

7

Trauma-informed Interspecies Social Justice in AAI

SARAH SCHLOTE*

EQUUSOMA® Horse–Human Trauma Recovery, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) often provide meaningful psychosocial opportunities for people facing trauma and marginalization. Without applying a trauma and social justice lens to the animals involved, AAIs risk repeating harmful dynamics that undermine the experience for all involved. This chapter outlines some examples of re-enactments that can unfold as a result of anthropocentrism and speciesism to reinforce the importance of prioritizing the welfare of both human and animal participants.

Social justice refers to the process of identifying and dismantling barriers that disproportionately impact certain groups, resulting in systemic experiences of oppression, unmet needs, adversity, and disparities in terms of health, welfare, and well-being. These disparities usually reflect power and control dynamics that are rooted in layers of privilege, discrimination, or implicit bias that benefit members of certain groups at the expense of members of other groups. A common example is where buildings, public spaces, facilities, and equipment are designed with able-bodied individuals in mind, which makes it difficult for people with various medical, physical, or mental health needs to participate in society in an equal way. From this standpoint, what is disabling is not their condition but the lack of universal design, accommodations, and non-judgmental acceptance that would facilitate their inclusion.

A related phenomenon is that of inspiration porn (Young, 2012), referring to the portrayal of individuals who are facing various adversities or barriers as inspirational to those who are not facing those particular challenges. The insidious message of inspiration porn is that success is ultimately a matter of having the right attitude, regardless of the number of systemic barriers that may legitimately be exacerbating their difficulties or may even be (re)traumatizing. This simultaneously objectifies

the oppressed individual for the more privileged viewer's gratification while absolving the latter from any responsibility related to their participation in a system that supports their comfort at the expense of others.

Anthropocentrism in AAI

The field of animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) is not immune to issues of social injustice and inspiration porn. Many AAIs provide much-needed support to underserved and/or marginalized populations in an effort to reduce disparities and facilitate a sense of inclusion. Such programs often receive media exposure and widespread acclaim for how inspiring they are. However, these same programs may occur at the expense of the animals involved. For instance, many AAI programs are designed for people facing trauma, stress, tragedy, discrimination, exploitation, barriers, or a lack of resources related to early adversity, health, racism, ableism, ageism, sexism, colonialism, capitalism, cis-heteronormativity, education, socio-economic status, and other risk factors. However, in spite of being trauma informed and/or social justice focused for the human client, some such programs may nonetheless be founded in anthropocentrism and speciesism, where animals are objectified,

*info@equusoma.com

commodified, and serve as gratification of human needs, sometimes at the animal's expense.

Social and mainstream media are replete with examples of animals involved in programs that are intended for human benefit. Sometimes there is a discrepancy between the glowing narrative and comments that extoll the virtues of the human-animal bond, and the accompanying images or videos that depict animals showing signs of annoyance, appeasement, aversion, pain, or discomfort, which are either overtly disregarded or simply not recognized by those offering and receiving the interventions and by those voicing their endorsement. In these cases, AAIs offer a different kind of inspiration porn, where animals are glorified as cure-alls for those who struggle, which provides a feel-good justification for AAIs that celebrates human benevolence and good intentions towards the less fortunate, while simultaneously distancing the viewers, those offering, and those benefiting from AAIs from any responsibility in their participation in a system that exists at the potential cost of the animals.

Role Reversals

Of course, many AAI programs follow protocols and principles that aim to ensure the welfare of both the humans and the animals involved, as evidenced in this book. However, when these protocols are not followed, the result can be an unfortunate re-enactment in terms of who is committing harm (“perpetrator”), who is helping (“rescuer”), and who is needing help (“victim”), in accordance with the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968), repeating similar power dynamics to those experienced by the human clients in the first place. For instance, consider a situation where a person leading an AAI has unresolved trauma that results in a pattern of codependence where they help others at their own expense (“rescuer”), so as to make up for the actions or inactions of the people and systems that have caused harm (“perpetrator”), which may inadvertently remove agency and self-determination from the client who is seen as suffering and in need of help (“victim”). The “rescuer” feels empowered for contributing to society, in part because helping was a way to prevent harm and avoid feeling powerless as a child, and being seen as altruistic and kind may also assuage underlying shame related to a core message that they had to earn love by being good and useful to others. This underlying pattern of appeasement may

make the person leading AAIs less likely to recognize how the animal may be appeasing and/or overriding as well. In that case, the roles in the triangle shift, where the “rescuer” and the “victim” (however unintentionally) adopt the role of “perpetrator” of harm towards the new “victim”, the animal.

Having a human client engage in an activity that benefits them over the needs of the animal places both in an untenable position. If the client does not recognize the re-enactment right away and later realizes that the animal is facing something similar to what they themselves experienced, they may: (i) either feel appalled or guilty for being complicit in that dynamic; (ii) be ashamed for now being in a similar position of “power over” as their abuser, even if involuntarily; (iii) resume suppressing their own needs after taking the risk to express them (especially if they had codependent patterns to start with); and (iv) face a double bind about whether or not to express these feelings, as well as any anger and distrust they might now have, towards the person leading the AAI for setting up the situation. The outcome reinforces a felt sense of unsafety in relationship for both the human client and the animal, which undermines the goals and intentions of the AAI.

Magic Unicorn Syndrome

A related phenomenon is what I call “magic unicorn syndrome” (Schlote, 2019a, Schlote, 2019b), also known as “unicorn-assisted therapy” (Lundgren, 2019). This refers to the objectification, commodification, and/or anthropomorphizing of equines as magical beings or co-therapists, and the implicit or unconscious expectations that may result. Historically, the idea of equines as co-therapists evolved as a counter-response to approaches and programs that used animals as tools without much regard for their own trauma histories, patterns, temperaments, and needs. Referring to equines as co-therapists or co-facilitators usually reflects an intention to acknowledge their sentience, individuality, and agency. However, referring to both the clients and the animals in AAI as participants avoids the pitfalls of anthropomorphizing and objectification that can occur when applying a human-based career label to another species. Additional reasons for not referring to animals as co-therapists or co-facilitators include:

- human professionals generally perform their role with an awareness of many layers of

information and expectations related to scope of practice, legislation, ethics, and/or standards, which animals are incapable of understanding and are not held to in the same way;

- human professionals have a duty of care to attend to the animals' needs in the experience, to ensure that their involvement does not negatively impact them (do no harm) and at best is beneficial to them (do good), just as they do the human client, whereas animals do not have this same duty of care;
- human professionals cannot simply walk away from a client mid-intervention, whereas an animal—if its sentience and agency are supported—could; and
- an animal cannot act as a therapist or facilitator independently without a human professional present (what makes the intervention “therapy” or “experiential learning” is the presence of a human professional operating within a specific scope), no matter how therapeutic or instructive unstructured time spent with animals may be.

The rationale for avoiding referring to horses as “healers” is similar. Some humans who call themselves healers may be engaging in a form of spiritual or communal narcissism, where they derive a sense of grandiosity at having special powers that are unique and needed by others, and reinforce the idea that they are more helpful, wise, evolved, and therefore better positioned to save or rescue others or the world (Ferrer and Vickery, 2018; Ingraham, 2019; Vonk and Visser, 2020; Beeden, 2021). This underlying belief system may be concealed under a veil of benevolence. These patterns risk fostering a sense of dependence on the healer and undermine the client's agency, inner locus of control, and self-determination in terms of their own healing. In addition, the concept of healer in Western society may at times reflect cultural appropriation by White people of methods that belong to various Indigenous groups or other cultural or spiritual communities, sometimes known as “plastic shamanism” (Mayo, 1991; Aldred, 2000). The Western phenomenon of spiritual narcissism also provides a foundation upon which egoic “guru culture” perpetuates harm through the distorted misuse of healing or shamanic practices (Kaufman, 2021).

When horses are painted in a similar brushstroke, there can be a similar risk of expectation by the professional and/or the client that the horse has magical powers that will heal the client. This

can result in its behaviour (even its stress responses) being misinterpreted as having healing intentions or messages for the human client, while simultaneously not addressing what may be generating said stress responses. There may also be secondary gains in calling a horse a healer: doing so may generate revenue by appealing to those for whom the idea of being healed or rescued by another being fills a need that went unmet by unresponsive, unreliable, or unsafe adults when they were little. This runs the risk of a re-enactment where the equine is pressured or coerced into providing a healing experience (to ensure that the client is satisfied, pays, and returns), and where the human client is set up for potential disappointment or harm if the animal does not offer such an experience. If the professional is also driven by a need to be liked or by a need to rescue so that the human client leaves feeling good, this can further contribute to these unconscious dynamics.

Certainly, many programs that refer to equines as co-therapists, co-facilitators, or healers are operating in ways that are ethical and show integrity and awareness related to these factors. That said, referring to animals as participants in AAIs does not diminish their significant contributions, many of which may defy explanation in terms of how astute, attuned, profound, beneficial, and therapeutic their involvement may be. It merely acknowledges that they are individuals first and foremost, which affords them more freedom to show up in whatever way is authentic to them in any given moment without the confines of particular expectations or obligations associated with human role labels.

Incongruent Congruence

Animals can provide opportunities for humans to experience safe touch, co-regulation, explore boundaries, and experience a sense of inner congruence, where their thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and actions align. However, an incongruent double standard exists when the same is not afforded to the animals involved. For instance, an AAI facilitator may be well intentioned in inviting a client to reach out and touch or pet an animal to explore sensory grounding, and may then describe the subsequent sense of calm in the client as evidence of co-regulation, further legitimizing the experience. However, if said facilitator also subtly blocks the animal from moving away from the client's touch, and the animal simply tolerates the experience from a place of appeasement or shutdown, co-regulation

would not be a congruent explanation for why the client feels calmer or a sense of enjoyment in that moment. This can also be the case if an animal is off-leash or “at liberty”: depending on its training or past experiences, an animal might not move away if it feels uncomfortable, and may simply check out mentally, freeze, or appease in place, giving the illusion of consent or willingness. Some facilitators may even explain that the animal has the ability to move away if it chooses, implying that the animal staying is always by choice, when this may not be the case. People who also responded similarly when uncomfortable or unsafe may feel shame or subtly blamed for what happened to them because they, too, did not choose to leave. Alternatively, a horse approaching or ‘joining up’ with a client in a round pen may be a sign of social engagement and connection, but it may also be an artifact of being isolated away from its herd, opting to engage because it would rather do so than be alone, something that the client may have had to resort to themselves at times. A client who also engages in these survival responses might not feel truly seen or heard if the person leading the AAI does not recognize these similar responses playing out in the animal. Finally, co-regulation requires that one nervous system is in a state that is conducive to inducing calm and connection in the other nervous system (Kain and Terrell, 2018). If a human client experiences calm, joy, or exuberance while engaging with or touching a shutdown or appeasing animal, this may be due to being away from their problematic circumstances, out in nature, experiencing novelty, the presence of the person leading the AAI, or other variables—as opposed to co-regulation.

AAIs have great potential in supporting trauma and social injustice-affected populations. Given that domesticated animals exist in human-controlled environments, it is essential that those offering AAIs dismantle systemic structures and beliefs while also addressing their own implicit biases and trauma patterns with compassion. Both human and animal bodies can have a history of experiencing harm in relationships, and their healing and liberation can be mutually experienced in relationship as well, provided that such a framework guides the process, even if the human is the identified client.

Bibliography

- Aldred, L. (2000) Plastic shamans and astrotruf sundances: new age commercialization of Native American spirituality. *American Indian Quarterly* 24(3), 329–352. DOI: 10.1353/aiq.2000.0001.
- Beeden, K. (2021) How to spot spiritual narcissists. *Medium*, September 29. Available at: <https://medium.com/@katiabeeden/fake-healers-are-real-b272ac3877c> (accessed 20 January 2023).
- Ferrer, J.N. and Vickery, W.Z. (2018) Transpersonal psychology and the spiritual but not religious movement: beyond spiritual narcissism in a postsecular age. In: Parsons, W.B. (ed.) *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*. Routledge, London, pp. 219–235. DOI: 10.4324/9781315107431.
- Ingraham, P. (2019) *Healer Syndrome*, November 16. Available at: <https://www.painscience.com/articles/healer-syndrome.php> (accessed 22 January 2023).
- Kain, K.L. and Terrell, S.J. (2018) *Nurturing Resilience: Helping Clients Move Forward from Developmental Trauma*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California.
- Karpman, S. (1968) Fairy tales and script drama analysis. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* 7(26), 39–43.
- Kaufman, S.B. (2021) The science of spiritual narcissism. *Scientific American*, January 11. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-science-of-spiritual-narcissism/> (accessed 30 January 2023).
- Levine, P.A. (1997) *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California.
- Levine, P.A. (2010) *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California.
- Lundgren, K. (2019) Unicorn assisted therapy. *MiMer Centre Blog*, July 19. Available at: <https://www.mimercentre.org/index.php/blog/unicorn-assisted-therapy> (accessed 20 January 2023).
- Mayo, L. (1991) Appropriation and the plastic shaman: Winnetou’s snake oil show from Wigwam City. *Canadian Theatre Review* 68, 54–55. DOI: 10.3138/ctr.68.017.
- Schlote, S.M. (2019a) Pseudoscience: a brief rant. *EQUUSOMA® Tiger Talk*, June 28. Available at: <https://equusoma.com/pseudoscience-a-brief-rant/> (accessed 8 January 2023).
- Schlote, S.M. (2019b) Security in connection and co-regulation: safeguarding the horse from traumatic re-enactments in EQUUSOMA. In: Parent, I. (ed.) *A Horse is a Horse, of Course: Compendium from the Third International Symposium for Equine Welfare and Wellness*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, Scotts Valley, California, pp. 215–238.
- Vonk, R. and Visser, A. (2020) An exploration of spiritual superiority: the paradox of self-enhancement. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51(1), 152–165. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2721.
- Young, S. (2012) We’re not here for your inspiration. *The Drum*, July 2. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-07-03/young-inspiration-porn/4107006> (accessed 20 January 2023).