How did you end up in the stable when you were negative in the first place?)* No, it changed pretty fast. I could feel that I wanted to help. When I saw that they were doing things with the horses I wanted to try. Almost to see how close I dared go, because I was afraid of the horses in the beginning. It was huge animals, and when they suddenly were, like on your side of the fence... So it was frightening, but it was something about them which made me want to learn more about it. That I thought it was interesting. Simple as that.

**Doing something I know.** The participants with previous experience with horses expressed another dimension to their sense of mastering during HAT.

The fact is that I know how to take care of horses and so on, so that’s all very automatic. So I feel that I master it. Can do it!

However, these participants highlighted the enjoyment of learning new things in addition to the gratifying experience of coping with familiar tasks. Participants without previous experience with horses also highlighted the enjoyment and motivation connected to learning new things, and being introduced to a previously unknown field. It is important that activities with the horses are adjusted to the participants’ level of experience or aptitude with horses, to ensure that the activities are seen as interesting, meaningful and worth investing in.

### **Theme 5: Break from treatment**

Mentioned by all the participants undergoing in-patient treatment, *break from treatment* is the theme most notably connected to all other themes. The participants described the time spent in the stable as “a break”, a place where they could forget problems and negative emotions. Included in the theme *break from therapy* is the participants’ experience of *change of focus*, of *feeling necessary*, of *being seen as who I really am* (by both horses and HAT team), an appreciation of *the person I used to be* for the participants with previous experience with horses, and perhaps most notably as a break from treatment connected to participants’ experience of *being a patient*.

**Change of focus.** Change of focus was described both as a positive aspect in itself and as a positive consequence of feeling better. Some participants described a change of focus as something that inevitably occurred to them when they were with the horses, either expressed as elicited by being in the stable, or as a result of interacting with the horses. Others would describe their change of focus as a result of feeling happy by being with the horses. Thus, they

expressed a causal explanation, where a generally more positive attitude was explained by a positive change of focus caused by the horse.

Some participants emphasized the interaction with the horses, and stated that in order to be able to communicate with the horse, they had to turn their focus away from themselves and out to the horse. They also implied that to turn their focus away from themselves in itself were positive. Some stated explicitly that it gave them an opportunity to focus on something else than their personal problems. Participants also emphasized how spending time with the horses provided an opportunity to change focus, and to think of something outside themselves.

In the beginning, it is happiness. Very positive. At the same time as it makes me forget everything. Actually, it's crazy that you said it now, because in a way you can compare it to drugs. Because when you are high, you want to forget everything else and just be in that own little world. And don't think about the negative and worries. The same thing happens when I'm here. Because then I'm only focused and only think about what happens right here, right now, and with the horse. And forget everything around. And as soon as I'm done down here and are on my way back, everything else come back as well.

**Feeling necessary.** Many of the participants highlighted simple pragmatic aspects of HAT, like feeding the horses or helping with the hay. However, many explicitly linked these aspects to a perceived therapeutic value by expressing a feeling of commitment and responsibility, and of feeling useful and appreciated.

Mostly, it has to do with the responsibility. To have someone that is dependent on you. Because it becomes a commitment. That's not something I've been that good at earlier. So I have absolutely found something in the horse therapy. It's animals that need food and care, and they need.... They need humans to survive, at least the horses here do. So it feels good in a way, that someone..... That I can make a difference. Or. Not just me, but you know. (*Q. You can make a small difference.*) Yes. Contribute with something, something positive. It feels good.

I'm always really happy when I'm going down to the stable. But generally, I am very happy. But I can feel it, that it is very positive for me. To know that I am going down here sort of and doing stuff with the horses and.... Get to this here as well, I have been helping them, those times carrying the hay. Well first and foremost so. I like to work, I like to do stuff. And especially because the others appreciate it. And that give me very much.

It's a bit difficult to answer, but what the horses do for me is that I feel, that I feel important. For example. I feel that I do something. That I do something that's important. To others. And of course, that's a good feeling.

**To be seen as who I really am.** Profoundly related to the perceived emotional effect of their relationship with the horses and their experience of mastery is the participants' experience of being seen as who they really are during HAT. It seems that the participants shared an idea about the "real me", which sometimes was present and sometimes not, and which some people (or animals) would acknowledge, and some not. Participants said they felt that both the horses and the HAT team treated them as the persons they really are. They said this contrasted with their experience of the general approached in other AUA treatment.

***The horses' role.*** The horses' contribution to being "seen as who I really am", can be interpreted as arising from the participants' notion of the horse as a mirror. Horses are known to judge you based exclusively on the behavior you display (Hallberg, 2008). Moreover, horses respond visibly and clearly to more subtle behavior than most humans do. To many people, the personal cues the horse responds to might represent their true self. Thus, somehow horses may be perceived to know humans on a different level than humans themselves do.

Moreover, horses in general are friendly beings. Normally, they will act more warmly and more unconditionally than most humans would towards a (comparative) stranger (McGrogan, Hutchison, & King, 2008). This might imply that when a person becomes aware of behavior of hers that is disturbing to the horse and modifies this behavior, the horse will (normally) respond in a friendly and physical manner, thus creating a sense of willingly acceptance.

You don't need to be popular to make the horse like you. If you are a good person, the horse will know. That's all that matters to them.

***The HAT team.*** The HAT team is described very favorably by all participants, and the most frequently mentioned positive characteristics are "they don't talk about drugs" (and other problems); they don't ask "difficult questions"; and "they treat me as who I really am" rather than as "a patient".

Most participants highlighted their relationship with the HAT team as different from their relationship with other therapists and staff at AUA. The HAT team were generally described as friendlier than traditional therapists. Several participants implied that they did not see the HAT team as therapists, but as friends. Other participants were clear about their view of the HAT team in the stable as therapists, but emphasized the HAT team's different approach to the participants. Participants described that the HAT team rarely focused on "problems", or asked questions related to drugs, addiction, and problematic or criminal behavior.

Because the focus in the stable is on the interaction with the horses or everyday tasks that needed to be done, participants described the atmosphere as more relaxed and "nicer" than at "huset" (the house). It was implied that the HAT team acted towards the participants in a way that gave the participants a sense of being "normal people". It was implied that the experience of being included in the stable environment also gave participants a sense of belonging, and direction.

When I come down to the stable, there's no talk of drugs, or thoughts about drugs at all, it's just to focus on the horses and how the day in there will be, in the stable. It gives a very good motivation to think ahead in my life, and like, drugs are no way out anyway. So if the horse stepped on me I don't think I would go down to Plata and buy some drugs, hehe. So I feel I can learn a lot from the girls in the stable. Because they are so sure when they are in the stable. And that



makes me calm down. That I feel safe with them and with the horses. That I want to be there even more.

**The person I used to be.** Two of the participants had extensive previous experience with horses on a relatively high level. Both had owned horses, and been part of active horse environments. The activities in the stable gave them the experience of achievement on a different level to inexperienced participants as well as providing a glimpse back to positive aspects of their previous life.

Everybody have one thing in their life they can go to. Or probably there are some people who don't and that must be really bad. But that's (working with the horses) kind of the one thing in my life that I can do. To get a break, and to get away from the bad feelings, and to flee from that kind of stuff. In a good way.

The participants with previous experience with horses also described another dimension in their relation to the HAT team. Although they stressed that HAT was therapy to them, they also described an experience of equality when in the stable. The way the AUA horses are kept does not differ from traditional keeping of horses in Norway in any significant way, and thus allowed most participants with some previous experience to feel "at home" in the AUA stable. Their previous knowledge allowed the experienced participants to participate in the activities as skilled performers, and gave them the opportunity to display proficiency and knowledge.

**To be a patient.** To be able to say anything about the freedom the participants experience in the stable, by not feeling like patients, it is necessary to say something about how they talk about being a patient. Participants had explicit thoughts about their expectations about treatment, and what outcomes they should expect from therapy. Most participants had thoughts about what kind of treatment was right for them, and what treatment that did not work. All the same, participants expressed different levels of involvement in their own treatment, and a different sense of responsibility concerning the outcome of their treatment.

But you know, it is an individual treatment and it depends on what you make of it yourself. And that's really good for me because then things can go the way I want them to. And what's supposed to happen, I make happen.

A similar "active" attitude can be seen in some participants, whereas others expressed a more passive attitude: They described ending up in the hospital, "kidnapped", the hospital increases their medication, they was driven around, "they" (staff) took into consideration participants interest in horses. An interesting aspect, though, is that some of the participants with previous experience with horses expressed a more active part in their own life when talking about the horses. It is also interesting to note how one of these participants expressed her experience of the HAT therapeutic team compared to other therapists.

They probably keep in mind that we are patients, and that we are emotionally fragile and so on. At the same time as they work in a way where they don't ask and nag and treat us like we were inferior or like we were. Yes, its just like we... Like I used to feel when I was in the stable before (outside the hospital), that I am a rider, I'm not a. Patient.

## Discussion

### Positive self

Through participants' accounts, the stable is constructed as a context where they experience different versions of themselves. In the stable, the participants feel responsible, and they feel necessary. They contribute to something. They are mastering new or old skills. They achieve something. By perceiving themselves as someone that can contribute to or achieve something useful, they are able to contrast themselves "as I am" with the concept of themselves as a "patient" or "drug addict" – a problem.

The primary recurring theme, connected to every other theme in my analysis, is participants' expressions of the emotions they experience in the stable. In light of Wetherell's (2012) concept of "embodied meaning-making", the participants' descriptions of the emotional effects of HAT can be seen as their way of making sense of a relationship which is perhaps experienced as physical on a different level to human relationships. The feelings of fear, close physical contact, friendship and even love which the participants describe in the company of the horses can thus be seen as exemplifications of affective practices that differ from those experienced and acted upon in relations with humans. Wetherell argues that embodied reactions are both generated and reinforced by existing narratives and discursive resources. Participants' interaction with the other people in the stable, and the rest of society thus contributes to frameworks for participants' expressions of the affect and emotions experienced with the horses. Thus, we can see how the participants use familiar and common expressions of emotional experience to describe experiences that are different from what the participants have experienced elsewhere, as well as expressions more specific to equestrian discourse; and how these descriptions serve to make sense of novel affective experiences. Wetherell further states that emotions are both expressed in discourse as well as completed in discourse. Thus, the participants' expressions of experience of emotional effect can be understood as partially constructed through the very conversation with me in the interview setting. Wetherell argues that "affective practice" connotes "ongoingness" and patterns in process, while at the same time acknowledging that past practice constrains the present and the future.

Wetherell (2012) describes how 'affective practices build small worlds' (p.81), and how emotional expression is involved in 'fitting in', and in the production of shared meanings and the maintenance of social norms (Wetherell, 2012, p.7). In terms of participants' expressions of self-regulation, this is relevant because of the stable is presented as a "small world" with shared

meanings and social norms for interacting with the horses, and in extension, also with other humans (Koren and Træen, 2003; Forsberg, 2007). According to Wetherell, emotions are not objects inside the self, but responses to others, situations, the world – thus profoundly relational.. Participants communicated an implicit understanding of HAT as learning to interact with the environment through interaction with the horse. A further assumption might be that this primarily happens through learning to control oneself. Koren and Træen (2003) describe how girls in a Norwegian riding school said how controlling and interacting with the horse also teaches them about influencing their social conditions. Willig (1999a) argues that there is a need to acknowledge the role of “practice” as a mediator, meaning that the context is accommodating rather than determining. People interpret and interact differently with the environment, and thus make their own distinct sense of the same environment. Thus, the individual and its social environment can be seen as mutually constituting, continually interacting and changing. The use of the “mirror” metaphor may reflect how HAT is experienced on a different “level” than other kinds of physical activity, precisely because it results in a visible, physical response from the horse.

Horse related activities have been assumed to encourage self-efficacy by providing a sense of achievement and mastery (Koren & Træen, 2003; Forsberg, 2007; Hauge, 2013). A seeming paradox in the participants’ accounts is how their interaction with horses (from own experience) did not always result in success of the planned tasks. However, participants rarely talked about a feeling of failure during HAT, even in response to direct questions. The underlying reason probably lies in the AUA HAT therapists’ positive approach, which is based on Antonovsky’s principle of salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 2005). The therapy sessions in the stable are “designed” to result in a positive experience for the patients using Antonovsky’s emphasis on health, cohesion and resource identification and development. This often includes or results in a sense of achievement. Traditional psychotherapy can be seen as typically focused on correcting something that is damaged or not working as it should. Lavender (2009) suggests that being with horses is about learning, about gaining knowledge and skill, in other words about achievement.

Participants’ sense of achievement is also communicated through their expressions of “doing something useful” in the stables. It seems that the participants appreciate the feeling of responsibility, of contributing to something useful, and feeling necessary, and that this provide them with a sense of meaning. Qualitative studies exploring patients’ view often report similar statements from participants (Dahle & Iversen, 2011). Worth particular notice is Nordheim’s

master study also conducted at AUA, which focused on patient experience of drop out (Nordheim, 2012). Nordheim reported that several participants in his study had called for participation in useful activities. Work in the stable was mentioned in particular as one such activity. Moreover, Dahle and Iversen's (2011) study of clients' experience of addiction treatment, and identified participation in meaningful activities as one of four important aspects for successful treatment.

**The role of the horse.** Throughout the participants' accounts, the horse is presented as a partner in mastering challenges, and as a challenge to master in itself. The horses are described as the reason why participants feel necessary, accepted and included. However, the horses are also described as friends and in terms of close emotional attachment, and as important emotional support during treatment.

There was little focus on riding in the study and this is reflected in my analysis. It is partly due to participants' limited talk about riding, and partly because of an active decision on my part. The object of HAT is therapy, not learning to ride. Participants' limited talk of riding probably reflects the HAT focus in the stables. However, the practice of riding - humans being carried by the horse, is perhaps the feature which most distinguishes the horse-human relationship from other human-animal relations. Riding is in itself an activity heavily laden with symbolic meaning, and to explore it in detail could possibly have expanded to another master project or a PhD project. Thus, as a conscious decision, I asked very few particular questions about riding during the interviews. Riding was typically mentioned as a pleasant or exciting activity or in relation with mastering, but was not explored further.

It can be argued that many of the beneficial effects experienced by the participants during HAT are not necessarily due to the horses, but rather are due to the stable environment in its entirety. While acknowledging the truth of this, I also want to argue that many of the characteristics of the stable environment – even those that are not explicitly connected to the horse – are shaped by the horse being the primary focal point in the stables. For example, it can be argued that the HAT therapists' attitude towards the participants, the social norms, behavior and display of emotions and affect, mastery, feeling needed, are all part of traditional Norwegian horse culture.

Although horses traditionally had the role of working animal, their position in Norway today resemble that of a pet or companion animal. In contrast to (relatively) similar animals that mainly are kept as meat (e.g. cattle or pigs) horses are named, recognized as individuals

and thus included in human society (DeMello, 2010). Although certain aspects of the horse tradition is gaining increasing resemblance to consumerism, this view is not present at AUA. Participants are encouraged to approach the horses as individual beings, with personalities that are understood and constructed as both similar to and different from humans.

Studies on the relationship between humans and companion animals suggest that an important human aspect of the relationship is talking to the animals (Belk, 1996; Birke, 2008; DeMello, 2010). To talk to a horse which responds by conveying understanding while being unable to verbally challenge what you say, creates a perceived sense of empathy and acceptance. According to Honneth, recognition in close relations (conceptualized by Honneth as love) is central to people's basal sense of self, and a prerequisite to take part in mutual relations (Lie and Granly, 2011). In their description of being understood, accepted and recognized as who they really are by the horses; the participants also communicate a sense of recognizing their own self-worth.

The notion of the horse acting as a mirror to the human is prevalent in horse literature in general, and usually integrated as one of the main explanatory factors for HATs efficiency (Mandrell, 2006). Similarly, other animals are seen by some as a mirror to humans, particularly with regards to companion animals (Belk, 1996; Kruger and Serpell, 2006). Because the mirror-metaphor is included in the philosophy and practice of HAT at AUA, it seems unlikely that the participants created the expression themselves. All the same, every participant at some point during the interviews used it to describe their relationship with the horses. It is of no less interest that this particular metaphor was chosen by all the participants to describe the horse-human relationship. By using "mirror" as a metaphor to the horses' response to themselves, the participants construct the horse as a representation of their own embodied emotions.

To an experienced horse person, there is little, if anything new or unexpected in how the participants describe their relationship to the horses. It is, however, interesting that participants, to some extent, talked about the horses in the same way, using similar expressions. Two of the participants had extensive previous experience with horses, and thereby stood out somewhat regarding their descriptions of everything horse related. Their expressions of therapeutic value of horses also had the feeling of a life with horses as an integrated part, compared to the somewhat more novel expressions used by the others. My perception is that these two participants' descriptions of HAT were more influenced by usual horse discourse – their expressions about horses were more familiar to me – while at the same time more based on knowledge and understanding of horses, and on experiences with horses outside of the HAT setting at AUA.

Parker (1999) emphasizes the relevance of the origin of expressions. Parallel to the expansion of the equestrian approach to “natural horsemanship”, and a more distinct focus on ethology in the training of horses, discourses of horses’ social awareness (mirroring emotions and behavior), and of their natural recognition of a leader has become more prevalent in typical equestrian discourse (Patton, 2003). Participants with previous horse experience might be aware of, or be influenced by, such discourse, at least to some extent. Conversations with the HAT team illustrated that such notions are integral to HAT at AUA. It is reasonable to assume that the HAT team have influenced how the participants talk, and that the participants have influenced each other. Nevertheless, the expressions used by the HAT team about the horses will also, inevitably, be influenced by cultural and ideological conceptions of the horse and the human-animal relationship.

Traditional Norwegian equestrian discourse has typically been male dominated and oriented towards work or military activities utilizing the horse, typically characterized by focus on responsibility, routines and hierarchies of dominance (Forsberg, 2007; Koren and Træen, 2003). Today, most horse related activities are characterized as leisure (Birke, 2008), and the majority of riders are female. In Norway, approximately 80% of the members in Norges rytterforbund are women (Sissel Finstad, personal communication, 19.04.2013). The shift towards leisure activities conducted by women can be seen as paralleled by a change in equestrian discourse, towards more social and interpersonal expressions (eg Birke, 2008; Koren and Træen, 2003). Studies on contemporary equestrian discourses indicates that it typically includes focus on care and relational experiences (Koren and Træen, 2003), in addition to discourse of traditional horse knowledge. The existence of these parallel discourses can be understood in terms of the Foucauldian concept counter-discourse, which is used to challenge hegemonic or traditional understandings of phenomena (Willig, 1999bb). This is a useful concept in understanding the clash between the institutionalized body of horse knowledge versus the emerging, “social” discourse. It may also contribute to an understanding of how the horse is seen as an effective component in therapy. The discrepancy between such discourses may have a role in legitimizing typical assumed benefits of HAT. By focusing on notions of “discipline” and “responsibility” from traditional horse discourse, therapeutic outcomes such as desirable changes in terms of social interaction can be legitimized through the emerging discourse focusing on social interaction and the horse-human relationship.

**The role of the context.** “An explanation is glued to the circumstances in which it is used” (Parker, 1999). Thus, Parker recognize that the material and embodied context is more

important than traditionally acknowledged in social constructionism. The physical and structural context of the AUA treatment setting as well as structural context factors at macro-level, such as Norwegian policy on illegal drugs provides a crucial context for understanding the social environment the participants live within.

Despite increasing focus on biomedical explanations of addiction, problematic use of substances is typically understood as connected to problematic social conditions (Skretting, 2013). Moreover, the participants in the present study can be categorized as belonging to one of the most marginalized groups in Norwegian society (Skatvedt & Scheffels, 2012). According to (Willig, 2000), discourses offer subject positions, which, when taken up, have implications for subjectivity and experience. The biomedical discourse of addiction as a disease, positions “the patient” as a passive recipient of expert care. Discourses legitimate and reinforce existing social and institutional structures, at the same time as these structures support and validate the discourses. AUAs insistence on using the concept “patient” reflects an underlying structure of passive receiver of treatment, at the same time as the treatment is based on a requirement of the “patient’s” active willingness to “being cured”.

The stable is presented as a place where the participants interacted with their social environment differently than in other settings. An important contributor in this respect is how interaction with and around the horses shapes the social interaction and emotional meaning making. Emotional geography studies locate emotions in “othered” bodies, which are experienced differently in different places (Bondi et al, 2005). (Cylwik, 2001) suggests that “place in a physical sense does not produce emotions but rather it is the way that people, as individuals and groups, culturally and socially construct place and give it meaning that produces emotions.” In line with Forsberg’s (2007) conclusions, participants’ experience of power and control in the stable may act as an enhancing factor for acting upon their circumstances as “patient at a hospital”.

Throughout the participants’ accounts, the stable is represented as an “independent” environment, an environment that exists “anyway” and on its own accord, and not necessarily related to what happens at “Huset” or in the rest of the world. I think this is relevant for a number of reasons, including two reasons: Many participants expressed the view that the horse sees you for “who you really are”. The HAT team only see the patients in the stable, with the horses whose reaction to participants is based exclusively on the behavior the participants display in the present. In addition, the HAT team have a stated policy of treating participants based on their behavior in the stable more than based on diagnosis or knowledge of their previous life.

The way the participants act in the stable is typically described by themselves as different and in more positive terms than their behavior outside the stable. Thus, the horses and the HAT team recognize a version of the participant that is described as positive in the words of the participants themselves. In light of Honneth's connection between recognition and identity (Lie and Granly, 2011), the recognition the participants describe in the stable may actually enhance their experience of positive identity development.

In their study of client-staff interaction, Skatvedt and Scheffels (2012) noted how experiences of asymmetry in client-staff relations were prevalent in a treatment community for people with substance related problems. However, they observed how pauses from the formalized treatment setting, such as taking a smoke together, often served to equalize the clients' experience of the asymmetry. Skatvedt and Scheffels argues that as "normal" and "sober", the staff in their study were perceived by the clients to retain the power to normalize the clients, by voluntarily opening up the equality these breaks offered. According to Skatvedt and Scheffel, this could be the result of a form of opposite labeling theory. By stepping out of their role as a therapist in these pauses, the staff were experienced as recognizing the clients as equal human beings. The participants in the present study rarely described AUA staff explicitly. However, by distinguishing the HAT team from the general AUA team, they communicated effectively how the experience of being in the stable differed from the general experience at AUA. Moreover, the HAT team was frequently described as "friends" or "really nice girls", without the connotations of asymmetry which are often experienced in client-staff relations (Skatvedt and Scheffels, 2012). One participant illustrated this by explicitly describing the HAT team as "not treating us like we were inferior". According to Honneth, recognition in symmetrical relations leads to confidence and self-worth (Lie and Granly, 2011).

The expression *break from treatment* can be understood as reflecting deeper structural issues than "nice horse therapists" (and horses) versus "tough traditional therapists". The participants' experience of being seen as who they really are in the stable, rather than as a patient, illustrates their possible experience of lack of recognition in the broader treatment system. Lie and Granby (2011) illustrates this with stories where marginalized young people refer to the milestone of their life as being persons who recognized and appreciated them for exactly what and who they are.

Participants' understanding of the meaning of HAT may be enhanced precisely *because* HAT is experienced more as an enjoyable activity than as therapy in the specific AUA setting. One needs to understand the AUA context if one is to understand why HAT is described in



such positive terms and in such contrast to more main stream traditional therapy. Many of the participants more or less explicitly communicated that the time spent in the stable was one of, or “the”, most positive aspect of their treatment. This might have affected the way they wanted to present the therapy to me as a researcher. Furthermore, participants may have been aware of, or have deduced that in times of economic constraint, the HAT program is not an absolute certainty at AUA. The research on HAT may have been perceived as an evaluation of whether horses should continue to be part of the treatment service at AUA.

### **Concluding remarks**

The research questions for the present study were concerned with participants’ experience of HAT, in particular their experience of the horse-human relationship, and HAT as part of their overall treatment at AUA.

In my view, there are three main underlying themes in the present study. First, the stable is constructed as a context where the participants are able to construct a positive self, namely a self which is necessary and accepted; one that can cope with challenges and achieve something; and one that is different from the “patient” that is receiving treatment for a problem or disease. Second, the participants’ expressions of their relationships with the horses suggest that the horses are both facilitators for the positive construction of themselves, as well as an important emotional support during treatment. Finally, the last underlying theme is the significance of the specific socio-historical context within AUA for the participants’ constructions and experiences.

### **Strengths and shortcomings**

There is little consensus about how to review and ensure scientific rigor in qualitative research. Criteria for evaluating qualitative research is typically connected to reflexivity, rigor, epistemology, “craftsmanship” in terms of analysis and integration of theory and its ethical integrity (Parker, 1992). Qualitative research has great possibilities but also some significant limitations. A meaningful question is what the present study can contribute to our knowledge and understanding of HAT and of the appropriate methods with which to assess its impact on addiction treatment.

**Naturalistic setting.** The present study is conducted in a naturalistic setting, with no artificial designs and with participants that were in immediate presence to the phenomena of interest both physically and “historically”. This have undoubtedly contributed to the ecological validity of the study (Parker, 1999) as well as my appreciation of the context, and ability to

evaluate the study's transferability. Although no formal data was collected to ensure triangulation, my knowledge of horses and immersion in the AUA setting have acted as a kind of informal triangulation of the data. I also had the fortunate possibility of continually evaluating results and interpretations with both HAT therapists and some of the participants.

**Generalizability.** It is not possible to make claims about the generalizability of my findings for the general population based on a sample of eight participants. Nor was that the objective of the present study. The present study sought to explore the specific experience of a specific activity within a specific context. This does not mean that the conclusions drawn from the present study do not carry relevance in other settings. As well as being the product of a specific context, the participants' accounts are dynamic products of macro-level processes and structures which also influence and interact with other people's experience. The participants' accounts convey important knowledge about the horse-human relationship, as well as displaying increasingly common notions about addiction treatment in general.

**Reflexivity.** Because all participants expressed a predominantly beneficial understanding of HAT, I did not want to challenge this perception by pressing issues of negative experiences of HAT. A more experienced interviewer could undoubtedly have assessed the situations better than I did. Looking back, I also see that the interview guide to a considerable extent is influenced by my assumptions based on my previous knowledge and assumptions about horses and horse assisted therapy. While this might be considered a drawback by some, in retrospect I wish I had paid even more attention to my assumptions, in order to explore these in even greater depth in the interviews.

## **Implications**

**Suggestions for practice.** The focus on the enjoyment and the happiness expressed by the participants in relation to the horses may seem somewhat naïve, considering the complex processes that often are involved in therapy. However it is important not to dismiss the significance of a seemingly basic emotional experience of happiness in search of more advanced therapeutic effects of treatment. In their descriptions of their overall therapy at "the house", the participants usually described a rather boring and (emotionally) tough daily life. AUA, like many other addiction treatment facilities, struggles with high drop-out rates and places emphasis on retention. I do not suggest that horses are some kind of universal spreader of joy nor the one and only factor that may motivate addicts to remain in treatment. I do, however want to

emphasize the importance of identifying and promoting factors that support a notion of treatment as enduring. The participants' accounts suggest that the positive emotions they experience in the stable may in fact be a motivational factor for both retention and investment in treatment. The very fact that all participants stated that they look forward to HAT, and some even explicitly claimed it to be the highlight of their week, is a sentiment to the importance the participants place on HAT. No therapist, no matter how skilled or involved, can help a person that is not motivated to change. Some will argue that therapy should not necessarily always be pleasant. However, if the horse lends a measure of endurance to working with difficult themes and thereby contributes to retention in treatment, its contribution to addiction treatment may well be significant.

Another essential aspect is the participants' expressions of equality with the HAT team. As discussed, the vagueness of the expressions of happiness might suggest that part of the positive feeling arises from being treated "in the present" and as "who you really are" – which can be understood as a fundamental attribute of the horse (Mantrell, 2006). Arising from this, it is possible that a central aspect of the horse's appeal in therapy is how the horse-patient-therapist interaction also equalizes asymmetrical relationships between people.

**Suggestions for research.** While one of the most important lessons from the study might be the role of HAT as a sorely needed, happiness-filled break from a challenging therapy setting, it does not follow automatically that the use of horses is necessarily a good idea. As Mariano (2012) suggests, more specific research on the construct validity of the horse is needed. This is necessary to justify the utilization of the horses.

Selby (2009) suggests that research is needed on specific populations in order to determine in which cases EAT is most efficient. The present study sheds light on specific significance of horses in treatment of young people with substance related problems, such as motivation for treatment, understanding and regulation of own emotions, and enhanced interaction with other people. However, I want to turn the problem around and suggest that research is needed on the general population, in order to better understand the horse-human relationship and how it may prove beneficial to both horse and human. It is possible to imagine that many of the methodological weaknesses often found in AAT research would be easier to address with a non-clinical sample. Because one of the main questions regarding AAT is the importance of the animal, I believe that the effect of the relationship between humans and nonhu-

man animals should be explored in a setting that is not restricted by the confinements that usually limit research on clinical populations. It is also my belief that HAT will benefit from research that is focused more broadly than simple verification of clinical aspects. Possible settings for further research are indicated in Koren and Træen (2003) and Forsberg's (2007) studies in riding schools, and in Hauge's (2013) study of interaction between young people and horses in small farm settings.

In the present study, I have limited the discussion of horse-human communication to deal with how the participants' expressions constructs their understanding of the communication. However, it should be possible to explore this interaction further using social constructionist theory, for example by applying foucauldian discourse analysis (Parker and The Bolton discourse network, 1999). Another interesting research focus might be how the horse in historical accounts and mythology have contributed to contemporary understandings of the horse-human relationship.

Although I think it is important to further explore the effect of the horse, I think it is wrong to focus exclusively on the effect of the horse alone when trying to understand the experience of HAT. As mentioned by many of the patients, the time they spent in the stable was important for many different reasons, maybe most importantly for providing a therapeutic/learning environment completely different from the traditional treatment setting. This provided an opportunity of getting out in fresh air; learning and mastering new skills; doing and contributing to "something useful"; and being in an environment where the focus was taken away from them and their personal problems. Further research on the clients' perspective in addiction treatment is needed. I suggest that in order to strengthen such research, an interdisciplinary approach is called for. In research the various disciplines themselves tend to limit participants' stories, and direct which aspects are focused on and which are omitted. An interdisciplinary approach may open a broader range of insight into a complex field - one still largely dominated by quantitative studies. As the present study shows, qualitative approaches are highly suited to exploring perspectives and stories that cannot be captured by quantitative data alone. In so doing they contribute to better understanding of the whole.

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# Vedlegg



## **Research issues to be explored**

How is horse assisted therapy (HAT) experienced by the participating patients, including:

- Their expectations of HAT
- Their experience of HAT as part of the AUA treatment and their healing process
- The relevance of HAT in their decision to remain in/drop out of treatment
- The significance of the horse in their recovery process

How do the patients describe the human-horse relationship?

## **Interview guide**

The questions and prompts of the interview guide should be considered possible ways of exploring the research issues. Thus, the interview guide is not a rigid plan to be followed in each interview. The order and the phrasing of the questions may vary depending on the interview situation, and additional questions may be asked if necessary.

### **Main themes in bold.**

*Central questions of each theme in italics*

*Prompts are indented.*

### **Generell innledning**

Om meg: Hvem jeg er, hva jeg holder på med, konfidensialitet og at jeg er interessert i behandling av rusavhengige.

### **Introduksjon**

*Litt generelt/demografiske fakta: hvilken avdeling er du på, hvor lenge har du vært her, alder, osv.*

*Kan du fortelle meg om hvordan du kom hit?*

*Hva var din rolle i denne beslutningen?*

*Hva gjorde at du ville/ikke ville dette?*

*Hvilke liknende steder har du vært tidligere?*

### **Behandlingen – hvordan plasserer du HAT i et videre behandlingsperspektiv**

*Kan du fortelle litt om behandlingen her?*

*Hva består behandlingen av?*

*Hva synes du om behandlingen?*

<b>Region:</b> REK sør-øst	<b>Saksbehandler:</b> Emil Lahum	<b>Telefon:</b> 22845523	<b>Vår dato:</b> 30.11.2012	<b>Vår referanse:</b> 2011/1642/REK sør-øst D
			<b>Deres dato:</b> 20.11.2012	<b>Deres referanse:</b>

Vår referanse må oppgis ved alle henvendelser

Til Espen Ajo Arnevik

### 2011/1642 Hesteassistert terapi for unge rusavhengige (HAT)

**Forskningsansvarlig:** Oslo universitetssykehus  
**Prosjektleder:** Espen Ajo Arnevik

Vi viser til søknad om prosjektendring datert 20.11.2012 for ovennevnte forskningsprosjekt. Søknaden er behandlet av leder for REK sør-øst på fullmakt, med hjemmel i helseforskningsloven § 11.

Endringene innebærer:

- Populasjonen er endret pga. endring i avdelingens organisasjon. Pasienter rekrutteres fortsatt innenfor samme avdeling, men pasienter vil nå bli randomisert fra Seksjon 1: Døgnbehandling.
- Det knyttes to masterstudier til prosjektet
- Informasjonsskrivet revideres i henhold til endringene

#### Vurdering

REK har vurdert endringssøknaden og har ingen forskningsetiske innvendinger mot endringen av prosjektet.

#### Vedtak

REK godkjenner prosjektet slik det nå foreligger, jfr. helseforskningsloven § 11, annet ledd.

Tillatelsen er gitt under forutsetning av at prosjektet gjennomføres slik det er beskrevet i søknaden, endringssøknad, oppdatert protokoll og de bestemmelser som følger av helseforskningsloven med forskrifter.

REKs vedtak kan påklages til Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for medisin og helsefag, jfr. helseforskningsloven § 10, 3 ledd og forvaltningsloven § 28. En eventuell klage sendes til REK sør-øst. Klagefristen er tre uker fra mottak av dette brevet, jfr. forvaltningsloven § 29.

Vi ber om at alle henvendelser sendes inn med korrekt skjema via vår saksportal: <http://helseforskning.etikkom.no>, eller på e-post til: [post@helseforskning.etikkom.no](mailto:post@helseforskning.etikkom.no).

Vennligst oppgi vårt referansenummer i korrespondansen.

Med vennlig hilsen

Stein A. Evensen  
Professor dr. med.  
Leder

Emil Lahum  
Førstekonsulent



## **RCT Hesteassistert terapi – Informasjon til pasienter og samtykke om å være med i forskningsprosjektet**

Vi og mange andre tror hester kan bidra til å forbedre psykisk og fysisk helse for pasienter med rus og avhengighetsproblematikk.

Pasienter ved Avdeling ung sier ofte at hestene ved avdelingen har hjulpet dem med å bli i behandling og å bli bedre av det de sliter med. Men er det slik? For å prøve ut dette vitenskapelig har vi satt opp et prosjekt for å studere hva hestene faktisk bidrar med, hva pasientene synes om denne type terapi og om det har effekt for pasienter med rus og avhengighetsproblemer. Noen av de som blir med vil få hesteassistert terapi, mens andre får det ikke. Dette skjer ved loddrekning.

Alle får den terapien ved Avdeling ung de er henvist for å få, helt uavhengig om de blir med på studien eller ikke. De som ikke blir trukket ut til hesteassistert terapi vil få mulighet til det som et poliklinisk tilbud etter endt innleggelse.

Hesteassistert terapi innebærer å bli kjente med hestene, lære om dem og sikkerhet, stell, riding, vognkjøring og arbeid i og rundt Stallen så som å gi hestene mat, ta vare på utstyr og rydde. Å være med i studien betyr at dersom du blir trukket ut må du være med på timene, men det betyr ikke at du må gjøre alle aktivitetene. Hvis det er noe du ikke ønsker å være med på, så gi oss beskjed, så finner vi en annen aktivitet til deg den timen. Vi vil gjerne høre hva du synes om de ulike aktivitetene, hva som er bra, hva som ikke er så bra, og hvorfor.

For de som blir trukket ut betyr det at du samtykker i å bli videofilmet i noen sesjoner, at du blir intervjuet om din opplevelse med denne terapien, og at du fyller ut noen ekstra spørsmål etter endt terapi. Studien er en del av YATEP slik at du også fyller ut de vanlige spørreskjemaene og testene som er på avdelingen.

Som med all annen informasjon på Avdeling ung og i YATEP vil informasjonen du gir fra deg aidentifiseres og lagres på en sikker måte godkjent av datatilsynet. Ved publisering vil det ikke på noen måte være mulig å knytte resultatene til deg.

Du kan når som helst, og uten å oppgi grunn, trekke deg fra studien.

Hovedansvarlig for studien er Avdelingsleder Espen Ajo Arnevik ([esarne@ous-hf.no](mailto:esarne@ous-hf.no)) og prosjektleder er Ann Kern-Godal ([annker@ous-hf.no](mailto:annker@ous-hf.no)). Ved spørsmål eller problemer med studien ta kontakt.

Din avgjørelse vil ikke ha noen betydning eller få noen konsekvenser for din generelle behandling ved avdelingen eller din deltagelse i YATEP.

