

**Research Treatise**

**THERAPISTS' PERCEPTION OF THE HEALING VARIABLES OF ANIMAL  
ASSISTED INTERVENTION**

by

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## Declaration


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**Declaration:** I hereby declare that the above mentioned dissertation is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment to another university for another qualification.

**Signature:**  \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** 15/ 08/ 2018

## Acknowledgements

í Oh, forgive me, Lord, how human Iøve become,  
 busy clicking what I like, busy pushing my cuticles back and back to expose all  
 ten pale, useless moons.  
 Would you let me tell your creatures how sorry I am, let them know exactly what  
 weøve done?  
 Am I not an animal too? If soí , make me one again.  
 Give me back my dirty claws and blood-warm horns,  
 braid back those long-frayed endings of every nerve tingling with all I thought I  
 had to do today.  
 Fork my tongueí . There is a sorrow on the air I taste but I cannot name.  
 I want to open my mouth and know the exact flavor of whatø to come,  
 I want to open my mouth and sound a language that calls all language home.  
 (Nickole Brown)

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**Appendix 3**.....

## Abstract

The significance of the bond that is formed through animal companionship can be found in narratives throughout history. In fact, often a pet is viewed as an integral part of the family and valued as deeply as a member if not more. This has resulted in numerous studies regarding the incorporation of animals within the therapeutic environment and the unique positive impact of their presence on the client.

This study aimed to highlight the healing variables of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) as perceived by therapists that actively and purposefully incorporated animals into the therapeutic milieu. A qualitative research approach was utilised for the purpose of this study and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of five participants selected through a non-probability purposive and snowball sampling strategy. Participants included registered Psychologists and Counsellors that had incorporated an animal into the therapeutic environment on at least three separate occasions in order to facilitate the therapeutic process.

The participants revealed that the presence of the animal within the therapeutic environment acted as a social lubricant for therapy. This allowed for increased interaction between the therapist and the client, thereby facilitating the process of rapport building and the formation of a therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client. The presence of the animal was observed as influential in increasing clients' self-esteem. Likewise, the animal's presence acted as an instrument in teaching social skills, namely, empathy and responsibility. Clients were additionally observed as more present within the here and now, further enabling the therapist to gain more in-depth information regarding the client's relational interaction outside of the therapeutic setting. The therapy animal also provided the client with therapeutic touch and affection, a source of distraction, a form of a transitional object or object of projection, as well as

a buffer that enabled clients to access and express emotions more freely. This study adds to the body of knowledge available on AAI within the South African context.

*Keywords:* Animal Assisted Intervention, Animal Assisted Therapy, healing variables, therapeutic role of animals.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

#### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the background of the current research treatise. This chapter begins with a brief explanation of the researcher's personal motivation for pursuing the topic at hand; that is Therapists' Perceptions of the Healing Variables of Animal Assisted Intervention. Next, an overview of the research topic will be provided, followed by the aim of the study. Lastly, the outline of the treatise will be provided.

#### Research Motivation

He's just my dog.

He is my other eyes that can see above the clouds; my other ears that hear above the winds. He is the part of me that can reach out into the sea.

He has told me a thousand times over that I am his reason for being; by the way he rests against my leg; by the way he thumps his tail at my smallest smile; by the way he shows his hurt when I leave without taking him (I think it makes him sick with worry when he is not along to care for me).

When I am wrong, he is delighted to forgive. When I am angry, he clowns to make me smile. When I am happy, he is joy unbounded.

When I am a fool, he ignores it. When I succeed, he brags.

Without him, I am only another man. With him, I am all-powerful.

He is loyalty itself. He has taught me the meaning of devotion. With him, I know a secret comfort and a private peace. He has brought me understanding where before I was ignorant.

His head on my knee can heal my human hurts. His presence by my side is protection against my fears of dark and unknown things. He has promised to wait for me whenever wherever, in case I need him. And I expect I will, as I always have.

He is just my dog. (Gene Hill, as cited in Smith & Gene, 1996, p. 125)

It is an unspoken and fairly closely abided by rule that when writing a scientific research treatise, be it a qualitative or quantitative research study, that the researcher should avoid the use of first person pronouns when referring to one's own work, thoughts, or otherwise decisions made throughout the research study. However, considering that this section requires the researcher to provide a personal motivation behind the pursuit of the topic under study, I choose to forgo this unspoken rule and in the hope of remaining authentic to my choice for the topic under study, I will be referring solely to my own personal motivation, and will for this section, and this section only, make use of the first person pronoun.

Throughout human history, animals have been viewed as instrumental in enriching humans' lives (Serpell, 2000). These words have been repeatedly stated at the start of the majority of the literature available on the human animal bond, Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) and Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), and will be again, and purposefully so, in the chapters of this study.

Animals have been a part of human life going back hundreds of thousands of years, where animals would provide a sense of security to the lives of the simple cave man (Braje, 2011), to this day where we have arrived at a technological stage that not a day goes by without one seeing a motivational or heartwarming video of a man or woman reunited with a dearly beloved pet, an autistic child bonding with a pet and inevitably learning to bond with others similarly, or simply videos painting a picture of how many lives have been saved, both in the literal and

metaphorical sense, because of a pet. Growing up in a city filled with tall concrete buildings and people that are forever too busy to lift their eyes and take notice of their surroundings, my fascination with non-human living beings started early. In fact, I can remember clearly that for the longest period of time in my childhood I had wanted to grow up and become a veterinarian. I believe that this desire only changed when, as young as I were, I began to realise that animals were in fact easy to understand and to connect with. It was humans that were, more than anything else, a challenging puzzle. It was because of my fascination with human behaviour, thought processes and emotions that I gravitated towards the field of Psychology. But why not combine the two? After all there was not a day that went by that I did not witness firsthand the uplifting effects of having an animal present in our daily lives. How could anyone possibly ignore these loving and comforting creatures? In fact, it may have been my initial lack of comprehension for how a human could possibly cause harm to these magnificent creatures that fostered in me a fascination and desire to enter the field of Psychology in order to better understand the dynamics of human behaviour; how wounded and hurt must one's soul be to do unto these magnificent creatures what was done to them.

Having always been surrounded by animals, animals that taught me to love endlessly and wholeheartedly with no conditions attached, it is no surprise whatsoever that I did not find the idea of AAI within therapeutic settings farfetched at all. In fact, how could the professional community continue to view the concept of AAI within therapeutic practices with scepticism? After all, is it not only one of the most promising ways to heal a wounded soul? In reality however, AAI's are unfathomably under practiced and under utilised. The majority of professionals worldwide do not recognise it as a form of practice, and probably cannot be faulted for requiring empirical evidence. This remains the biggest challenge facing AAT and AAI

practitioners (Fine, 2011; McCulloch, 1984). Simultaneously, interested professionals willing to provide AAI for clients in need are often faced by and have to overcome critical and sceptical professional scrutiny. Furthermore, such pioneers of AAI are also faced by the challenges of a lack of professional resources and accessible and sound knowledge base from which to operate. It is unfortunate that we live in a world where our information with regards to AAI is limited, a world where our motivation for this method of practice is limited. In actuality we are living as a part of an ever changing mechanised society surrounded by towering concrete buildings pushing us to disregard contact with nature, so much so that bonding with animals has become a privilege (Vining, 2003; Wilson, 2011) rather than a given. We have become so accustomed to seeing animals in the cages of zoos, and so desensitised to this massive level of cruelty (Vining, 2003), that we have begun to almost literally cage ourselves away from their existence as we continue to complain about the sounds of the birds and the neighbourhood pets. How has this become our reality? How did we get to a place where materialistic possessions have become more valuable than forming authentic bonds and relationships? No wonder humanity is in a greater need for therapeutic intervention than ever before! And why not take this opportunity to remind humanity of the many ways in which non-human animals can enrich our lives? And why not begin with those that are more wounded than the average human animals? After all, they are the ones that may have been most affected by this level of disconnect between us and non-human animals.

### **General Overview of the Study**

Animals have come to play an important role in the life of humans. Over the past century, humans have began a new phenomenon; namely, to try and fill the void that exists due to a major disconnect from nature, by bringing animals into their homes and calling them pets (Vining, 2003). This change in the manner in which animals are viewed, slight as it may be, has resulted

in a rippling effect as far as research is concerned. For one, more and more researchers have begun to study the human animal bond, and others have taken to trying to prove the efficacy of AAT and AAI, if any, through empirical research, which unfortunately remains limited to this day.

This is not to say, however, that there is no research available with regards to the efficacy of AAI within therapeutic settings. There are numerous research findings available based on the anecdotal reports of professionals that report a variety of benefits associated with the practice of AAI within therapeutic settings. This considerable progress that has been made in the field of AAI is undoubtedly due to the efforts of one Boris Levinson, who claimed that he came upon these benefits accidentally (Coren, 2002). However, as he was able to repeat these results with similar patients, he proposed that the scientific community should begin to consider Child Centered Pet Therapy as a viable method of practice (Coren, 2002; Levinson & Mallon, 1997; Serpell, 2000). As a result of Levinson's efforts, the publications of Sigmund Freud's personal notes about his dog Jofi, as well as the valuable work of Erika Friedmann (Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011), the scientific community, be it medical practitioners or therapists, began numerous research studies aimed at identifying the benefits of AAI. This resulted in AAI not only being taken more seriously, but also resulted in an increase in the practice within various medical and therapeutic centers.

In fact, this sudden hype in interest has resulted in numerous publications regarding the historical use of animals for therapeutic healing; be it by encouraging the practice of pet keeping or by incorporating animals in mental asylums to help improve the well-being and quality of life of patients suffering from mental illness (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016). To this day, many emphasise the importance of animals in teaching children social skills such as



empathy (Serpell, 2010). Research in the field of AAI and AAT report similar findings; that the presence of an animal within the therapeutic setting can provide opportunities for clients and/ or patients, regardless of their age, to not only learn valuable social skills, but also that these skills are easily transferred to life outside of the therapeutic environment as information is better integrated in therapy due to the multisensory nature of AAI (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2006, 2010). In addition, animals have been found to bring a sense of safety and calm into the therapeutic environment hence increasing therapeutic interaction, which in turn results in enhanced therapeutic rapport (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2006, 2010). Furthermore, not only do animals help enhance clients' self-esteem, but the presence of an animal within the therapeutic milieu has also been found to increase clients' access to and expression of emotions within the therapeutic setting (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2006, 2010). This has been found to be relevant even during times when the client may be recalling particularly difficult or traumatic experiences or thoughts (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2006, 2010).

Although the above is a very brief discussion of the benefits of AAI for clients, it is evident, based on the literature available, that having an animal present within the therapeutic milieu can significantly, and positively, affect the therapeutic healing of the client by enhancing movement in therapy. Considering that AAI remains underutilised within therapeutic contexts, and especially within the South African context of (Lubbe & Scholtz, 2013), the researcher had a specific aim for pursuing this topic. The aim of the study is discussed in the next section.

### **Aim of the Study**

As previously discussed, there are numerous benefits that have been associated with the presence of an animal within the therapeutic environment. However, most of the literature available with this regard relies on studies conducted outside of the South African context, and it so happens

that the majority of professionals within South Africa remain unaware of AAI as a viable therapeutic practice, as well as its benefits for the client and the therapeutic process as a whole (Lubbe & Scholtz, 2013).

Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore and describe the healing variables of AAI as perceived by registered Psychologists or Counsellors that have purposefully incorporated an animal into the therapeutic milieu. This was done through semi-structured interviews conducted with participants that were selected based on specific criteria, regarding their perceptions and observations of the effects of the animal's presence on clients. The researcher further aimed to increase awareness of the healing variables of AAI and to add to the body of knowledge available with this regard.

The outline of this treatise is discussed in the following section.

### **Outline of the Treatise**

Chapter one of this treatise introduced the present study by providing a motivation for the study, a general overview of the study based on the literature available on the human animal bond, AAT and AAI, as well as through briefly discussing the aim of the study.

Chapter two introduces the human animal bond. In order to better describe the concept of the human animal bond and its benefits, the chapter first explores comparative psychology and the human animal disconnect. The benefits of the human animal bond are then explored across three domains, namely, the physiological benefits, the psychosocial benefits in childhood, and the psychosocial benefits in adulthood.

Chapter three examines AAI within therapeutic settings. This chapter first defines AAI, especially in relation to the current study, and later explores the historical use of AAI. This is then followed by a detailed exploration of the healing variables of AAI on the client. These

healing variables are presented in themes, namely, enhancing feelings of safety, facilitating rapport, enhancing self-esteem, as instruments in teaching social skills, and as catalysts for emotion. Lastly, the benefits of AAI for the therapy animal and human therapist are briefly discussed.

Chapter four describes the methodology utilised in the current research study. The research aim and objectives are discussed, and the sampling and data collection procedures are presented in detail. The chapter further explores the data analysis procedure utilised to analyse the data gathered. Lastly, the chapter pays close attention to the ethical considerations applied to the current study.

Chapter five focuses on the findings of the study. First, the research sample is described. Next, each emerging theme based on the findings of the study is discussed with the use of statements made by participants for reference, as well as with reference to the relevant literature where applicable.

Chapter six provides the conclusion to the study. This is done by providing a brief summary of research findings, as well as through providing and briefly discussing the limitations and the recommendations to be used as a reference for future studies in this research field.

### **Conclusion**

Research with regards to AAI and the benefits associated with this method of therapeutic practice has increased significantly in the past few decades. However, due to the lack of empirical evidence, AAIs remain highly underutilised; both worldwide and within the South African context. It is further evident that the majority of practicing Psychologists and Registered Counsellors are unaware of AAI as a form of practice, and that those who are have minimal resources available to them to bring such practices to fruition. Hence, the aim of this study is to

explore and describe the healing variables of AAI as perceived by registered psychologists and counsellors that have purposefully incorporated an animal into their therapeutic practice, as a means to add to the body of knowledge available and to raise awareness of the benefits of AAI.

The following chapter focuses on the human animal bond as this forms a foundation for understanding AAI and its beneficial impact on clients within the therapeutic environment.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HUMAN ANIMAL BOND AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

#### Introduction

Pets, paradoxical as it may seem, can help to rehumanize society because they meet many needs not fulfilled by the present social structures. Pets upgrade the quality of life, bring us closer to nature, provide companionship and emphasize the fact that animals must be accepted as desirable participants in society.

(Levinson, 1972, p. 5)

This chapter describes the foundation of the bond that we, as human animals, form with non-human animals, and the many ways in which animal companionship has uplifted our quality of life. The chapter initially discusses comparative psychology and our ancestral interaction with non-human animals. Later, there will be a brief discussion of the human disconnect from nature and its inhabitants and how this may have fueled pet-keeping practices and the need for connectedness. Finally, the chapter will move to discussing the human animal bond and the many ways in which companion animals can foster both physiological and psychosocial health and wellbeing.

#### **Comparative Psychology: The Need to Understand Animal Behaviour**

The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, etc., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well developed condition, in the lower animals. (Darwin, 1871, p. 101)

The study of animal behaviour is in no way a new phenomenon. This has become evident through archaeological research aimed at understanding the ancient human interaction with animals, and the environment as a whole, which ultimately resulted in the mass extinction of many animal species, and the development of our current modern ecosystems (Braje, 2011). Research in this regard was made possible by the fact that about 50000 years ago, the Anatomically Modern Human (AMH) began to express himself artistically, leaving behind tools, accessories and paintings that can now be analysed and studied for further insight into our ancestors and the ways in which they interacted with each other, nature, and of course, animal communities (Braje, 2011). Amongst the many forms of ancient history left behind, and most relevant to this study, are the cave paintings from as far back as 30000 years ago that illustrate many forms of animal species either in interaction with each other or otherwise being hunted by humans (Chauvet, Deschamps & Hillaire, 1996). Other forms of expression are necklaces made of animal teeth or bones. Other times it is purely a matter of finding animal bones and fossils in parts of the world where these animals did not originate (Braje, 2011). As a result of all these findings, archaeologists and paleoanthropologists have been successful in tracking the movement of the AMHs out of Africa; an achievement that illustrates the AMHs' capability to manipulate animal communities, transport species, and record their sophisticated and improved hunting techniques (Braje, 2011). These findings have provided the first definitive evidence that even early humans took to studying animal behaviour and were able to depict a clear understanding of ways to manipulate animal communities for self sustenance and survival (Braje, 2011). Today, we still continue to study animal behaviour, although it is safe to say that we have shifted, ever so slightly, away from doing so primarily for personal survival.

It has been almost a century since humans began to regard animals as more than just a means to an end, placed on earth to be exploited for personal gain and survival (Wilson, 2011). This shift in perspective, however incomplete, as we continue to restrict our generosity mostly to our pets, comes from the newly gained awareness of the mental processes of non-human animals, courtesy of comparative psychology (Wilson, 2011). Comparative psychology, rooted in Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, has brought about an awareness of the qualities that we, as human animals, share with non-human animals (Liebal & Haun, 2012; Wilson, 2011). In fact, Fredrick Engels (as cited in Tolman, 2011) is of the belief that the only essential difference between human animals and non-human animals lies, in short, in the manner with which we, as human animals, treat our environment; in that "the animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, *masters* it" (pp. 26)

This awareness has however not resulted in a drastic change in the way we continue to treat our environment, nor in the way that we continue to selfishly place our own need for survival before that of animals through their exploitation for economic gain or medical research (Wilson, 2011). It would simultaneously, however, be outright pessimistic to claim that we have not taken a step closer to viewing our animal counterparts as beings with independent interests and the ability to affect our quality of life (Wilson, 2011). And although comparative psychology has allowed us to take this small step towards learning to value the importance of the human animal bond, and the endless ways in which animals can enrich the human quality of life (Wilson, 2011), there has been a major disconnect between man and nature that may or may not have contributed to the furthering of our understanding of the human animal bond.

### The Human Animal Disconnect

There is sorrow enough in the natural way  
From men and women to fill our day;  
And when we are certain of sorrow in store,  
Why do we always arrange for more?  
*Brothers and Sisters, I bid you beware  
Of giving your heart to a dog to tear.*

Buy a pup and your money will buy  
Love unflinching that cannot lie -  
Perfect passion and worship fed  
By a kick in the ribs or a pat on the head.  
*Nevertheless it is hardly fair  
To risk your heart for a dog to tear.*

When the fourteen years which Nature permits  
Are closing in asthma, or tumour, or fits,  
And the vet's unspoken prescription runs  
To lethal chambers or loaded guns,  
*Then you will find - it's your own affair -  
But ... you've given your heart to a dog to tear.*



When the body that lived at your single will,  
 With its whimper of welcome, is stilled (how still!).

When the spirit that answered your every mood  
 Is gone - wherever it goes - for good,  
*You will discover how much you care,*  
*And will give your heart to a dog to tear.*

We've sorrow enough in the natural way,  
 When it comes to burying Christian clay.  
 Our loves are not given, but only lent,  
 At compound interest of cent per cent.  
 Though it is not always the case, I believe,  
 That the longer we've kept 'em, the more do we grieve:  
 For, when debts are payable, right or wrong,  
 A short-time loan is as bad as a long -  
*So why in - Heaven (before we are there)*  
*Should we give our hearts to a dog to tear?* (Rudyard Kipling, 2001, pp. 28- 29)

Throughout human history, animals have continuously been viewed as taking a central role in theories regarding ontology and health, and as fundamentally involved in enriching people's quality of life (Serpell, 2000). However, there has been a major disconnect between humans and non-human animals beginning from the era of the industrial revolution (Vining, 2003). Our relationship with animals has since been one of contradiction. The rise of machines and technology brought about a new development, one which allowed us to no longer be as

dependent on nature and animals for survival (Vining, 2003). Simultaneously, not only do our modern eco-systems allow us to physically separate from nature, but also to emotionally disconnect from the consequences of our modern practices on our environment and the non-human animals that inhabit it (Vining, 2003). Another influential era on this modern disconnect was the rise of early Christianity which brought about a new obsession with the notion that humans are superior to all other species, privileged in status, and placed on earth to rule over these subordinate and inferior species (Serpell, 1986).

How is it then, we may ask, that we continue to bring animals into our homes and shower them with affection and call them our pets? There are numerous theories dedicated to explaining why modern man has taken to pet-keeping and the forming of close relationships with the select few species that they consider as their pets. It is in this space where we face the contradictory consequences of our major disconnect with non-human animals and to nature as a whole (Vining, 2003). Keith Thomas (as cited in Vining, 2003), for example, argues that the combination of urbanisation and industrialisation brought about a change in our proximity to animals and nature, and the resulting psychological split brought to surface our inherent and intrinsic value for our animal counterparts. As a result, we have seen an increase in pet-keeping and animal welfare movements (Vining, 2003).

Paul Shepard (as cited in Vining, 2003), on the other hand, argues that early man had a greater understanding of the differences between us and other species. The acknowledgement of our inherent differences, according to Shepard (as cited in Vining, 2003), allowed early humans to create a clear boundary between themselves and animals, which in turn enabled them to love animals as sacred beings that deserved greater respect. Shepard believes that the modern man crossed this vital boundary by taking in pets, loving them, and yet completely excluding their

truly wild nature. According to Shepard (as cited in Vining, 2003), this is a reflection of our complete lack of understanding of who animals are, and inevitably who we are, and this lack of understanding is the ironic consequence of how our efforts to connect with the animal species has distanced us even further away from them than when we purposefully kept our distance.

However, the most popular theory as to why modern man has taken to pet-keeping surrounds the notion that we do so to minimise our feelings of moral discomfort and cognitive dissonance, or to put simply, our feelings of guilt (Vining, 2003). Erikson (2000), for example, explains that pet keeping allows us to resolve the feelings of guilt that arise from hunting and consuming wild animals. Other related theorists, such as William Cronon (as cited in Vining, 2003) argue that our alienation from our food sources may be the only functional way to deal with the nature of our relationship with animals (Vining, 2003). Generally, the theory expands that this separation, and our disconnect from nature, has actually created positive emotions towards all animal species, in that our lack of awareness of what would be perceived as negative animal behaviours by someone that may experience such behaviours first hand, has nurtured in us a love for all animal species and all animal behaviours (Vining, 2003).

Nonetheless, we are at a stage where we view nature and animals as a sentimental luxury, and our efforts to form intimate bonds with our pets and other animals may be paving the pathway to much needed feelings of unity and connectedness that can enable psychological healing (Vining, 2003). Be it our feelings of guilt, our inherent need to reconnect with nature, or even as Shepard (Vining, 2003) believes, our lack of understanding of non-human animals and inevitably ourselves, these theories only begin to explain what may have played the role of a catalyst in man's formation of attachment based relationships with non-human animals. The preservation of these relationships however, and the continuing growth and interest in forming

human animal bonds, is based on much more; that is, the many qualities inherent in animals that can enrich our quality of life.

### **The Human Animal Bond**

How much more pleasant are the simple, straightforward, intense emotions of a dog, wagging his tail or barking his displeasure! The emotions of the dog, remind one of the heroes of antiquity. Perhaps that is the reason why we unconsciously bestow upon our canines the names of ancient heroes such as Achilles and Hector.

Sigmund Freud (as cited in Viereck, 1957, p. 5)

In recent years, there has been a vast increase in the formation of social bonds between people and their companion animals (Fine, 2010; Serpell, 2015) and therefore, the practice of pet-keeping (Erikson, 2000). The level of fondness that is created through bonding with a pet is one that cannot easily be described in words (Wilkes, 2009), although some have tried describing it as simply extraordinary and unlike other conventional relationships (Fine & Beck, 2010). This is because many mammals, much like humans, have an internal social system that thrives through forming relationships (Chandler, 2012).

Pets relate to their owners through constant portrayal of unconditional positive regard and loyalty. As a result, many different types of relationships are formed between humans and their pets; some provide entertainment as playmates, while others provide nurturance and support, much like friends and family members (Chandler, 2012; Myers & Saunders, 2002). In fact, more often than not, such nurturance and support is much more than what many receive from their actual friends and family members (Walsh, 2009). It is for this reason that the majority of pet owners accept, value, and cherish their companion animals as they would any other valued member of the family (Fine & Beck, 2010). It should therefore come as no surprise that the

recent increase in the level of social attachment formed between people and their companion animals (Fine, 2010; Serpell, 2015) has resulted in a parallel boost in theoretical interest and research surrounding the significance of the human animal bond (Blazina, Boyraz & Shen-Miller, 2011; Serpell, 2015).

The term human animal bond is broadly used to refer to the social interaction that exists between humans and their non-human animal companions, and the types of social attachment that develop through the formation of these relationships (Serpell, 2015). In the previous section of this chapter, a few theories were briefly discussed regarding why individuals have taken to pet-keeping. Theories explaining the human animal bond, although closely related, take a closer look at why we form the significant bonds that we do with our companion animals.

Attachment theory, for example, explains that attachment formation stems from our need to protect as well as be protected (Fine & Beck, 2010). As a result we seek to attain and maintain proximity with others, not excluding non-human animals, and in so doing a bond is formed. This theory maintains that animals are viewed as both dependable and dependant and that it is for this reason that we achieve a sense of safety by forming a close bond with our companion animals (Fine & Beck, 2010).

Other theorists maintain that our relationships with our pets often mirror our relationships with other humans, especially parent-child relationships, whereby our pet relies on us for the same reasons as a child would; to provide continual care and protection, as well as to be their voices as they have none (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Fine & Beck, 2010). Not only do we take over the role of a nurturer in relation to our pets, but we also often find ourselves relating to them in exactly the same ways as we would to our children, for example, through baby talk or childlike play (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Fine & Beck, 2010).

Yet other theorists posit that we form an attachment with our companion animals because we are able to relate and communicate more freely with them (Fine & Beck, 2010; Pachana, Massavelli & Robleda-Gomez, 2011), be it through verbal or nonverbal interaction, as they remain non-judgmental towards our material possessions, status, social skills, or our physical or psychological wellbeing (Barker & Dawson, 1998; Chandler, 2005; Fine & Beck, 2010; Kruger, Trachtenberg & Serpell, 2006; Serpell, 2010). Not only do they allow us to project our own inner thoughts and needs upon them, they also provide a buffer in times of stress, and can play the role of catalyst in stimulating socialisation with others (Chandler, 2005; Fine & Beck, 2010). These are qualities that promote the formation of a meaningful attachment to a companion animal, so that we may reap the many rewards that stem from such companionship.

### **Benefits of the Human Animal Bond**

As previously mentioned, there has been a vast increase in research studies in recent years dedicated to understanding the benefits of the human animal bond; be it their impact on one's physiological health, psychological well-being, ability to form social relationships or recovery from serious illnesses or conditions (Pachana et al., 2011; Walsh, 2009).

These numerous benefits deserve their very own doctoral dissertation to say the least, however, for the purpose of this humble treatise, and in an effort to provide some background into the rise of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) in therapeutic settings, it is only fair to briefly, and in summary, discuss the many ways in which companion animals can enrich one's quality of life.

#### **The physiological benefits of the human animal bond.**

In the late 1970s, Erika Friedmann conducted research aimed at evaluating the effects of social and lifestyle factors on the survival of 92 recent victims of heart attacks (Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011). Her tentative hypothesis regarding the benefits of pet ownership led Friedmann to include

questions regarding pet ownership, as a lifestyle factor, in her baseline and follow up interviews with her research participants. Surprisingly, Friedmann's findings led to the discovery that pet owners, in comparison to those who did not own pets, were more likely to survive for one year after their heart attack (Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011).

Friedmann's findings were significant in fostering the surge of research that followed, most of which concentrated on the short term physiological benefits of the human animal bond, the majority of which discovered a positive correlation between pet ownership and different aspects of physiological health. Researchers found that physical interaction with a pet led to an immediate decrease in patients' level of autonomic arousal (Beck, 1999; Pachana et al., 2011; Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011). Others found that the process of bonding with a pet resulted in an increase in circulating oxytocin levels, and that the process of bonding with a pet lowers the risk for developing cardiovascular disease (Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011). There has also been vast scientific evidence that interaction with a pet lowers one's blood pressure both during and after contact, and that those with companion animals have lower cholesterol levels, as well as higher levels of resilience in stressful situations, which in turn results in much fewer health problems and hospital visits (Pachana et al., 2011; Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011).

In addition to the above, studies have found that the level of attachment to one's pet directly correlates with the health benefits of the human animal bond; that the stronger the attachment to one's pet, the greater the health benefits (Serpell, 2015). In addition, it should also be acknowledged that pet ownership stimulates physical activity (Beck, 1999). For example, dog owners with significant attachment to their companion animals are more likely to walk their dogs, which will in turn reduce body weight and reduce the risk of developing diabetes, hypertension, depression, and hypercholesterolemia (Beck, 1999; Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011).

Overall, the physiological benefits of bonding with a non-human animal are endless and not in any way limited to pet owners. It is for this reason that there has been an increase in Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) and AAIs in different settings and contexts such as hospitals or homes for the elderly (Friedmann, Son & Tsai, 2010). However, the increase in such practices, AAAs and AAIs, is not solely based on the physiological benefits of the human animal bond, but also due to the numerous psychosocial benefits of bonding with a non-human animal.

### **The psychosocial benefits of the human animal bond in childhood.**

As previously discussed, human beings, as the occupants of modern society, have taken a step closer to eliminating the major disconnect that exists between us and nature, and all the non-human animals that inhabit it. The researcher discussed earlier how some theorists believe that urbanisation, and hence the lack of proximity to nature, may have resulted in individuals distancing themselves from what would generally be perceived as the negative behaviours of animals, and their threat to human existence, hence allowing individuals to relate to non-human animals more positively (Vining, 2003). This shift in perspective, and the consequent new standpoint on the exploitation of animals for personal gain, has allowed individuals to take a more active role in forming positive relationships with non-human animal species, and to therefore form human animal bonds that have allowed individuals to develop greater mental health (Beck & Katcher, 1996).

Animals, with their ability to remain non-judgemental, have changed not only the way in which individuals relate to other humans and non-human animals, but in many ways they have also influenced how one views oneself and one's own identity (Beck & Katcher, 1996). In fact, the presence of animals in our lives has had such a visible influence that in as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the great philosophical minds began to advocate the practice of pet-keeping (Serpell,



2010). John Locke was one of the great minds behind the advocacy for the practice of pet-keeping, especially due to their positive influence on the socialisation of children (Serpell, 2010).

In 1699, John Locke expressed that allowing pets into homes would encourage children to learn a sense of responsibility and enable them to develop feelings of affection (Serpell, 2010). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the notion of pet-keeping as beneficial to the socialisation of children became quite popular, and other great minds of the time expressed that a child would learn to reflect on and control one's own, as described by Serpell (2010, p. 25), "innately beastlike" characteristics through learning to control real animals. This also influenced the rise in expressions of concern regarding animal welfare in children's literature, aiming to teach children, from a young age, to treat animals with kindness and affection, and to eliminate violent behaviour, especially in male children (Serpell, 2010).

In today's modern society with the unlimited research available on the many benefits of companion animals in the socialisation of children, research has found that bonding with a companion animal provides the child with much more than a sense of responsibility and feelings of affection and compassion (Pachana et al., 2011; Serpell, 2015). Not only do children experience bonding with a companion animal as most satisfying, but research has also found that the formation of such attachment has a positive effect on the child's cognitive abilities, emotional IQ, as well as language and expressive abilities (Pachana et al., 2011). The animal's ability to express itself freely and in a straightforward manner, teaches the child to be empathic (Pachana et al., 2011). In addition, being able to care for an animal, taking responsibility for the well-being of the animal, and receiving unconditional positive regard from the animal, enables the child to learn to form connections and relate to others more positively (Pachana et al., 2011). In fact, it has been found that children with pets have higher self esteem and socialisation skills,

and are therefore more likely to interact positively with others and participate in social and athletic activities (Pachana et al., 2011).

Furthermore, research findings show that children often view their companion animals as closer companions than other members of their family. In one research study, Bryant (as cited in Pachana et al., 2011) found that children with increased socioemotional functioning often viewed their pets as special friends with whom they would share intimate talks and secrets (Pachana et al., 2011; Walsh, 2009). In addition, the child's ability to communicate freely with their companion animal, and to receive unconditional positive regard regardless of the content or manner in which the interaction was shared, increases the child's confidence in expressive language and verbal/ non-verbal interaction, allowing them to explore communication freely and without reservation (Pachana et al., 2011).

The above qualities of the companion animal allows children to form secure attachments with their pets, which enhances their feelings of safety, and their ability to not only form meaningful relationships with others, but also to gain a secure sense of their own identity (Vining, 2003) through the freedom of self exploration (Blazina, 2011). Furthermore, this secure attachment provides the child with a safe haven away from major life stressors (Blazina, 2011). For example, according to Chandler (2005), children from homes that experience parental conflict are more likely to run to their pets during the outburst of arguments between their parents. During such stressful situations, the companion animal plays the role of a buffer and provides the child with a distraction from the source of the stress (Chandler, 2005; Siegel, 2011). This has also been evident in children that experience trauma or neglect within their household (Blazina et al., 2011). This buffering effect has also been found extremely beneficial to children

as they transition into adulthood, and prepares them with various coping strategies later in life (Pachana et al., 2011).

The benefits of forming a human animal bond in childhood are not limited to, for lack of a better term, conventional contexts. In the modern era of technology it is most unlikely to browse social media without stumbling upon articles, videos or short stories portraying the miraculous role of companion animals in the lives of children with autism, learning disabilities, speech related disorders, intellectual disabilities, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or physical disabilities. In fact the literature available on the benefits of companion animals in the lives of children affected by one of the above is unlimited. Children with autism, for example, have been found to be more expressive with their companion animals due to the non-threatening nature of the animal (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Grandin, Fine & Bowers, 2010). In such instances, these children find it easier to connect with the animal, and interact with the animal through touch, which is usually a difficult activity for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (Grandin et al., 2010). Children with ADHD are found to be much calmer and more attentive when in the presence of an animal, be it their own pet or an animal introduced to them by someone else (Fine, 2010; Pachana et al., 2011). In addition, the non-judgemental nature of companion animals, as previously mentioned, encourages both verbal and non-verbal interaction in children, and allows them to explore their language and speech abilities, which has been found to be highly beneficial to children with language related disorders and children with intellectual disabilities (Pachana et al., 2011). Furthermore, companion animals provide children with stimulation and active social learning skills that enhances their general learning abilities and the animals' portrayal of unconditional positive regard, loyalty, and love towards children, regardless of their physical or mental health, fosters improved self esteem and confidence that

will allow children to learn to love and accept themselves (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Pachana et al., 2011).

Human animal bonds formed in childhood continue to benefit the child as they develop into adults, and even in old age, most of what has been gained through bonding with a companion animal during childhood continues to positively influence one's quality of life (Pachana et al., 2011).

### **The psychosocial benefits of the human animal bond in adulthood and old age.**

A pet can provide a boundless measure of love, adoration, and unqualified approval. Many elderly and lonely people have discovered that pets satisfy their needs and enable them to hold on to the world of reality, of care, of human toil and sacrifice, and of intense emotional relationship. Their self-concept as worthwhile individuals is restored and even enhanced when they find that the pet they have been caring for loves them in return. (Levinson, 1972, p. 111)

Human animal bonds formed in childhood continue to benefit the child as they develop into adults, and even in old age, most of what has been gained through bonding with a companion animal during childhood continues to positively influence one's quality of life (Pachana et al., 2011). Experiencing the human animal bond in childhood fosters the ability to feel compassion and empathy, and these skills become a part of one's essence and are qualities that are not easily lost even as the individual faces the hardships of an ever changing life (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Children that have experienced the human animal bond often continue to seek the level of connectedness that having companion animals can foster, hence, more often than not, these children continue to practice pet-keeping as they grow into adults (Altschiller, 2011). Many have expressed this continuation to be as result of the fact that the human animal bond allows the

individual to experience what Freud and his daughter described as "pure love" (as cited in Blazina et al., 2011, p. 4). Others, such as Beck and Katcher (1996), refer to it as pet consistency.

Pet consistency refers to the never changing, and all accepting nature of the companion animal towards its human companion (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Regardless of what hardships we may face in our lives, be it losing a job or one's belongings, or be it the disabilities that come with old age, or illnesses that may affect us in our lifetime, pets continue to relate to us as they did when an attachment was first formed (Beck & Katcher, 1996). This is due to their lack of interest in all but our existence in their lives (Barker & Dawson, 1996; Beck & Katcher, 1996; Fine & Beck, 2010). It is for this reason that many describe coming home to their pets as the most satisfying daily experience (Beck & Katcher, 1996). At the end of each day we return home, and our companion animals greet us at the door, with no demands or expectations, only with joy at our return, reminding us that all is well and safe, and that our home remains just as we left it (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Pet consistency has also been described by Beck and Katcher (1996) as the pet's way of reminding us that regardless of what may have happened in our hours away, our essence remains the same. In fact, if we were to pay attention and observe, we would see the evidence of their unconditional acceptance and consistency in our everyday lives as we pass homeless people on the streets that have nothing left to offer but themselves, and yet their dogs continue to follow their footsteps, all the while wagging their tails, or their cats curl up on their laps as they rest against a tree by the pavement (Beck & Katcher, 1996). These people may have faced the harsher realities of an ever changing world, but in so many ways they may have more than most; the unconditional love and loyalty of an animal that fosters in them self worth, and brings meaning to their lives (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Serpell 2010).

The experience of companion animals bringing meaning to one's life is one that is experienced by many. A study in Sweden, for example, found that 15% of their elderly participants described their companion animals as their most significant social contact that brought meaning back to their lives (Beck & Katcher, 1996). In the lives of adults and the elderly, companion animals eliminate feelings of loneliness, and bring back a sense of meaning by fostering a sense of being needed by another (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Serpell, 2000). This alone decreases the risk for depression and increases one's self worth, and hence quality of life.

The human animal bond is so meaningful and significant in the lives of many that more and more individuals are choosing animal companionship as a substitute for other relationships (Blazina et al., 2011; Wells, 2009). Such individuals may in fact turn to pets to satisfy a range of roles, including that of parenthood, which may not only be psychologically comforting, but also essential (Blazina et al., 2011). Some adults that may have experienced abuse or emotional deprivation in childhood, or trauma or loss in adulthood, tend to find pets as most reliable and consistent, and therefore much easier to turn to (Blazina et al., 2011; Brown, 2011). Some individuals with none or limited social support tend to find a source of emotional sustenance in their companion animals. In such instances, the human animal bond fosters feelings of connectedness and belonging (Blazina et al., 2011). Simultaneously, companion animals foster self cohesion and self esteem, and hence socialisation, interaction and the formation of meaningful relationships with others, even in cases where the formation of such relationships may have otherwise been difficult, if not completely unlikely (Blazina et al., 2011).

The psychosocial benefits of animal companionship in adulthood and old age are numerous, and it is for this reason that we continue to bring animals into our lives and that we have taken an ever so slight step away from their exploitation. The human animal bond has awoken in us a

sense of connectedness and the realisation that animals have the capability to heal the very essence of the human being by providing an unconditional source of love and acceptance that is consistent, and in many ways more extraordinary than the more conventional relationships in an individual's life (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Blazina et al., 2011; Fine & Beck, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter numerous aspects of the human animal bond have been discussed. It is clear that man has been in interaction with non-human animal communities dating back hundreds of thousands of years. Many evolutionary theorists believe that human beings' survival would have been impossible if not for the ability to interact with non-human animals and exploit them for their own survival. Regardless of this, the survival of the human being proves yet another notion; that is, we have been studying nature and the non-human animals that inhabit it for as far back as man has existed. Our ability to observe and learn from the behaviours of non-human animals has enabled us to create a modern ecosystem that has in many ways resulted in a disconnect between us and nature. However, our inherent need for unity with nature and the animal species that inhabit it has brought about the modern practice of pet-keeping and a new appreciation for all animal species. In fact, the re-emergence of comparative psychology has led to a newly found interest in the many qualities that we share with non-human animals, as well as the many ways in which animal companionship and the human animal bond can enrich our existence and improve our quality of life.

Simultaneously, this has resulted in an increase in studies aiming to pinpoint and understand the benefits of the human animal bond. Many of these studies have found that companion animals can positively affect many aspects of our physiological health; including, but not limited to, lowering blood pressure levels, autonomic arousal levels, as well as the risk for

cardiovascular disease. Other studies have concentrated more on the social and psychological benefits of the human animal bond. The human animal bond has been found to be beneficial in the socialisation of children by fostering in them compassion and empathy, providing them with a sense of responsibility and a secure attachment figure, improving their self esteem and self worth, as well as teaching them socialisation skills that enable them to form meaningful relationships with others.

These benefits continue far into adulthood and old age, so much so that many adults find their relationships with their companion animals as more significant than their other more conventional relationships. In addition, many describe the human animal bond and the consistency of their pet's unconditional love as having provided them with a newly gained sense of meaning that not only eliminates feelings of loneliness, but also the risk for depression.

The newly gained awareness of the positive impacts of the human animal bond has resulted in increased levels of interest in the practice of AAI as a means to improve mental and physiological health in patients in a variety of settings. It is for this reason that AAI and Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) are gaining in popularity and becoming more accessible. The next chapter will focus on AAI within therapeutic settings, the history of such practices, as well as the beneficial effects of having an animal present within the therapeutic milieu.



## CHAPTER 3

### ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTION

#### Introduction

“Animals are such agreeable friends – they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.” George Elliot (as cited in Chandler, 2005, p. 58)

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI). It will begin by providing the definition of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), as well as AAI, especially regarding its relevance to this research study. An overview of the historical use of AAI and the influential theorists that have, through their contributions, helped bring the practice of AAI to the forefront will be discussed. Finally, a detailed review of the healing variables of AAI as evident from the available literature, including theoretical explanations where applicable will conclude the chapter.

#### Animal Assisted Intervention

The human animal bond has gained much popularity in the past century and has resulted in numerous professionals within various fields looking into ways to incorporate animals into their practice in order to increase quality of life and physical and psychosocial health (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Considering the fact that this notion is relatively new, and that the interest is not limited to the field of psychology, the terms used to convey the concept of animal facilitated interventions has resulted in a major linguistic confusion (Kruger & Serpell, 2010); for example, the current confusion in what passes as Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), and what does not. Unfortunately the term AAT has been continuously used to refer to practices that do not in any way refer to therapy, and are at times completely recreational (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Hence, defining the relevant terminology is of great importance, and will provide some clarity on the use of the term Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) within the context of this study.

In an effort to eliminate the confusion surrounding AAT, the Delta Society (as cited in Chandler, 2012; Kruger & Serpell, 2006; Kruger & Serpell, 2010) defined AAT as a goal directed intervention in which a suitable animal, that meets the necessary and appropriate criteria, is an integral part of the treatment process. For this treatment process to be adequately administered, the service must be within the scope of practice of the health professional delivering the service, and the professional must have specialised expertise within the field of AAT (Chandler, 2012; Kruger & Serpell, 2006; Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Hence, the term AAT should not be used in events where the presence of an animal merely brings enjoyment to a patient or client (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Rather, the process must be aimed at the treatment of the patient or client (Kruger & Serpell, 2010).

The term AAI, on the other hand, has been defined by Chandler (2012) and Kruger and Serpell (2010) as any therapeutic intervention that deliberately includes animals in the therapeutic milieu. For this reason, it can be said that AAT is a form of AAI, however not all AAI's are AAT. That is to say, AAT requires professionals to be specifically trained in the field of AAT, and the therapy animal plays a specific role within the therapy sessions (Chandler, 2012). In AAI the professional need not be an expert in the field of AAT and yet incorporates an animal into the therapeutic environment with the purpose of aiding the therapeutic process (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). The decision to incorporate an animal into the therapeutic milieu is informed by the professional's awareness of the positive impacts of the human animal bond and their understanding that animals possess inherent qualities that facilitate therapy, and that their mere presence can provide opportunities and confer benefits that would be impossible, or much harder to attain in their absence (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Hence, this study is not limited to

registered psychologists that practice AAT, but rather registered psychologists and counsellors that practice AAI, and what they perceive to be the healing variables of AAI.

In an effort to pave the pathway to the literature available on the healing variables of AAI, the next section will explore the historical use of AAI and the influential theorists that brought the practice of AAI to the forefront and are now considered the fathers of AAI and AAT.

### **Historical Use of Animal Assisted Intervention**

“If there are no dogs in Heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went.”

Will Rogers (as cited in Chandler, 2005, p. 140)

In order to better understand the therapeutic contributions and value of the human animal interaction, it is important to highlight the major events in history that helped contribute to the rise in the interest and practice of AAI. Some of the most significant occurrences in history that have contributed to our understanding of AAT and AAI will be discussed below as a means to create a foundation for the discussion of the healing variables of AAI.

### **Animal Assisted Intervention between the 9<sup>th</sup> Century and 1919**

You speak in your letter of the loneliness of the insane. This is the outward feature of what within is a serious withdrawal of interests from the world of reality and a turning within to the unreal world of psychosis. At all times, the patient has sane and normal people about him who represent possible social contacts, but he lacks the initiation to respond, and the problem is, how to help him out of the unreal world of his psychosis and back to reality. No one can foretell what may be the experience which may finally attract the patient's interest, wake him, so to speak, from his morbid phantasies and be the beginning of the re-socialization of his instincts. In this general scheme, animals, and

particularly dogs, because of their peculiarly friendly relations with humans, may well be fitted to serve useful ends. Dr. William Alanson White (as cited in Chandler, 2017, p. 21-22)

It was in Belgium during the ninth century that animals were first used therapeutically with people, in this case with the handicapped population (Matuszek, 2010). During this time, the handicapped population were assigned the task of caring for different farm animals as a means to increase their sense of purpose and responsibility, and ultimately to improve their quality of life by providing them with a sense of meaning (Matuszek, 2010).

Later in 1792, in England, this same development was implemented in York Retreat whereby animals were used as a means for improving human wellbeing (Chandler, 2012). The York Retreat was founded by a Quaker named William Tuke in 1792 (Chandler, 2012; Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016) whose interests were piqued by the events of 1791. During this time, one of the female members of the Society of Friends was placed in the then York Asylum (Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016). Once admitted, the patient was refused visitation from her friends, and was soon after reported dead (Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016). The circumstances surrounding her treatment, as well as her death so soon after her placement in York Asylum, caused significant suspicion, which resulted in Tuke questioning the management of the mental asylums and lunatic hospitals of the time (Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016). Tuke became aware of the severe neglect of patients placed in mental asylums, and was inspired to put an end to the appalling level of maltreatment faced by patients (Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016; Matuszek, 2010). In the spring of 1792, Tuke propositioned the Society of Friends to have an institution under its own control that would treat the suffering patients with a more humane approach. Although his proposition was

met with resistance and negative critique, he eventually managed to convince the society to start York Retreat (Chandler, 2012; Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016).

In this new environment the patients were treated kindly, were allowed to dress in their own clothing, to read and write, and to engage in handicraft projects (Matuszek, 2010). In addition to the above, the patients at York Retreat were allowed to wander freely in the courtyards, where they were provided with the opportunity to interact with a number of small domestic animals such as rabbits, seagulls and poultry (Coren, 2002; Kibria & Metcalfe, 2016; Matuszek, 2010). Allowing these patients to interact with other beings fostered socialisation in patients (Matuszek, 2010) and encouraged healing by providing them with a sense of responsibility and a need for self control (Chandler, 2012).

There are two other instances that have been highlighted in history as having followed in the footsteps of York Retreat. These include the Bethel center in Bielefeld, Germany, and Saint Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, D.C. (Chandler, 2017). The Bethel center in Bielefeld was founded in 1867 as a home for patients with epilepsy, although it later grew to accommodate and foster healing in over 5000 patients from disadvantaged backgrounds (Chandler, 2017). This center utilised pets, such as dogs, cats, birds, horses and farm animals to assist in the healing process of their patients (Chandler, 2017). Later in 1919 the Saint Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, which specialised in working with veterans suffering from mental illness, brought in dogs to help socialise their patients (Chandler, 2017).

Although there have been notable instances in history where animals were used to foster healing in patients suffering from different forms of mental illness through providing opportunities for socialisation (Chandler, 2017; Coren, 2002; Matuszek, 2010), it was Sigmund

Freud who is believed to have started the use of animals in formal psychotherapy (Chandler, 2017).

### **Sigmund Freud and his Chow Chow, Jofi**

“Dogs love their friends and bite their enemies, quite unlike people, who are incapable of pure love and always have to mix love and hate in their object relations.” Sigmund Freud (as cited in Masson, 2012, p. 21)

According to Fine (as cited in Serpell, 2010), Sigmund Freud is viewed as the first therapist to have ever incorporated the assistance of dogs in psychotherapy by bringing his pet dogs to sit in during the therapy sessions.

Freud's fondness for dogs, especially during the last two decades of his life, is quite widely acknowledged (Coren, 2002). Freud expressed on numerous occasions that dogs are capable of what he referred to as non-ambivalent or pure love (Genosko, 1998). Freud stated that non-ambivalent love is the ability to love without hate, something that in his view humans lack as is evident in their tendency to split (Genosko, 1998). In fact, Freud was so taken by his dogs, their manner of self expression, and their ability to portray pure love (Blazina, Boyraz & Shen-Miller, 2011) that his dogs were often the topic of his letters to his friend, French author and psychoanalyst, Princess Marie Bonaparte (Genosko, 1998). In their letters Freud and Bonaparte not only reflected on their relationships with their dogs, but also discussed the wellbeing of their dogs and their amusing behaviours (Genosko, 1993). Indeed, in their correspondence, Freud and Princess Bonaparte would at times refer to their dogs' behaviours as analogies to discuss and demonstrate psychoanalytic concepts (Genosko, 1993).

Although Freud is known to have had numerous special attachments to his pet dogs, including his daughter Anna's alsatian, Wolf, his favorite dog companion is known to have been

his Chow Chow Jofi (Coren, 2002). In fact, Jofi is said to have never left Freud's side, in all her 7 years of life, and was inevitably present for every psychoanalytic session, often perched at the foot of the couch in his office (Chandler, 2017; Coren, 2002). Jofi's presence by Freud's side during psychotherapy sessions has been well documented by Freud's patients and colleagues (Genosko, 1993). One of these patients was American poet Hilda Doolittle who was so taken by Jofi that she later described, in poetic detail, her first encounter of this golden-haired Chow Chow in her book:

A little lion-like creature came padding toward me ó a lioness, as it happened. She had emerged from the inner sanctum or manifested from under or behind the couch; anyhow, she continued her course across the carpet. Embarrassed, shy, overwhelmed, I bend down to greet this creature. But the professor says, "Do not touch her ó she snaps ó she is very difficult with strangers." *Strangers?* Is the Soul crossing the threshold, a stranger to the Door-Keeper? It appears so. But, though no accredited dog-lover, I like dogs and they oddly and sometimes unexpectedly "take" to me. If this is an exception I am ready to take the risk. Unintimidated but distressed by the Professor's somewhat forbidding manner, I not only continue my gesture toward the little chow, but crouch on the floor so that she can snap better if she wants to. Yofi ó her name is Yofi ó snuggles her nose into my hand and nuzzles her head, in delicate sympathy, against my shoulder. í My intuition challenges the Professor, though not in words. That intuition cannot really be translated into words, but if it could be it would go, roughly, something like this: "í . You are a very great man. I am overwhelmed with embarrassment, I am shy and frightened and gauche as an over-grown

school-girl. But listen. You are a man. Yofi is a dog. I am a woman. If this dog and this woman take to one another, it will prove that beyond your caustic implied criticism or if criticism it is or there is another region of cause and effect, another region of question and answer. (As cited in Chandler, 2017, pp. 22-23)

Doolittle's discussion of her first impression of Jofi, as well as what she believed may have been the dialogue between her and Freud, should she have found the words to express herself at the time, is a demonstration of how she initially felt much more comfortable with Jofi than she did with Freud himself (Chandler, 2017; Genosko, 1993). And although Freud himself did not ever formally refer to the concept of AAT, he acknowledged the value of having his dogs, especially Jofi, present during his psychoanalytic sessions; for example, as demonstrated above, Jofi's ability to enhance feelings of comfort in patients, as it did with Doolittle (Chandler, 2017).

Freud explained how the presence of Jofi in the sessions made it easier for his clients to open up regarding difficult and sensitive issues, especially adolescent and child clients (Serpell, 2010; Wilkes, 2009). Jofi had a way of remaining unmoved regardless of what was discussed by the client, leading to feelings of acceptance and safety in the client (Chandler, 2017). This was observed to be especially true during free association (Coren, 2002; Serpell, 2010; Wilkes, 2009). Freud explained how free association requires patients to lie back on the couch and simply say whatever comes to their mind, without awareness of the therapist's expression (Chandler, 2017). And although the patients were unable to see Freud's expressions, they were able to clearly watch Jofi's behaviour, and Jofi would remain non reactive to the contents of the patient's free association (Chandler, 2017). For the client, sharing painful experiences would most commonly feel too overwhelming and embarrassing, yet the presence of the dog and its non reactivity to the topics being discussed would enhance a sense of reassurance that further



motivated the client to feel free to express absolutely any information during the session (Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Minton, Fernando & O'Callaghan, 2010; Wilkes, 2009).

In addition, Freud was very expressive regarding his dogs being great judges of character (Welsch, 2012), and if one of his dogs was to react negatively towards any given person, be it a patient, a visitor or a colleague, he would admit, without a hint of reluctance, that they most probably deserved it (Chandler, 2017; Coren, 2002; Genosko, 1993; Genosko, 1998). This was also later expressed by his son Martin Freud (as cited in Chandler, 2017, pp. 23). Martin stated that their dogs presented an almost judicious and selective reception of those who visited their home, and that, thinking back, he believed that Jofi's judgment of every single character was most trustworthy (Chandler, 2017). Freud often spoke of how their reliable judgment translated into the psychotherapy sessions, especially because he observed that Jofi's response was always a good indicator of his clients' state of mind (Chandler, 2017; Coren, 2002). He stated that Jofi would move farther away than usual from the patient if the patient was experiencing anxiety, whereas he would lie closer to the patient and even allow physical contact if the patient was feeling depressed (Coren, 2002).

Freud's interests in AAI was however not confined to the effects of the pet's presence on the therapeutic milieu, rather, he viewed animals as able to aid humans to become more in touch with their animal instincts or the concept he referred to as the id (Serpell, 2000). This notion was later replicated in Jung's interpretation of how the collective unconscious manifests in the form of animals in dreams and visions (Serpell, 2000). And later Boris Levinson went further by explaining that the human feelings of alienation were as a result of individuals' disconnection with their unconscious animal natures that may only be restored through the formation of real and positive relationships with their pets (Serpell, 2000). Boris Levinson believed so

passionately in the healing powers of connecting with an animal on a deeper level that he began to advocate the practice of AAT. In fact, although Freud is considered to be the first therapist to formally incorporate animals into the therapeutic milieu, Boris Levinson is considered to be the father of AAT (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Mallon, Ross, Klee & Ross, 2006).

### **Boris Mayer Levinson and his Dog, Jingles**

This book is dedicated to Jingles, my co-therapist, To whom I owe more than he owes me; Who taught me more than I taught him; Who unveiled a new world of experience for me; Who doesn't care whether this book is dedicated to him or not; And who will never learn about it. (Boris M. Levinson, as cited in Levinson & Mallon, 1997, p. v)

As previously discussed, there have been numerous instances in history where animals were brought in to interact with individuals suffering from various forms of mental illness (Chandler, 2017). And although Sigmund Freud is viewed as the first therapist to have ever incorporated the assistance of dogs in psychotherapy, Boris Levinson is considered to be the founder of AAT as a method of therapeutic practice (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Mallon et al., 2006).

In 1953 Levinson came upon what he later referred to as "the accidental discovery" (as cited in Levinson & Mallon, 1997, p. x) courtesy of his pet dog, Jingles. Jingles had previously never been allowed to be present for sessions, on this particular day however, the client, a little boy, and his mother arrived a couple of hours earlier than expected (Chandler, 2017; Levinson & Mallon, 1997). The child had been referred for a clinical assessment, and presented with severe symptoms of withdrawal after numerous unsuccessful therapeutic interventions (Chandler, 2017; Parish-Plass, 2013). When the client and his mother arrived, Jingles, who had been lying at Levinson's feet, ran up to the boy and began to lick him, all within the short few minutes that it

took for Levinson to greet the boy's mother (Chandler, 2017; Levinson & Mallon, 1997).

Levinson described feeling surprised that the little boy did not put up any resistance or fight, but rather cuddled up to Jingles and began to pet him (Chandler, 2017; Levinson & Mallon, 1997; Parish-Plass, 2013).

Jingle's presence at the clinic on that particular morning changed something in the little boy; he formed a connection with Jingles that enabled him to lower his defenses long enough to communicate with Levinson (Chandler, 2017; Levinson & Mallon, 1997). Moreover, Levinson observed that Jingles provided the child with a form of distraction that allowed him to communicate more freely with the child and to eventually build rapport (Chandler, 2017; Levinson & Mallon, 1997; Parish-Plass, 2013).

Levinson attributed his success with this particular client to Jingles, however, he decided not to pursue the subject any further at the time as he believed it was too eccentric (Levinson & Mallon, 1997). Nevertheless, Levinson began to utilise Jingles more frequently in his therapeutic sessions with clients (Fine, 2011) and found that much like with his first client, Jingles had a positive effect on the therapeutic process, especially with other similarly withdrawn clients, or otherwise clients that had difficulty communicating (Coren, 2002). Finally, in 1961, Levinson decided to move forward and publish his findings, regardless of how they may be received by his peers, trusting that he had discovered a new therapeutic technique (Levinson & Mallon, 1997).

Levinson presented his findings at a meeting of the American Psychological Association and was met with ridicule, almost as though his colleagues were reacting in response to their own feelings of discomfort (Chandler, 2017; Coren, 2002; Levinson & Mallon, 1997). In fact, Carl Rogers (as cited in Levinson & Mallon, 1997, p. x) later stated that he believed the professionals' reaction came from a place of general resistance to new psychotherapeutic techniques.

Regardless of the negative critique and disapproving comments however, a select few of the professionals present at the meeting found themselves intrigued and began to study the therapeutic impact of animals on humans (Coren, 2002; Levinson & Mallon, 1997). In fact a later survey by Levinson himself found that out of the random 319 professional psychotherapists that responded, almost a third had used pets in their practice and more than 90 percent of these therapists found this technique beneficial in the treatment of clients (Altschiller, 2011; Beck & Katcher, 1996). Furthermore, and quite coincidentally, it was around this time that several new biographies of Freud's life and his house full of dogs emerged (Coren, 2002). The surfacing of this new information regarding Freud's relationship with his dogs, and especially the effects of Jofi's presence during therapy sessions, put an end to the ridicule towards Levinson's findings on the therapeutic benefits of what he referred to as pet therapy (Coren, 2002).

This was the beginning of serious work and research into the benefits of AAT and AAI (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Coren, 2002). In fact, shortly after Levinson's presentation of his findings, psychiatrists Sam and Elizabeth Corson opened the first pet assisted therapy program incorporating different animal species (Altschiller, 2011; Beck & Katcher, 1996; Coren, 2002; Levinson & Mallon, 1997), and soon after, psychologist Alan Beck and psychiatrist Aaron Katcher began to provide solid scientific findings that showed the positive effects of incorporating animals, be it dogs, cats or birds, in therapeutic settings; including their ability to improve treatment outcomes and mental health in general (Coren, 2002). Levinson himself went ahead and published his findings in several papers as well as two books: *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy* in 1969, and *Pets and Human Development* in 1972 (as cited in Beck & Katcher, 1996, p. 134). His publications, which included numerous case studies, highlighted the beneficial roles that pets, most especially his dog Jingles, whom Levinson dubbed his

õcotherapistö (as cited in Melson & Fine, 2006, p. 212), play in the treatment of young patients (Beck & Katcher, 1996).

The ripple effect of Levinson's presentation and the subsequent successful research findings that emerged resulted in a tremendous increase in the practice of AAI; in fact it is estimated that the number of programs grew from less than 20 in 1980 to a staggering 1000, or more, by the year 2000 (Coren, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that many consider Levinson the father of AAT (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Mallon et al., 2006).

As evident from the historical accounts of AAI, incorporating an animal within therapeutic settings has numerous benefits that extend farther than the client. The practice of AAI has been reported as not only beneficial in assisting clients in reaching their therapeutic goals, but also as beneficial to the therapy animal and the human therapist. These benefits will be discussed in the following section, based on the literature available on the healing variables of AAI.

### **The Healing Variables of Animal Assisted Intervention for the Client**

For horses can educate through first hand, subjective personal experiences, unlike human tutors, teachers, and professors can ever do. Horses can build character, not merely urge one to improve on it. Horses forge the mind, the character, the emotions and inner lives of humans. People can talk to one another about all these things and remain distanced and lonesome. In partnership with a horse, one is seldom lacking for thought, emotion and inspiration. One is always attended by a great companion. ( Charles de Kunffy, as cited in Chandler, 2005, p. 160)

Although there has been a spike in interest and the practice of AAI within therapeutic settings, this field of practice continues to face challenges as a result of the lack of scientific research and empirical evidence that support its efficacy (Fine, 2011). This lack of empirical evidence is

partly due to weak research designs, moderate effect sizes, as well as the absence of long-term studies that result in non-definitive conclusions (Altschiller, 2011; Serpell, McCune, Gee & Griffin, 2017). However, one must acknowledge that a lack of empirical evidence is not an indication that AAI is ineffective, but rather that this field has so far faced challenges in the field of research (Serpell et al., 2017).

It is for this reason that most of what are considered to be the benefits of AAI are based on anecdotal and subjective reports of therapists that have incorporated animals in their therapeutic practices (Fine, 2011; Kruger & Serpell, 2006, Serpell et al., 2017). In addition, most of the available literature on the benefits of AAI focus on the unique intrinsic attributes of animals that contribute to therapy, and yet others call attention to the animal's ability to foster positive change in patients by providing them with the opportunity to learn various skills and acceptance of personal agency (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). This section presents an overview of the healing variables of AAI for the client, as well as the relevant theories most commonly found in the available literature on AAI and AAT.

### **Enhancing Feelings of Safety**

One of the most commonly referred to benefits of AAI is the animal's ability to enhance feelings of safety in the client or patient within the therapeutic environment (Altschiller, 2011; Chandler, 2017; Fine, 2010). In fact, Sigmund Freud, although he never formally addressed the concept of AAI, documented this simple effect that Jofi's presence had on his patients (Serpell, 2010; Wilkes, 2009). Freud noted that Jofi's presence during sessions would make his patients feel much more comfortable and safe, so much so that they would be willing to talk openly regarding their difficulties and problems, even when discussing topics that they may have commonly found

too painful or embarrassing to share (Coren, 2002; Serpell, 2010; Wilkes, 2009). According to Coren (2002), this was especially true when Freud was dealing with children or adolescents.

Consider, for example, the case of Hilda Doolittle in her description of her first encounter of Freud and Jofi, discussed earlier within this chapter. Immediately after arrival in Freud's office, Doolittle found herself having a rather defensive internal dialogue with Freud as a result of finding him an intimidating and possibly a judgemental man (Chandler, 2017; Genosko, 1993). And only after Jofi began to move towards her, did she, noticing that contrary to Freud's belief, Jofi did not reject her, internally lift herself up to a level worthy of acceptance and respect from her to-be human therapist (Genosko, 1993). This example highlights a number of important aspects of the effects of AAI with regards to fostering feelings of safety. For example, Jofi's reaction towards Doolittle reaffirmed her positive view of herself as someone that dogs usually "take to" (as cited in Chandler, 2017, p. 22); hence an affirmation of her self-concept as well as her self-worth. In addition, this affirmation resulted in a change in the tone of her internal dialogue, from defensive to a state of negotiation, indicating her willingness to allow for actual interaction and communication with Freud (Genosko, 1993).

As evident from the above, the presence of an animal during therapy tends to have an immediate impact on the client. Examples with this regard are unlimited. There are numerous reasons why the presence of an animal within a therapeutic setting can result in the client feeling more at ease. These include the animal's portrayal of unconditional positive regard and their non-judgemental nature, the possibility that they are the living embodiment of our most primitive inner selves, as well the physiological effects of their presence (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Melson & Fine, 2006).

Animals have been portrayed, throughout history, as having the ability to portray unconditional positive regard (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). This is often associated with the accepting and non-judgemental nature of the animal (Chandler, 2012). This unique intrinsic quality of the animal has the ability to make clients feel safe in their presence, knowing that the animal will not reject them regardless of whatever internal battles they may be fighting (Chandler, 2017; Kruger & Serpell, 2006). In addition, their lack of hesitation in approaching the client (Chandler, 2017), and their ability to portray exactly what they feel (Coren, 2002), also contributes to the client's tendency to feel an immediate level of comfort, trust and safety within an otherwise intimidating environment (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). Humans are generally perceived as complex beings in comparison to animals. Animals are not able to hide their true feelings, they are authentic beings that portray exactly what they feel, be it wagging their tails in joy, hissing with anger and fear, or biting when provoked (Fine, 2010). This simplicity is easy to comprehend for an observer, and so the client observing a cat that purrs, for example, will trust that the cat is happy to be there (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003).

There are many theoretical explanations that aim to explain why animals can foster feelings of comfort and safety in clients and patients. Oren and Parish-Plass (2013), for example, state that for the client the entire process of therapy can be intimidating. However, seeing the therapist interact with the therapy animal helps the client perceive the therapist as more endearing and hence less threatening or intimidating (Chandler, 2012; Oren and Parish-Plass, 2013). This is also fostered by the fact that the client witnesses the therapy animal itself feeling safe in the presence of the therapist (Oren and Parish-Plass, 2013), consequently creating an atmosphere of warmth (Fine, 2010). This explanation has been supported by others, such as Kruger et al. (2004)



and Beck and Katcher (1996), who further maintain that this feeling of trust and safety that arises from the presence of the animal enables clients to be more willing to reveal their inner selves.

Psychoanalytic theorists, in addition, attribute this feeling of safety in the presence of an animal to our inherent tendency to be drawn to animals due to our inner basic and animalistic natures; our id (Serpell, 2010). In fact, Freud maintained that it is for this reason that children felt most comfortable in his sessions when Jofi was present, and was quoted as stating that "The child unhesitatingly attributes full equality to animals; he probably feels himself more closely related to the animal than to the undoubtedly mysterious adult, in the freedom with which he acknowledges his needs." (As cited in Melson & Fine, 2006, p. 212)

As evident from the above, most anecdotal reports of the benefits of AAI refer to its tendency to foster feelings of comfort and safety in the client. In addition, and perhaps due to the above inherent qualities of the animal, numerous researchers have found that interacting with an animal resulted in decreased autonomic arousal and blood pressure (Beck, 1999; Pachana et al., 2011; Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011). Hence, being able to pet an animal during therapy can have a significantly relaxing effect on the client, making it easier for them to share difficult information or revisit past traumas (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010).

Although enhancing feelings of safety may be considered as the most immediate healing variable of AAI, it is considered as significant to the success of treatment as it remains intact throughout the treatment process (Chandler, 2005). Enhanced feelings of safety and trust within the therapeutic environment is considered as relevant to the entire treatment process, especially as it creates a rippling effect through increasing verbal and non-verbal interaction between the client and the human therapist, as well as by acting as influential on the process of rapport building.

## **Facilitating Rapport**

Chandler (2012) maintains that the quality of the relationship built between a client and the therapist is essential to the success of therapy and hence building and maintaining rapport with the client is vital for effective therapeutic treatment.

As previously discussed, Boris Levinson, who is considered as the pioneer of AAI within the psychotherapeutic context, came upon the benefits of incorporating an animal into the therapeutic context when he noticed the effect of his pet dog Jingles on his highly withdrawn child client (Parish-Plass, 2013). Levinson's client, who had been referred for clinical evaluation, presented with severe symptoms of withdrawal and was highly non-communicative (Serpell, 1986). Upon arrival at the clinic however, Jingles ran up to the child, and rather than flinch in fear, the child began to interact with Jingles and even embraced the dog in a cuddle while petting him (Serpell, 1986). Subsequently, Levinson, realising the change in his client's behaviour in the mere two minutes that the child spent interacting with Jingles, began to include Jingles in the following therapy sessions (Coren, 2002; Levinson & Mallon, 1997; Serpell, 1986; Wilkes, 2009). Levinson noted that the child was much more open to therapy in Jingles' presence, and was even willing to coherently communicate with Levinson, hence facilitating interaction and rapport building between Levinson and his client (Levinson & Mallon, 1997; Serpell, 1986; Wilkes, 2009). In fact Levinson reports bonding with the client through Jingles, by referring to the dog's behaviour or asking the child questions on behalf of Jingles. Levinson, who was taken by this accidental discovery and the subsequent successful treatment of this particular client, began to experiment by bringing Jingles into more therapy sessions with a range of clients and discovered that Jingles had a similar effect on all of his clients, and especially with those presenting with similar symptoms of withdrawal (Levinson & Mallon, 1997).

As previously discussed, many have observed that the presence of the animal has an immediate calming effect on clients (Chandler, 2012; Fine, 2010; Reichert, 1998; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008). In fact the presence of an animal in therapy has been reported as having an uncanny way of breaking the ice with the client; be it a child, an adolescent, an adult or even an elderly client (Chandler, 2012; Fine, 2010; Reichert, 1998; Yorke et al., 2008). Simply being greeted by the therapy animal, or watching a dog fetching a ball or a cat chasing a feather, for example, provides a type of entertainment, which invariably brings a smile to the client's face and motivates the client to attend sessions. This immediate positive response of the client towards a therapy animal has a similarly positive rippling effect on the remainder of the therapeutic process. As the client begins to feel more relaxed and safe, he or she begins to share information more freely with the human therapist (Chandler, 2012; Fine, 2010; Reichert, 1998; Yorke et al., 2008). This increase in the level of interaction allows the client and the human therapist to build a therapeutic relationship, even if it may at first revolve around the therapy animal (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). This shared interest, being the therapy animal, becomes the foundation of the relationship between the client and the human therapist, and acts as a catalyst in the formation of rapport, inevitably resulting in more information being shared between the client and human therapist (Fine, 2010).

Fine (2010) recalls a case study regarding a 15-year-old boy who was referred to his office with the diagnosis of depression, and who was immediately taken by the fish tanks in Fine's waiting room. Fine (2010) explains that the boy had coincidentally developed a strong interest in tropical fish in the previous years, and that this shared interest became a topic of conversation that quickly enhanced their therapeutic rapport. Over the duration of their therapeutic relationship this shared interest went much further than just talking about or observing the fish,

and that after careful consideration, they came to a mutual decision to build a salt water fish tank together (Fine, 2010). Fine (2010) reports that this shared activity, be it the designing of the fish tank, deciding on its scenery, or selecting the different types of fish for the tank, did not only help enhance their therapeutic bond, but also that the process had an uplifting effect on the client. The fish tank gave the client something to look forward to and enhanced his feeling of pride in himself to see his own accomplishments at the beginning of each session (Fine, 2010). Although he continued to struggle with depression, the fish tank provided him with a refuge, and was a great asset to their therapeutic relationship (Fine, 2010).

Fine (2010) reports that animals are instrumental in helping regulate the emotional climate within therapy, especially as they help reduce the tension and the client's anxiety at the start of each session. This inevitably helps reduce the client's resistance to therapy which further enhances therapeutic rapport (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010).

### **Enhancing Self-Esteem**

“The dog is the only being that loves you more than you love yourself.” Fritz von Unruh (Chandler, 2005, p. 58)

Before discussing the many ways in which AAIs can help increase a client's self-esteem, it is important to acknowledge that an enhanced self-concept and an increase in self-confidence contributes positively to one's self-esteem (Lubbe & Scholtz, 2013), and hence these will be included in the discussion.

In the previous sections there have been numerous discussions regarding the non-judgemental nature of animals and their ability to portray unconditional acceptance and positive regard. Animals do not discriminate, and they love and accept you for who you are; regardless of your job, your income, your physical attributes, or even your social and psychological difficulties

or illnesses (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Pachana et al., 2011; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). This is much unlike humans who will often withhold love and approval automatically, even unconsciously, from those who do not measure up socially (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003, Self-Esteem Building section, para. 1). This unique quality of the animal makes it a distinctive adjunct to the therapeutic treatment of clients (Fine, 2017; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003), and provides the client, especially children, with opportunities to strengthen their self-concept and self esteem, and inevitably, to develop personal and social identity (Chandler, 2017; Trotter, 2012; Wilkes, 2009).

Consider briefly the use of cognitive and social cognitive theories in therapy. These theories are of the belief that there is a reciprocal relationship between one's cognitions, behaviours and the environment, and so therapy would aim to bring about positive changes in a client's self-perceptions (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Hence, the goal of therapy would be to improve a client's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and their general internal locus of control by providing the client with opportunities to learn through observation, imitation, direct instruction, and/or association (Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 31); all of which are opportunities that the practice of AAI can easily provide (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003).

In AAI, the therapy animal becomes an active participant in the treatment of the client, and provides the client with opportunities for interaction, activity, as well as observation of the relationship between the human therapist and the therapy animal, which provides the client with a positive role model (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Therapists can ask clients to care for and to take responsibility for the therapy animal through small activities (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003); such as walking the therapy dog (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003), cleaning the horse stables (McNicholas & Collis, 2006), feeding the therapy

birds or fish (Fine, 2010), or grooming the therapy cat (Chandler, 2005), all of which will result in an increase in the client's sense of purpose and responsibility (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Therapists can have clients involved in teaching new tricks to the therapy animal, which will require the client to not only develop a relationship with the animal, but to also earn the therapy animal's respect (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). This will further enhance the client's listening, observation and communication skills, which will in turn help the client develop a tolerance for mistakes, be it their own or the therapy animal's (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Throughout the above activities, the client will receive unconditional positive regard and affection from the therapy animal, in addition to appraisals from the human therapist for a job well done (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). Once the goal of the activity has been reached, or perhaps at the end of each session, the client will experience a sense of autonomy and accomplishment (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003); for example, when the therapy dog finally learns the new trick. The client will learn the meaning of unconditional acceptance and respect, and will gain self-confidence and pride in himself and in the therapy animal, all the while observing how the human therapist interacts with the animal (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003).

All of the above can have a significant effect on the client's self-concept and self-esteem (Bierer, 2001; Chandler, 2017; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Not only does the client gain a sense of personal identity and trust in his own abilities within the therapeutic sessions, but also all the skills learnt through the client's interaction with the therapy animal will translate into the formation of meaningful relationships outside of therapy, further enhancing the client's self-esteem (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003).

There have been numerous researchers since the increased interest in the practice of AAI that have conducted studies with positive results in favour of using AAI to increase self-esteem in clients and patients (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Following the publications of Boris Levinson in the 1960s, numerous psychologists began to conduct research on the benefits of AAI in therapeutic treatment, especially in treatment of child clients (Altschiller, 2011). A study, conducted by several Colorado State University researchers on two emotionally disturbed 11 and 12 year old boys, concluded that teaching children with emotional disorders to interact with a dog during therapy had a positive overall effect on the boys, including enhancing their self-esteem (Altschiller, 2011). In a study by Krawetz in 1992 (as cited in DePrekel & Neznik, 2012, p. 45) the teens involved in the study reported higher self-esteem as a result of the positive interaction with the horses used in their therapeutic treatment. In another study, Burgon (2003) published findings after examining the psychotherapeutic effects of a horse riding program in 6 adult female patients suffering from a range of mental health problems. At the end of this therapeutic program the patients reported increased confidence and self-esteem that translated into their lives outside of the program (Burgon, 2003).

Lubbe and Scholtz (2013) had a similar finding within the South African context in their therapeutic treatment of a 14-year-old boy with behavioural problems, such as skipping school, and withdrawal symptoms. The boy had been referred by another therapist that mentioned she could no longer work with the boy due to his disrespectful manner and his unwillingness to interact with her during therapy (Lubbe & Scholtz, 2013). They found that bringing Morkie (Scholtz's therapy dog) to assist in the therapeutic treatment of the boy had numerous benefits, one of which was the positive effects of Morkie's presence on the boy's self-esteem.

There is an ongoing list of available research on the efficacy of AAI in enhancing the self-esteem of clients. Enhanced self-esteem does not only contribute to the development of personal identity, feelings of self-efficacy and agency, but also the development of social identity and social skills (Chandler, 2017; Wilkes, 2009), which will be discussed in the next section.

### **Instruments in Teaching Social Skills**

The previous section highlighted how the presence of an animal within the therapeutic environment enhances the client's feelings of safety, hastens rapport building and enhances the client's self-esteem. However, incorporating an animal into the therapeutic environment can provide much more than just the above depending on the goals for therapy.

In the practice of AAI, the therapy animal is an integral part of the treatment process and provides a multisensory experience for the client (Chandler, 2005). The human therapist can, for example, organise activities that involve the therapy animal; such as getting the client to teach the therapy dog new tricks, teaching the client to gain the therapy horse's trust so that the client may learn to approach and perhaps even ride the horse, or by the simple act of play with the therapy cat as it chases a feather across the room (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). The therapy animal also provides the client with the opportunity to experience and provide nurturance, as discussed previously, through acting as surrogates for therapeutic touch.

In general, AAI provides an opportunity for social interaction between the client and the therapy animal, which in turn enhances the client's social and interpersonal skills. In addition, because the presence of an animal within the therapeutic environment "adds significant kinaesthetic, tactile, auditory, visual, and olfactory stimulation" (Chandler, 2012, p. 17), the client remains alert during therapy, and may in fact integrate the learned information at a deeper and more meaningful level (Chandler, 2012, 2017). Additionally, these skills are transferable.



Hence, not only will the client be able to form more meaningful relationships outside of therapy, but he/ she will also be able to teach others these newly learnt skills.

### **Empathy.**

In the previous chapter, the benefits of the human animal bond were briefly discussed. One of these numerous benefits was that the human animal bond can foster feelings of compassion and empathy in childhood which can later translate into adult life and adult relationships (Thompson, 2009; Zilcha-Mano, 2013). It is important to acknowledge however that this benefit is not limited to pet-ownership or the individual's age; rather, the act of bonding with an animal, even if it is limited to weekly therapy sessions, can foster and improve empathy in clients of all ages (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Macauley, 2006, VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010).

Animals are viewed as straightforward, authentic and uncomplicated in that they are able to portray exactly how they feel through their body language and behaviour (Kruger et al., 2004; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010). This unique quality of the animal makes it much simpler for clients, especially children (Weston, 2010; Zamir, 2006), to determine the animal's feelings and intentions (Kruger et al., 2004) and provides them with an outlet for the loving parts of themselves (Gonski, 1985; Ross, 1992). Hence, as opportunities present themselves within the context of AAI, for example, through learning how to be sensitive to a horse's movements (DePrekel, 2012), or through observing that a therapy bird may feel intimidated if approached without permission (Fine, 2010), the client, be it a child or an adult, will learn to appreciate the unique and individual needs of the animal and to respond to these needs rather than to react to them (DePrekel, 2012). This fosters the client's ability to think about and consider the needs and feelings of others in addition to their own; hence it establishes within them a sense of empathy (DePrekel, 2012).

In addition, it is known that the most effective way to learn empathy is through firsthand experience and observation, both of which are promoted in AAIs (David, 2013). Animals are perceived as empathic beings that listen, understand, and yet do not question, judge or evaluate (Serpell, 1986; Wilkes, 2009). Similarly, therapists that practice AAI are committed to the therapy animal's wellbeing and state of mind; hence, rather than objectifying the therapy animal, they relate to it with empathy and compassion (Parish-Plass & Oren, 2013). Consequently, in addition to experiencing empathy firsthand, from both the therapy animal and the human therapist, the client gets to observe the empathic interaction between the therapy animal and the human therapist; hence providing the client with the two most effective ways to learn empathy (David, 2013).

#### **Agency and responsibility.**

Caring for a pet provides an opportunity for the child to toughen his ego . . . acceptance for responsibility for the care of a pet will eventually lead to an acceptance of responsibility for establishing meaningful, satisfying human relationships. (Boris Levinson, as cited in Mallon, 1992, p. 57)

Chapter 2 highlighted the psychosocial benefits of the human-animal bond in the socialisation of children. In 1699, John Locke advocated for the practice of pet-keeping as a means for encouraging children to learn a sense of responsibility (Serpell, 2010). The notion of pet-keeping for the socialisation of children became quite popular by the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has been viewed as influential in teaching children, especially young boys, to control their own 'innately beastlike' (Serpell, 2010, p. 25) characteristics through taking responsibility for the pet. The influence of the human animal bond on the fostering a sense of responsibility is not limited to children, rather, even as adults, we can learn responsibility and agency by taking care of animals.

In AAI the client is provided with the opportunity to form a meaningful relationship with the therapy animal, and although the client may have no further opportunity to interact with the therapy animal once the process of therapy has ended, the skills that were learnt during the therapeutic process remain intact and are in fact translated to life outside of therapy (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). As mentioned previously, and on numerous occasions, the therapist practicing AAI has the opportunity to get the client involved in caring for and taking responsibility for the therapy animal. This can be achieved through simple exercises such as learning to feed or groom the therapy animal, taking the therapy animal for walks, or even cleaning the therapy animal's quarters, for example, the bird's cage, or, in the case of Equine Assisted Therapy, the horse's stables (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). The client would in such instances be responsible for understanding the body language of the therapy animal, as well as to evaluate the needs of the therapy animal (Trotter, 2012).

Exercises such as the above require patience, empathy and self control (Chandler, 2005; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003), and the sense of achievement that is accomplished through successfully taking care of the therapy animal (Chandler, 2005) will enhance the client's sense of independence, personal agency and control, and teach the client that they are in fact the active participants in their own lives and treatment (Kogan, Granger, Fitchett, Helmer & Young, 1999; Kruger et al., 2004; Thompson, 2009; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2010). This can in addition result in increased self esteem and self-confidence, and hence promote further socialisation (Chandler, 2017). In fact, even as early as 1792, William Tuke witnessed that by allowing patients in York Retreat to interact with small animals he was providing them with a sense of responsibility and a need for self control, which in turn enhanced their socialisation skills and their quality of life (Chandler, 2012; Matuszek, 2010).

## **Catalysts for Emotion**

Most therapists have experienced instances in therapy where a client finds it difficult to get in touch with or experiencing their feelings. As previously discussed, the presence of an animal in the therapeutic environment can have an instantaneously calming effect that results in the client feeling comfortable and safe in what may have otherwise been perceived as an intimidating environment. This unique effect of the therapy animal's presence remains intact throughout the treatment process and tends to provide the client with a sense of warmth that aids the client to be more willing to not only access, but also to express their emotions without the fear of judgement (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010).

Through their portrayal of empathy and unconditional positive acceptance, the therapy animal's mere portrayal of physical affection can often elicit a range of emotions in a client, be it fear, anger, sadness or sorrow, or even feelings of joy (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010). Consider the case of Rusty, the American Cocker Spaniel therapy dog, and Stacy:

One day Rusty and I were walking Larry back to his room when we passed an interview room with the top half of the wall made of glass. Inside were two female probation officers trying to communicate with a belligerent looking juvenile girl we will call Stacy. As we passed, one of the officers came out to greet us. She introduced herself to me as Larry's probation officer and said she had heard many good things about Rusty the therapy dog and wanted to meet him. I asked Larry to introduce Rusty to his officer and he did so with beaming pride, a big smile, and in clear and coherent speech. While we were conversing, the other probation officer had been called out of the interview room to take a phone call, leaving the young juvenile female alone in the room with the door open. A few

moments passed as Larry, his probation officer, and I were conversing when the three of us looked down at Rusty to see that he had made eye contact with Stacy through the doorway into the room where she was still sitting. Stacy's face had changed since I had first seen her through the glass only a few moments before. Initially the muscles in her face were tight, her forehead deeply furrowed, her lips frowned, and her eyes angry. But now, her face was different as she looked back at Rusty. Her eyes were soft and had a longing look. Her frown had slipped into a slight smile, and her forehead was more relaxed and smooth. She looked very much like she wanted to pet Rusty who was actively wagging his tail in an expression of wanting to greet her. The probation officer and I made eye contact in recognition that something very special was taking place between Stacy and Rusty. The officer asked Stacy if she would like to pet Rusty, and without hesitation she gave a nod and moved from the small room down to the floor in the doorway. Rusty accelerated the speed of his tail wag that caused his whole body to wag with it and crawled into her lap and snuggled up against her chest. Stacy put her arms around Rusty and began to cry. As the heavy teardrops hit Rusty's curly coat, he pushed his head up to her shoulder and nuzzled his nose against her neck as if to say, "It's okay, I am here for you." With Rusty snuggled against her body Stacy began to sob heavily. Rusty continued to snuggle with Stacy as her tears of anger and fear poured out of her. The rest of us stood quietly for these few precious moments while Rusty provided therapeutic affection to Stacy. When Stacy's tears began to slow, I made a few simple reflections about how Rusty cares about her and knows she is having a hard time. Stacy dried her tears on her

shirtsleeve, and she and the probation officer resumed their interview while Rusty and I escorted Larry back to his room.

After Rusty and I were back in the car ready to leave for home, I allowed myself to release my feelings and as my eyes teared up I told Rusty what a very, very good dog he was. My heart was full of joy and compassion and once again it was affirmed to me that my choice to work with Rusty as a partner in therapy was indeed a very good one. I received a phone call a few days later from the therapeutic programs coordinator who told me that the two probation officers were saying glowing things about AAT. They said that after just a few moments of empathy exchange with Rusty, Stacy had become cooperative with the officers. The belligerent and resistant attitude she had only moments before her visit with Rusty had disappeared after her visit with Rusty. Sometimes, it takes a friendly, furry animal face to help people who are frightened of other people to feel safer. (As cited in Chandler, 2012, p. 170-172)

As evident from the above case example, the presence of an animal can provide the client with the space to release emotions they may otherwise be unwilling to access or express (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). However, the presence of an animal within the therapeutic environment can also result in the simple experience of joy and laughter (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2006, 2010; Beck & Katcher, 1996). Therapy animals have an uncanny way of lightening the mood of the client, often through the exhibition of humorous behaviour; especially as animals have a tendency to get themselves into mischief (Fine, 2010). The relevance of humour within the therapeutic process should not be underestimated, especially considering the positive effect of humour on a client's mental state and physical constraints (Beck & Katcher,

1996; Fine, 2010; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). In addition, at times this humorous behaviour can serve as a quick and joyous distraction and relief to ease the difficulties and pain that the client may be experiencing without taking away from the actual extent of the experience (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003).

The presence of an animal in therapy can help clients access and express their emotions (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). Although at times the mere presence of the animal maybe enough to elicit emotions, the therapy animal also provides the client with opportunities for therapeutic touch and an object of projection (Fine, 2010), and sometimes, especially in the case of child clients, they can make the best transitional objects (Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

#### **Surrogates for therapeutic touch.**

More often than not, during the therapeutic treatment process, clients reach a stage where they must come into contact with their painful and difficult emotions. During these instances, the presence of an animal can provide the client with an opportunity for therapeutic touch, especially considering the fact that [f]or the most part, it is prohibitive for a human therapist to touch a client because of a real or perceived danger of client exploitation (Chandler, 2005, p. 74).

Having the opportunity to pet or hold a therapy animal provides the client with a form of genuine and unconditional nurturance that can foster feelings of comfort or reassurance and sooth the client (Fine, 2010). At times this calming effect of the therapy animal has been criticised for prohibiting the client from feeling the full extent of their emotions. However, Chandler (2005, 2012, 2017) and Fine (2010) argue that the comforting effect of the therapeutic touch provided by the therapy animal does not take away from the extent of the emotional experience of the client; rather it helps to soothe the client's pain just long enough for the client to examine and work through their emotions during this otherwise overwhelming experience. In

fact, the availability of this form of nurturance and affectionate physical contact provided by the therapy animal has been observed as helpful in assisting clients to explore their issues more deeply and for a longer period of time (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017).

**Transitional objects and objects of projection.**

It's funny how dogs and cats know the inside of folks better than other folks do,  
isn't it? Eleanor H. Porter (as cited in Chandler, 2005, p. 16)

One of the many benefits of the human animal bond, especially the bond formed with a pet, is that the animal can serve as a positive example of a transitional object (Chandler, 2005; Chandler et al., 2010; Triebenbacher, 1998). Although transitional objects mostly play an essential role in the life of children, it is not unlikely that an adult may in fact need a transitional object from time to time (Cashdan, 1988; Kruger & Serpell, 2006). The purpose of a transitional object is to serve as a temporary substitute or supplemental figure for an attachment figure in order to soothe a child's transition from the primary attachment figure as an outer-object to an inner-presence (Cashdan, 1988). Hence, the transitional object acts as a bridge that enables the individual to transition through this otherwise overwhelming process gradually and over time (Cashdan, 1988; Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

The role of a transitional object within a therapeutic setting is considered as slightly different. The therapy animal, in AAI, alleviates the stress of the initial phases of therapy by serving a comforting, diverting role until the therapist and patient have developed a sound rapport (Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 30). In addition, the therapy animal creates an opportunity for clients to take their subjective experiences and project them onto the therapy animal. In such instances, the therapy animal plays the role of an "affectionate and responsive" (Chandler, 2005, p. 6) transitional object that "never contradict[s] the attributes projected onto [it] with words". It is for



this reason that the therapy animal has been considered to make the optimal transitional object, as it combine[s] the best therapeutic attributes of both toys and humans while avoiding the obvious limitations that toys and humans may present (Chandler, 2005, p. 6). Hence, the therapy animal, in the role of a transitional object, holds the client's needs and emotions until such time where the client is ready and able to move to a higher, more socially acceptable level of functioning (Chandler, 2005; Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

In addition to the above, animals possess mirror neurons which enables them to sense the emotional state of the client and portray empathy (Marcus, 2013), hence providing the client with an object for projection (Chandler, 2005). Animals, unlike humans, portray their emotional state through their behaviour, and it is for this reason that we are immediately able to recognise exactly what the animal may be feeling at any given time; for example, a dog wags its tail when it is feeling excited or appears restless when it is feeling anxious or stressed (Chandler et al., 2010). This quality of the animal, combined with their ability to portray empathy without judgement (Coleman, 2012), provides the client with the opportunity to reflect on and become aware of their own emotional state (Urlichuk & Anderson, 2003). Consider the case below:

One day I was doing a brief demonstration of AAT for a colleague's doctoral counseling practicum course. A student in the class volunteered to be the client, and she and Rusty and I sat on the floor as there were no comfortable chairs or couches for Rusty to get up on to be next to the client in the classroom. With the whole class looking on, I invited the student to interact with Rusty by petting him if she wanted to while we talked about how her day and her week were going. I instructed Rusty to lie down next to her, and she sat there stroking the fur on his back while she talked. The volunteer talked about fairly superficial things

regarding her day and her week. After a couple of moments, Rusty got up, walked in a tight circle, nuzzled her hand, and lay back down again, and the client resumed talking and stroking his back. Rusty did this several more times when I reflected his behavior to the client and asked her what she thought about it. She had been sharing very surface level information up to that point, but after my inquiry she said she felt that Rusty acted unsettled and was so probably because she was unsettled. With encouragement from me, she continued to explain that she in fact was very stressed out and frustrated about some issues in her life and felt a lot of inner turmoil. I invited her to share that which she felt comfortable sharing in a group environment, and she began to express some of her personal problems. As she talked, she shifted her voice and body tone while becoming more inner reflective. I noticed her hand, which had been stroking Rusty's back, slowly move up his neck and begin gently rubbing his ears. She seemed to be petting him without thinking much about him; she was focused on herself while conveying her personal concerns. As she talked on, she continued to rub his ears, and Rusty slowly rolled over onto his side and lay quietly with his eyes drooping. The client was very intent and focused on telling her story while gently rubbing Rusty's ears. Rusty lay quietly snuggled next to her and began to drift off to sleep. At the conclusion of this approximately 30-minute demonstration, I asked the volunteer client how she experienced the session. She said that she was nervous about being in front of the class and at the same time very anxious about issues in her life. She had been putting off things and trying not to deal with them or even think about them. She felt that Rusty could sense her anxiety and so he felt

unsettled around her. She further conveyed that when she did acknowledge to herself that she had to face and talk about her concerns, she began to sense some internal relief and that is when Rusty settled down. She felt that she and Rusty were very in tune with one another and he was at first a source of providing self-awareness for her and then later in the session a source of affirmation and soothing comfort for her. She felt that by observing Rusty's unsettled behavior she was gently confronted with having to face her issues instead of running away from them because she too felt very unsettled. Her unsettled feeling was mirrored by Rusty's unsettled behavior. Then as she began to acknowledge her issues and express them, Rusty settled down, and that affirmed for her that she was releasing some anxiety by expressing herself. Rusty then served as a source of soothing comfort for her as she rubbed his soft, warm ears and observed his relaxed, slowed, easy breathing as she shared her uncomfortable personal issues. She went on to say that if this had been a more private counseling session she would have put her arms around Rusty and cried for a bit. Even so, she said she felt better after spending just a few minutes engaged in AAT as part of the class demonstration. Thus, in just one short classroom exhibition, Rusty assisted in demonstrating how a therapy dog can assist a human therapist to provide greater self-awareness for a client, encourage client expression, and contribute to the client's experience of some relief. (Chandler, 2005, pp. 93-94)

As evident from the above example, the therapy animal's tendency to mirror the emotional state of the client provides the client with opportunities to become self-aware and to reflect on their own emotional state and the reasons behind it (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003; Chandler, 2005;

Chandler et al., 2010; Coleman, 2012). In addition, this kind of projection provides the human therapist with opportunities to call the client's attention to the effects of their negative emotional energy so that they are able to begin to resolve the issues that may give rise to such negative internal emotional states (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003; Chandler, 2005; Coleman, 2012). This is especially beneficial in cases where the client may not be able to make this association by themselves (Chandler, 2005; Coleman, 2012).

The role of the therapy animal as transitional objects or objects for projection has been subjectively reported as significantly beneficial by many who practice AAI. The therapy animal can help enhance the client's self-awareness, as well as provide them with insight into the effects of their negative energy on others (Chandler et al., 2010). Simultaneously, the therapy animal may provide the client with a transitional object that can hold their needs and emotions until such time as they are ready to face the realities of their emotional needs and able to move to a higher, more socially acceptable level of functioning (Chandler, 2005; Kruger & Serpell, 2006). In addition, the therapy animal acts as an adjunct to the human therapist by providing the human therapist with opportunities that facilitate discussion and reflection (Fine, 2010). Hence, AAIs are not only beneficial for the client, but also the human therapist, and in many ways for the therapy animal as well (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). These benefits will be briefly discussed in the following section.

### **Benefits for the Therapy Animal and the Human Therapist**

To all my therapy animals over the past three decades (Sasha, Puppy, P.J., Hart, Shrimp, Magic, Snowflake, Starlight, Tikvah, Coshe, Spikey, Tilly, Boomer, and Houdini) who have been inspirational in extending my abilities to work with and support others.

This book is especially dedicated to my dear Shrimp. You have been a dedicated and loving companion for so many years. You are fondly treasured by all for your gentleness and warmth.

Finally, to my wife, Nya, and sons Sean and Corey, our love and work with animals have strengthened our relationship and our family. I am blessed to have you all in my life. You are all the spark in my heart. (Aubrey H. Fine, 2006, Dedication)

One of the many qualities of AAI that tends to attract practitioners is that it is also beneficial for the therapy animal. Most AAI therapists tend to bring their own pet to assist in the therapeutic process (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). This means that the therapy animal gets the opportunity to spend more quality time with its human companion (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). In addition, the therapy animal spends less time bored at home, not to mention that AAI can provide the therapy animal with stimulating activity, hence reducing the therapy animal's overall exposure to boredom (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that therapy animals generally tend to be happier and healthier; they receive substantial opportunities for stimulation and interaction, not only with their co-therapist owner, but also with clients (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017).

As evident from previous discussions, when practicing AAI, the therapy animal becomes an integral part of the therapeutic process. The presence of an animal in therapy has numerous benefits that can assist in the successful treatment of the client, including their tendency to help hasten the process of rapport building, as well as their ability to soothe the client during difficult times. Hence, the therapeutic benefits of AAI are not mutually exclusive to the client, but also beneficial to the human therapist. In addition, practitioners that tend bring their own pet to assist

with the therapeutic treatment of a client have the benefit of spending more quality time with their animal companion, not to mention that the human therapist may stand to gain financially as the AAI practices may attract more clients (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017).

The practice of AAI is also considered as highly versatile. According to Chandler et al. (2010) animals possess a variety of therapeutically beneficial inherent qualities that can easily be incorporated into various theoretical foundations. Hence, the human therapist can select and modify AAI techniques to best fit their chosen theoretical modality; for example, regardless of one's preferred modality of practice, be it Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Person-Centered, Gestalt, Existential or Psychoanalytic therapies, to name a few, AAI techniques can be modified to match the principals underlying these therapeutic modalities (Chandler et al., 2010).

Furthermore, AAIs have been found to be beneficial in the treatment of individuals with a variety of psychological disorders (Chandler, 2005); including, but not limited to, individuals with Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Katcher & Teumer, 2006), Anxiety, Learning Disorders, speech and related disorders, Depression and related disorders (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017), as well as Substance Use disorders (Coetzee, Beukes & Lynch, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of AAI, including what it entails, its historical use, as well as its healing variables for clients, the therapy animal and the human therapist.

The chapter began by distinguishing AAI as any therapeutic intervention that deliberately includes animals in the therapeutic milieu as a means to facilitate the therapeutic process. This

study is therefore not limited to registered AAT practitioners, but rather registered psychologists and counsellors that practice AAI.

The chapter then briefly highlighted the historical uses of AAI, with specific attention to the two significant figures that helped bring AAI to the forefront; namely, Sigmund Freud and Boris Levinson. Next, the benefits of AAI for the client were discussed. These benefits were presented in themes, namely, enhancing feelings of safety, facilitating rapport, enhancing self-esteem, as instruments in teaching social skills, and as catalysts for emotion. This chapter thereafter concluded with a brief discussion of the benefits of AAI for the therapy animal and the human therapist.

The following chapter describes the methodology utilised in the current study which aims to explore and describe the healing variables of AAI as perceived by therapists that purposefully incorporate animals into their therapeutic practices.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the primary research aim of the current study and the methodological approaches used to conduct this study. The chapter briefly discusses the use of an exploratory descriptive qualitative research design and the sampling procedures used to identify potential participants for the study. The process of data collection and data analysis are highlighted with a specific focus on the approaches used to analyse the data set and to enhance the trustworthiness of the overall data analysis procedure. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of relevant ethical considerations that were applied to the current study.

#### **Research Aim**

The primary aim of this study is to explore and describe the healing variables of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) as perceived by registered Psychologists or Counsellors that actively and on purpose incorporate animals into the therapeutic environment. This was done by exploring the perceptions of therapists on the impact that such incorporation has on the client, the professional themselves, the therapy animal, and the therapeutic relationship as a whole. In exploring these perceptions, the research objectives are to further add to the body of knowledge available with regards to AAI and to generate therapeutic insight that can further assist professionals who show an interest in, and aim to incorporate AAI into their practice of psychotherapy.

#### **Research Design**

The present study was conducted using an exploratory descriptive qualitative approach, more specifically that of Thematic Analysis, in order to gain an in-depth understanding and insight (Creswell, Hansen, Clark & Morales, 2007; Hair, Celsi, Money, Samouel & Page, 2011) into



therapists' perceptions of the healing variables of AAI. The exploratory descriptive nature of qualitative research approaches enables researchers to tap into areas that are lacking in definition and recognition (Hair et al., 2011).

One of the main advantages of the qualitative research approach is that this approach makes use of open-ended questions that allow participants to express their meaning of experiences in their own unique way (Creswell et al., 2007; Hoepfl, 1997; Merriam, 2009). Hence, open-ended questions, by nature, enhance the quality of data gathered by allowing researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Hair et al., 2011)

However, qualitative research has received its fair share of criticism (Mason, 2002). For one, although open-ended questions are considered beneficial in numerous ways, they can also result in the gathering of unimportant and unnecessary information by allowing participants to fully describe and explore the topics at hand (Babbie, 2007; Mason, 2002). The gathering of unnecessary information was however minimised in the current study as the researcher ensured that all the questions were derived directly from the relevant literature. A preliminary interview guide was thereafter constructed, which can be found in Appendix 1.

Qualitative research approaches have also been criticised for relying on the anecdotal and subjective reports of participants (Mason, 2002). In addition, this approach to research provides the researcher with an in-depth understanding and insight into the phenomenon under investigation, which may in turn result in the researcher over-generalising the findings to populations outside of the sample frame (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). These disadvantages raise concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the findings of a study (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). It is therefore of the utmost importance for the researcher to conduct the study following a set of precise steps and precautions in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings.

In order to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of this qualitative research study, the researcher made use of Lincoln and Guba's model of trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed four main criteria that, if applied, can enhance and establish trustworthiness when conducting a qualitative research study. These four criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Credibility refers to the internal validity of the study whereby the researcher attempts to prove that the study measures what it was intended to. It includes demonstrating that the results came about as a product of the utilisation of a correct and valid method. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that frequent debriefing sessions between the researcher and the research supervisor can help enhance the credibility of the study as it will allow for the exchange of perceptions and ideas between the researcher and the research supervisor. With regards to the current study, this was applied through collaboration with peers, academics, colleagues, as well as regular supervision sessions with the research supervisor, as it allowed for constructive feedback to further enhance the internal validity of the study. In addition, the researcher and the research supervisor discussed the research methodology and the emerging themes in order to expand on various ideas and enhance the credibility of the study.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts and situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It can also be known as external validity. One way to increase transferability is for the researcher to portray the boundaries of the study. These boundaries can then be considered before transferability is applied. The findings of this study attempt to describe a particular sample's experience. Hence, the researcher created boundaries by placing a set of specific inclusion criteria for participation in the study, and only the participants that met all the inclusion criteria were allowed to participate in this study. The use of inclusion

criteria enhances the transferability of the study and eliminates the risk of over-generalisation of the findings to other populations.

Dependability refers to the reliability of the study and whether consistent findings can be drawn if the study was repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to increase dependability, the researcher must record the exact method of scientific research utilised in the study. This will enable future researchers to repeat the study and ensure that they will reach similar findings. With regards to the current study, the researcher ensured that all the steps taken throughout the study were recorded in order to increase the dependability of the study and to ensure trustworthiness. These steps, as well as recommendations for future researchers, have been included in the current research study.

Conformability refers to the objectivity of the study which can be affected by the researcher's biases; in essence, it focuses on the level of neutrality and the manner in which findings have been influenced by the participants rather than the motivation or interests of the researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend for the researcher to create a detailed description of the methods and decisions utilised and to use an external reviewer of scientific research to enhance the conformability of the study. The researcher has recorded detailed descriptions of the method and decisions that were made; a thorough description of the research methodology will allow for the integrity of the research findings to be scrutinised. Additionally, the research supervisor was consulted during the process of the research study to enhance the neutrality of the findings. As a result of the utilisation of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model of trustworthiness of qualitative data, the researcher's biases and subjectivity were minimised and the trustworthiness of the study was enhanced.

### **Sampling and Participants**

As discussed previously, the researcher made use of a qualitative research approach for the current study. This further enabled the researcher to make use of non-probability purposive and snowball sampling methods in selecting participants for the study. A non-probability sampling approach implies that the participants in the study were not selected at random, but rather for a specific purpose and reason (Mason, 2002). This method allows for the subjective determination of participants based on qualities and factors relevant to the investigation (Suri, 2011).

According to Patton (as cited in Suri, 2011) the researcher would thereby be able to create a sample with extensive knowledge and insight into the topic of interest. This is an advantage of using non-probability sampling methods (Mason, 2002; Suri, 2011). However, a disadvantage of non-probability sampling is that this method of sampling does not allow for the statistical analysis of data as the researcher has little control over the representativeness of the sample (Mason, 2002; Suri, 2011).

The researcher made use of purposive and snowball sampling methods, allowing for the non-random selection of participants based on the knowledge of the population and the sample inclusion criterion (Mason, 2002; Suri, 2011). In addition, snowball sampling implies that the researcher was able to approach additional participants through the knowledge of the initial participant. In the case of the current study, the initial participant who was selected using purposive sampling was able to introduce the researcher to other potential participants that met the inclusion criteria.

For the purpose of this study, the sample consisted of registered psychologists and counsellors that had purposefully incorporated a pet or animal into the therapeutic milieu for a minimum of three sessions. Their decision to practice AAI was informed by the participantsø

understanding that the presence of the animal in the therapeutic milieu would enhance the therapeutic treatment of clients. Furthermore, the participants were required to be fully fluent in the English language and to practice within the Eastern Cape where the research was conducted. Data saturation, as determined by emerging themes, was reached after interviews were conducted with a total of five participants.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Once the researcher received procedural and ethical approval from the Faculty Post Graduate Studies Committee (FPGSC) of Nelson Mandela University and the Research Ethics Committee - Human (REC- H), the researcher began identifying and recruiting voluntary participants within the Eastern Cape for the study. These potential participants were contacted and provided with basic verbal information regarding the study. Thereafter, they were provided with an information letter (Appendix 2) with a detailed description of the purpose of the study, as well as what participation in the study would entail, including the confidential nature of participation. Participants that were willing to participate in the study were thereafter provided with a written consent form (Appendix 3) as well as the preliminary interview questionnaire. The purpose of providing participants with the preliminary interview questionnaire was to allow them time to reflect and familiarise themselves with the nature of the questions to be expected in the interviews in order to minimise the gathering of unnecessary and unimportant information.

The researcher scheduled the interviews with each participant at a time and location that was convenient for them. The researcher proceeded to re-introduce the purpose of the current study to each participant, as well as the motivation for the particular topic chosen for the study, prior to the commencement of the interview, as a means to provide each participant with additional margin for questions or concerns. At this stage, participants provided consent by signing the

consent forms and were reminded of their right to withdraw from participation at any given point during the course of the research study. Furthermore, the researcher proceeded to enquire basic information regarding the therapy animal as a means to build rapport. In addition, the semi-structured interview questions were adjusted wherever necessary to suit each participant and, if relevant, their field of practice. Furthermore, the researcher included a question regarding what motivated the participant to pursue AAI as a means to further enhance the rapport between the researcher and the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants in order to allow for later analysis. Each interview took an estimated 30 to 50 minutes in total. Only the researcher and the research supervisor had access to the audio-recordings.

Once all the interviews were completed, the audio-recordings were transcribed independently by the researcher with much emphasis on the accuracy and detail of the data. The transcriptions made use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, and will be shredded after a period of five years.

In addition, the researcher made use of a personal journal to record any personal thoughts and perceptions that arose during the data collection or transcription processes. This enabled the researcher to minimise the risk of personal biases entering into the data.

### **Data Analysis**

As discussed previously, the researcher based the interview questions on the relevant literature in an effort to produce the data required for the completion of this study. During the interviews, the researcher explored the therapists' perceptions of the healing variables of AAI on the client, the therapy animal, as well as the therapists themselves. The researcher further explored the possible

risks and limitations of AAI, as well as the suitability of this practice based on the type of clients that AAI was used with.

Once all the audio-recordings obtained during the interview process were transcribed, the researcher began the process of data analysis. The purpose of data analysis is to seek common themes in the participants' responses. This was done according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of Thematic Analysis (TA). These six phases of TA enabled the researcher to identify repeated patterns of meaning in relation to the research question. According to Braun and Clarke the analysis of data requires a process of 'constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing' (2006, p. 15). Hence, it was important for the researcher to truly familiarise herself with the data. This is the first phase of TA as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and provides the bedrock for the rest of the analysis. This phase requires researchers to immerse themselves in the data by reading and rereading the data until they gain exhaustive familiarity with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It has been suggested that the researcher make notes and mark ideas during this phase for later coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher, having been interactively involved in the process of data collection, had some familiarity with the data prior to the formal process of data analysis. In addition, the researcher made notes of ideas that emerged during the interviews as well as during the transcription of the audio-recordings. Later, the researcher read the transcriptions thoroughly and made further notes as she gained more in-depth familiarity with the content of the data. This enabled the researcher to move forward to the second phase of analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The second phase of TA involves the systematic production of initial codes from the data set. These initial codes refer to identified features in the data that appear interesting to the analyst and

that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is suggested that the researcher should make notes of as many codes as possible.

Once the researcher recorded all the emerging codes in the data, she moved to the third phase of TA. This phase requires the researcher to begin identifying themes through grouping and regrouping the list of codes that were generated in phase 2. The researcher made use of mind-maps to assist during this phase and began to sort the generated codes into overarching themes by looking at the relationship between the codes, between themes, as well as between different levels of themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Without discarding any identified themes, the researcher moved to phase 4 of TA which is identified as the process of reviewing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase the researcher began to refine the themes that were identified by combining, discarding or breaking down themes wherever it was deemed necessary and appropriate. Furthermore, the researcher returned to the data set whenever necessary to re-evaluate codes. Once the researcher had a fairly clear idea of the different themes and how they related to each other, she moved to the next phase of the analysis which was to define and name the identified themes. During this phase the researcher referred back to the collated data and extracted coherent and consistent accounts and their accompanying narratives in order to better define the importance and relevance of each theme. The themes were later named accordingly. The research supervisor was consulted throughout the data analysis process to enhance the reliability of findings.

Lastly, the researcher reanalysed the findings, and collaborated with the research supervisor to assess the validity of the findings. Changes were made wherever necessary and the researcher moved forward to the last phase which is to report the findings of the research study, as informed by the data, in a concise, coherent, logical and non-repetitive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In



addition, the participants that requested feedback were provided with a copy of the research dissertation at the conclusion of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) (2008) requires all professionals to implement ethical procedures in research as well as in practice. Prior to the commencement of this study, the researcher presented the research proposal to the Department of Psychology of the Health Sciences Faculty of Nelson Mandela University. Thereafter, the research proposal was submitted to Faculty Post Graduate Studies Committee (FPGSC) and the Nelson Mandela University Research Ethic Committee: Human (REC-H), and the researcher received approval to move forward with the study. The researcher then took further ethical considerations into account. The HPCSA (2008) has specific rules with regards to how psychologists may conduct themselves. For one, when conducting research that involves animal subjects, one is required to treat each subject with care and respect, and to ensure that no harm will be inflicted upon the animal (HPCSA, 2008). Due to the nature of this study, the researcher did not require to make contact with any animal subjects. Additionally, the researcher ensured that all human participants were treated with respect by taking into account specific ethical considerations. When conducting research involving human subjects, the HPCSA requires factors such as informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, objectivity, integrity and possible risk and psychological harm to be taken into consideration.

### **Informed Consent**

According to the HPCSA (2008) informed consent implies that the participating subjects were given an accurate breakdown of what the research entails and the possible risks involved, if any, and have thereafter freely and willingly given the researcher the opportunity to conduct research.

The researcher provided all participants with an accurate breakdown of the nature of the study, what would be expected of them if they were willing to participate, the process of data collection, as well as the confidential nature of the study. The researcher did not foresee any risks with regards to participation. In addition, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any given point and were provided with the researcher's contact details as suggested by Rosnow and Roseenthal (2005) and The British Psychological Society (2009).

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

One of the key aspects of research is trust. Trust requires participants to feel safe, and to be informed of their rights and responsibilities. These rights include the right to confidentiality and anonymity (The British Psychological Society, 2009). In addition, it is the responsibility of the researcher to take care of and safeguard all the information provided by the participants as this information is of a sensitive and personal nature (Cozby, 2008).

The participants in this study were assured that all personal details would remain confidential, and only the researcher and research supervisor would have access to the audio-recorded information. The participants' awareness of and trust in the confidential nature of the study created a space of safety that further enhanced the participants' willingness to freely share truthful, explorative and detailed responses. The researcher ensured that all the audio-recordings were safely stored in a password protected folder on her personal computer. Furthermore, the researcher utilised pseudonyms in the transcriptions to protect the participants' identities.

### **Objectivity**

It is of utmost importance for researchers to acknowledge their own opinions and biases when conducting research, and to refrain from allowing such opinions and biases to hinder their ability

to remain objective (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2010). Furthermore, Tracy (2010) suggests that the use of a personal journal, where the researcher can record their own personal perceptions and opinions, can help enhance the sincerity and objectivity of a qualitative research study. The researcher had the opportunity to record her own biases, thoughts and opinions in a personal journal, hence enhancing personal insight into her own beliefs, views and perceptions. This awareness enabled the researcher to ensure that her biases and opinions would not enter or in any way influence the research findings. In addition, the research supervisor oversaw the process of data analysis and confirmed the reliability of the research findings.

### **Integrity**

Integrity includes the act of reporting results honestly and with accuracy (The British Psychological Society, 2009). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Model of Trustworthiness was followed closely to ensure an accurate representation of the findings of the study. Additionally, the research supervisor was able to guide the supervisee in order to ensure the accuracy of findings drawn from the study.

### **Possible Risk and Psychological Harm**

The researcher ensured that risks to participation were minimised through protecting the identity of participants and by highlighting the voluntary nature of participation in the study as suggested by Cozby (2009). Furthermore, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any given time. The researcher also ensured that the participants were clearly informed of their role in the research, and provided with opportunities to ask any questions, all of which were answered honestly. Overall, the researcher did not foresee any potential risks of psychological harm for the participants in this study.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the methodology of the current study, including the research aim as well as the exploratory descriptive qualitative research approach that was used to conduct this study. The advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research approaches, as well as those of the non-probability purposive and snowball sampling methods that were used to identify participants for this study, were discussed. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were described, as well as the data collection procedure used for the purpose of this study. This chapter further discussed Lincoln and Guba's model of trustworthiness, as well as Braun and Clarke's 6 phases of TA, and how these models were applied to the process of data analysis. Lastly, the ethical considerations applied to this study were discussed. In the following chapter, the researcher will discuss the findings of the current research study, and will describe these findings in relation to the literature available on the benefits of AAI.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the findings of the study. A description of the themes identified from the semi-structured interviews is also presented. Each identified themes is then discussed, and relevant literature is integrated into these discussions. Finally, a summary of the findings is given.

#### **Description of the Research Sample**

The participants included in this study were selected using a specific set of inclusion criteria to ensure a homogeneous research sample. The study consisted of a total of five participants, one male and four female participants. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 65 years. Two of the participants were primarily English speaking, and four were primary Afrikaans speaking but fluent in the English language. All participants were Caucasian.

The sample further consisted of a registered Clinical Psychologist, a registered intern Clinical Psychologist, two registered Counselling Psychologists, and a Registered Counsellor. All but one of the participants had incorporated animals into their therapeutic practice for the first time within the duration of 12 months prior to the semi-structured interview. One of the participants had practiced AAI over a longer period of time.

Three of the participants incorporated their own pets into therapy, while the other two had incorporated a colleague's pet into therapy and counselling. All participants predominantly incorporated a dog into therapy, however, one participant also practiced with a cat, and another also incorporated tortoises into the practice. All the participants incorporated an animal into the therapeutic milieu on at least five different occasions with the same or different clients. The total

duration of the semi-structured interviews was 145 minutes and the individual interviews ranged between 18 to 49 minutes.

All personal information regarding the participants in this study remained confidential to encourage detailed responses with regards to their perception of the healing variables of purposefully incorporating an animal into the therapeutic milieu. In examining the participants' perceptions, the study was able to identify and discuss the ways in which the presence of an animal within the therapeutic setting can be beneficial for the client and the therapeutic process. These findings are discussed in the following section.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The researcher made use of Thematic Analysis to identify emerging themes from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants of the study. These themes were critically evaluated and discussed with the research supervisor. The agreed upon themes that were identified are presented in the table below.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes and Categories</b>
Animals as Social Lubricants for Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Therapy and therapist viewed as less threatening</li> <li>• Enhanced feelings of safety</li> <li>• Calming effect</li> </ul>
Facilitating rapport	Facilitates interaction between client and therapist and the formation of an authentic therapeutic relationship.
Enhances Client's Self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced sense of control</li> </ul>
Instruments in Teaching Social Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> </ul>
Presence in the Here and Now	Promotes presence in the moment and enhances self

	awareness.
Catalysts for emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Therapeutic touch and affection</li> <li>• Distraction</li> <li>• Transitional object or objects of projection</li> <li>• Diffuses excessive emotion and reactive behaviour</li> </ul>

### **Animals as Social Lubricants for Therapy**

One of the major themes that emerged during the process of data analysis, was the fact that the therapists had observed the animal acting as social lubricants for the therapeutic process. This has been one of the major benefits spoken about in the literature available on animal assisted therapy and its positive effects on the client and the therapeutic process as a whole (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). Therapy animals, whether given this label on the basis of their inherent temperament or based on training and certification, have been found to have an immediate effect on the client and the therapy environment (Fine, 2010). These effects range from the animal's ability to bring qualities to the therapy room that enhance the client's feelings of safety within the therapeutic environment, their ability to instantaneously pass on the message that the therapist is in actuality a real and authentic human being, as well as the animal's calming effect on the client. Hence, this theme has been divided into three subthemes on the basis of codes that emerged in the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. These subthemes include the therapy and therapist being viewed as less threatening, feelings of safety and the creation of a calming effect. Although these subthemes are interconnected and have rippling effects on each other, they were established as significant enough to stand on their own.

### **Therapy and therapist viewed as less threatening.**

More often than not, the stereotypical cartoon portrayal of therapy is the depiction of a man that, needless to say, looks like an exaggerated version of Sigmund Freud, clipboard in hand, asking the client, who lies on the couch often with the most distressed expression, "and how does that make you feel?" It is therefore not surprising that one of the most popular misconceptions about the process of therapy is that one is required to enter a room and expected to communicate the innermost layers of their being and their deepest emotions to an expert who will without a doubt analyse their every thought and judge their every decision. It is for this reason that the general population is often reluctant to seek therapy, and when they finally do, they place their guards up and arrive with defensive attitudes masking their anxiety that is rooted in their expectation of the absolute worst case scenario (Chandler, 2017; Genosko, 1993). This initial reluctance results in calculated responses and an overall experience of therapy as daunting. This is especially true with clients that may have had no say in the decision to attend therapy; for example, children (Chandler, 2005).

How does practicing AAI influence the client's perception of therapy and the therapist? This was one of the areas that the participants of this study reflected on. Based on their responses, because of the presence of the animal in the session, the participants perceived a change in the way the client viewed the therapeutic process. Most participants reported that the presence of the animal in the therapy session took away some of the client's perceived pressure of therapy, and that the clients viewed the session as less threatening or not threatening at all. This was portrayed in statements made by the participants. One participant reported that:

í it helped a lot because" especially with the adult one, because she was very uncomfortable, and very nervous. I'd bring in (the dog) it was almost like it



distracted her from the actual process. Although we still spoke about the same things, she wasn't as focused on what she was saying and how she was saying it.

Another participant reported "I really feel that it took the pressure off him, that he didn't feel like he had to talk about his feelings." This was especially found to be the case with child clients. During the semi-structured interviews, one of the participants that works primarily with child clients reported "I think, for me, I think animals make it less threatening in a therapy environment." Another participant, who also works primarily with children, reported:

"The kiddies [sic] find it very non-threatening. Which is nice. And also going outside, for a lot of my " the anxious and the ADHD children that are impulsive and that have " maybe feel a bit caged in the therapy room, they love being outside!" And the dogs add energy to therapy so that it doesn't feel like it's therapy. They're just chatting.

The participant further added that:

I just think for the children sometimes, as I said just now, therapy is very daunting. We as therapists make them feel comfortable and they love therapy because of the fun and games. But sometimes what we have to talk about in therapy is not nice! So sometimes they come for the animals and the relationship they have built with the animals.

Most participants believed that having an animal present in therapy not only eliminated the perceived threat of the process of therapy, but also motivated further attendance.

In addition, the participants found that the presence of the animal also influenced how they were perceived by the client. One of the participants stated that:

Í I think they see us as caring, so they definitely see a different side to you. Maybe because obviously we don't hold children we nurture children in an indirect way in therapy but we don't physically so they definitely see us being affectionate towards the dog, hands-on with the dog; we stroke and we love. With the tortoises as well. So I think they maybe see that side as a nurturing, so if you love animals, you're loving, most children make that connotation.

Another participant explained:

Í the dog will enable one because in therapy you should always try and enter the frame of the patient's least defensiveness, if I can put it like that, and the dog facilitates that very easily. I also think that it, at a meta-communicative level, it communicates with the patient that this therapist is real, authentic, because I think they transfer it from the dog to the therapist.

A third participant stated:

Í with the child I'd think it was appreciated that I brought (the dog), because for her it was like I'm keeping my promise as well. Because I told her (the dog) will be there, and (the dog) was there every time, so the trust he was like a transitional object in a way.

The participants in this study clearly demonstrated that practicing AAI can reduce, or eliminate, the client's perceived threat of the therapist and the overall therapeutic process. Furthermore, some participants expressed that they were of the opinion that the presence of the animal actually motivated the client to attend therapy, hence eliminating the element of reluctance, especially in the case of child clients. The animal's tendency to eliminate the threat of

therapy and negative misconceptions regarding the therapist is closely related to the client's feelings of safety as discussed below.

### **Enhanced feelings of safety.**

As mentioned in the previous chapters, most of the research regarding the benefits of AAT and AAI are based on anecdotal reports of professionals who have at some stage incorporated animals into their therapeutic practices. One of the most commonly referred to benefits of AAI is that the presence of the animal enhances clients' feelings of safety (Altschiller, 2011; Bruneau & Johnson, 2011; Chandler, 2017; Fine, 2010; Serpell, 2010). These reports further explain that animals have inherent qualities that help enhance the client's feelings of safety. These qualities include the animal's portrayal of authenticity, unconditional positive regard and acceptance, empathy, as well as their ability to enhance the client's trust in the therapeutic relationship; be it their relationship with the therapy animal or with the therapist (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). These observations were also expressed by the participants of this study. Furthermore, most of the participants indicated that the above qualities of the animal also resulted in the clients feeling authentically validated, heard and acknowledged.

Animals are perceived as authentic beings that are incapable of putting on a façade. They express their emotions in a clear way that allows the observer to understand and behave accordingly (Chandler, 2017). It is for this reason that often people, be it in a therapeutic setting or outside of one, find it easy to connect with animals. The authenticity of the animal, therefore, results in a trusting bond and relationship formation that will enable the client to feel safe within the therapeutic environment, and express their own authentic selves in return (Fine, 2010). One of the participants expressed that:

í what we try and create in therapy, is a real world experience, a relationship that the patient has never had before. (The clients) learn to bond again in a comfortable, safe, neutral way. And the dog brings that spontaneity. í bringing the real world into the therapeutic space; with all its dirt, its ticks.

There are many other factors that the participants reported as enhancing the client's feelings of safety within the therapeutic environment. Most participants reported that the therapy animal portrayed unconditional positive regard and acceptance towards the client, and as a result the clients, especially the child clients, felt safe within the therapeutic space and were therefore able to interact with the therapist. One participant explained that the dog "reacts the same to everyone. So when we go down to the waiting room he won't bark or growl; he's very accepting." Another participant reported that "in my case, the dog I use, will always greet the patient by smiling at the patient. It always "it smiles at people it hasn't met before!" A third participant stated that "I think that's what the dog brings as well; that unconditional positive regard and just, you know, unconditional acceptance, and "so I find that works really well." This participant further explained "dogs improve reading by just the kid "having the kids read to the dog, so it's less threatening because the dog is not going to correct them. The dog is not going to judge them."

Participants also expressed that because of the animal's ability to portray empathy the clients would feel authentically validated, heard and acknowledged, hence enhancing their feelings of safety with regards to self expression, and enabling them to lower their defences. One of the participants stated:

I think (the dog has) got "she picks up on emotions very quickly. If I look at this little boy with the bereavement, he didn't smile for the majority of last year, but

when he was in session with (the dog), he was smiling the whole time and he could connect with her looking at him. It's kind of like he felt heard by her.

Another participant summed up these qualities:

í what are the kind of factors that facilitate or affect the working alliance, therapeutic relationship, what are the things? Empathy, unconditional positive regardô I don't really like to use the term empathy, I'd rather use the term compassionate understanding. Empathy is just agreeing with somebody; compassionate understanding is a little bit moreí validation ofí so these are some of the ingredients that I think that we see in the relationship focused approach that we tryô and I think the animal does bring that into the therapy. I think, those core functions, the animal brings that into [therapy] naturally. I think the animal brings in the sense of safetyô trust.ö

It is evident from the above that the presence of an animal within the therapeutic setting, and the inherent qualities that the animal brings to therapy, result in the client feeling safe within the therapeutic environment. Along with increasing the client's sense of safety, the presence of the animal has been shown to have a calming effect on clients within the therapeutic setting, leading to the following subtheme.

### **Calming effect.**

Another sub-theme that emerged through the semi-structured interviews was that the animal's presence tends to have a calming effect on the client. It has been found that interaction with animals, especially physical interaction, can help lower one's autonomic arousal and blood pressure, and increase the release of oxytocin (Beck, 1999; Pachana et al., 2011; Serpell, 2015; Siegel, 2011). Hence, physical interaction with an animal during therapy can help clients feel

significantly more at ease and relaxed, making it much easier for them to communicate with the therapist even when sharing difficult information (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010).

All participants had observed that the animal had, at some point, helped calm a client. This was additionally observed with a variety of clients; including clients with diagnosed Generalised Anxiety Disorder, ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or clients with severe Major Depressive Disorder. All the participants further reported that the clients were able to continue with the process of therapy and still have meaningful conversations, although much calmer when doing so. This was reflected in participants' statements. One participant reported "Just, first of all the physical contact, just petting the dog, rubbing the dog, talking to the dog, immediately kind of well we know that genetically, that process releases oxytocin, which, you know, enhances one's sense of wellbeing". This participant further explained:

I mean I had one instant where the patient was quite very distressed, very depressed, and (the dog) just lay on her lap for an hour! He just didn't move! And she just sat there and rubbed the dog the whole time. And that was the whole therapy.

Another participant stated:

"we still spoke about the same things, she wasn't as focused on what she was saying and how she was saying it. She was holding the dog and looking at him and touching him; it's like it calmed her down.

This participant further reported that "I think if I compare my sessions with the same client before, not like before or after, but like before (the dog) was introduced, it definitely they were more calm."

A third participant explained ð[The petting] calmed him. Yeah, I think the major thing was that it really calmed him down.ö Yet another participant stated ðí it calms children beautifully; so your anxious children, your children that are really struggling with that sort of thing, I find it works.ö Lastly, a fifth participant reported:

He has facial tics when he getsô he's got Generalised Anxiety Disorder, un-medicated, so, when he's very anxious he gets facial tics, and with the ADHD, I used to have a swerve [sic] chair and he'd move like this [demonstrated rapid swerving] the whole time. And when the puppy is in the room, he sits still and he can still communicate his thoughts without, you know, being distracted and he had zero facial tics.

Based on participants' reports of their experiences with AAI the presence of the animal acted as a social lubricant for therapy; through eliminating the client's perceived threat of the therapeutic process and the therapists themselves, by enhancing the client's feelings of safety, as well as through providing a sense of calm. As a result of the above, clients have been found to become more willing to interact within the therapeutic environment, hence facilitating the rapport building process, which is the next theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

### **Facilitating Rapport**

It is believed that the quality of the relationship built between the client and the therapist is essential to the success of therapy (Chandler, 2012). And it is for this reason that building and maintaining rapport with the client is vital for effective therapeutic treatment (Chandler, 2012). One of the most commonly referred to benefits of AAT and AAI is that the presence of the animal facilitates the process of rapport building between the client and the therapist. One of the

participants in the study reflected on the importance of the therapeutic relationship and the role of the animal in enhancing this therapeutic alliance:

I think, indirectly, [the presence of the animal] certainly facilitates the movement of therapy as much asô again if you fall back into therapy is only effective as the ability to develop an authentic relationship, transparent, authentic relationship, in which both, how can I put it, in which both parties feel comfortable self disclosing, being honestô then it does. Certainly. Because I think the animal does facilitate the development of an effective bondí And thus, once you've got an effective bond, anything is possible. I mean it's incredible how patients rapidly move towards real change in their lives once that bond is established. So if the animal is facilitating, which it definitely does, that therapeutic alliance, then the sky is the limit. And it's amazing then [sic] how people then move.

As is evident from the above statement, the presence of the animal within the therapeutic milieu does not only facilitate rapport and enhance the therapeutic relationship, but it also inevitably facilitates movement in therapy. This commonly referred to benefit of AAI is closely influenced by the fact that the presence of an animal acts as a social lubricant for therapy which then contributes to the client feeling at ease enough to communicate with the therapist, even if this interaction may revolve around the animal at first (Fine, 2010). This was explained by one of the participants: ôThe dog is a part of the therapist, and I think that's probably one of the mostô to create a sense of safety, containment, trustô will facilitate the, what's the word? Connection?ö

The tendency for the presence of the animal to facilitate rapport building was echoed by the majority of the participants. For example, one participant reported:



Well, I've definitely seen a change in the children that we have here, so I've seen that it's much easier to establish rapport with the kids, it's much easier to get them - they - it seems to shorten that initial period of getting to know each other and being comfortable to talk about really deep issues; it seems like that comes more naturally.

Another participant reported - I mostly use (the dog) for rapport building -

Most participants, furthermore, reported that the presence of the animal had an immediate impact on the client that resulted in enhanced levels of communication between the therapist and the client; the animal immediately engages with the client and uplifts the client's mood. One of the participants reported:

I had a particular patient, my first patient that I used [AAI with], was a patient that was depressed, a teenager, and he just didn't want to open up in therapy. And he had quite a lot of attachment issues. Yeah, so I thought that it would be worthwhile to give it a go - when the patient arrived, he was very depressed, very low mood, just his whole body - but as soon as I took (the dog) to him, he lit up. It was like such a strange experience, because this child, I have never seen him smile in therapy! And it was the first time that he actually, that you know, he wanted to come to therapy. Because he knew there was going to be an animal, and he really like lit up. He had more energy.

This was further echoed in a statement made by another participant:

- it's interesting like sometimes - it could be just getting up and walking, it could mean sitting and throwing a ball to the dog, and the dog bringing the ball back to you; some kind of interaction - I've noticed that just after a session like

that, that the client's mood definitely lifts up, and they're definitely less distressed after that interaction.

A third participant described a similar scenario, highlighting the impact of the animal on the client and their willingness to interact in the session:

The one client had Aspergers [sic] and the reason for referral was grief. So it was more overwhelming because it was more difficult and communication was a process, a bit. In the beginning she wanted the dog to be there but she wouldn't interact with him, but he must, *he must* be in the session. So I think it gave her more reassurance that he was there. And I think often she got bored easily, so he entertained her; because it was ongoing entertainment, it wasn't like a toy. So, um, she enjoyed interacting with him, and also she started talking to him which I found interesting. Because I didn't talk facilitate that; that came from her.

Based on the participants' reports, as discussed above, the presence of the animal facilitates the process of rapport building, and inevitably the formation of a therapeutic relationship. The bond that is formed between the client and the therapist, as well as between the client and the therapy animal, can positively influence the client's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. This was another significant theme that emerged during the process of data analysis.

### **Enhances Client's Self-esteem**

Research with regards to the benefits of AAT and AAI have consistently resulted in findings in support of the animal's influence on enhancing the client's self-esteem. As discussed in the previous chapters, one's self-esteem is positively affected by an enhanced self-concept and an increase in one's self-confidence (Lubbe & Scholtz, 2013). These attributions to the self are, then again, significantly influenced by one's sense of self-worth, personal agency and control

(Granger & Kogan, 2006; Lubbe & Scholtz, 2013). In addition, the inherent qualities of the animal that allow it to portray compassionate understanding and unconditional positive regard and acceptance have been found to contribute to an increase in the client's self-esteem (Fine, 2017; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003).

Most participants reported that the above mentioned unique qualities of the animal often resulted in the client feeling validated, heard, acknowledged and nurtured, but most importantly, worthy of the unique and authentic relationship and bond that was formed within the therapeutic setting. One of the participants reflected on the impact of the animal's validation on a client's sense of self-worth:

I also think that specifically with that client because he needed a lot of nurturance himself, he was actually showing what he needed without having to use words to say it. Because he never once said "I need to be loved", or "I feel unworthy" even though that was the messages [sic] that came through in therapy. But he showed that, he showed that he needed and when he was speaking and he was interacting with (the dog), (the dog) at once would go to sit on his lap, and you could see the reaction. I mean sometimes you can't explain the actual reaction of the patient, but you could see he really wants it and really appreciated the fact that (the dog) engaged so well with him it gave him nurturance, he felt nurtured, and I think he felt worthy. So the client responded well.

Another participant described the importance of unconditional positive regard and acceptance by using the example of improved reading skills in children that struggle with reading; "dogs improve reading by just the kid having the kids read to the dog, so it's less threatening because the dog is not going to correct them. The dog is not going to judge them." This unique effect of

AAI on promoting reading in children that experience difficulties has been highlighted throughout the literature (Fine, 2006). Enhanced feelings of safety allow the client to practice different skills, be it reading or otherwise, without the fear of judgement (Fine, 2006). As clients make progress within any given skill, they begin to experience a sense of confidence in their own abilities, as well as a sense of accomplishment, hence enhancing their self-esteem.

Simultaneously, enhanced self-esteem further motivates clients to continue attempting to perfect the particular skill seeing as there is a reciprocal relationship between one's self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment (Fine, 2006; Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Krawetz (as cited in DePrekel & Neznik, 2012, p. 45) and Burgon (2003), for example, studied the effects of Equine Assisted Intervention on clients' self-esteem, and found similar results as their participants attempted horse-riding as a skill.

The literature available on the efficacy of AAI in enhancing self-esteem often highlights the importance of the bond formed in therapy in further enhancing the client's self-esteem outside of the therapeutic setting (Fine, 2010). Most therapists view the therapeutic relationship as the most essential and significant tool in healing a client (Chandler, 2017). This is because more often than not, clients get to experience the true meaning of an authentic and real relationship for the first time within the context of therapy. It has been found that the bond that is formed between the client and the therapy animal has the tendency to not only enhance a client's self-esteem in the moment, but also outside of the therapeutic setting, as such clients often feel motivated to seek similar relationships outside of the therapy, and in doing so, their self-esteem is enhanced even further (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). This was additionally highlighted by a few of the participants in this study. One of the participants reflected on the simplicity of this transformation by stating "I mean that little boy on

the spectrum making eye contact; even when the dog wasn't there he made eye contact with me!

He had a range of facial expressions!ö Another participant stated:

And yet that child will bond and develop enough self-esteem to venture forth into the real worldí And I mean that's what we want. That's what we try and create in therapy, is a real world experience, a relationship that the patient has never had before. And I think the dog facilitates that uniqueness in that relationshipö

Most participants, however, specifically highlighted the importance of a sense of control and personal agency in contributing to the client's enhanced self-esteem. This was therefore a subtheme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, and will be discussed below.

#### **Enhanced sense of control.**

Most of the participants found that the presence of the animal within the therapeutic setting helped provide the client with an enhanced sense of control. One of the activities that therapists usually facilitate in the practice of AAI is to allow the client to take responsibility for the therapy animal (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). This activity provides clients with a basic sense of control; a basic need that most clients lack in their daily lives (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). An enhanced feeling of control over one's surrounding can positively influence one's self-esteem.

This was expressed by most of the participants. One of the participants stated:

I'd remind them beforehand that (the dog) would be joining us in the session, when I remind them about the appointment. Then I'd also take (the dog) to the waiting room so that they meet, introduce them, and I'd give the lead to themí I think to show them that the animal is there for them as well, it's not my dog or just there for me. So for me handing it over to them is like it's their time now.

Another participant reflected:

I think that's also a very important ingredient of developing the relationship; it's that, doesn't matter how vulnerable we are, doesn't matter how distressed we are, doesn't matter how disempowered we are, an animal, a dog, is completely vulnerable! It's completely dependent. So in terms of the power ratio, doesn't matter how inadequate you are, you will have power over that animal. And that impacts on your self-esteem.

A third participant stated:

I think it positively affected the first session because it gave the patient a little bit of control that he's never had. So he had to engage with the animal. I didn't step into that role of attempting to bring the animal, or to, you know, pet the animal before the time, he had to do that! He would in fact, and I mean he went and picked up on that (the dog) needed to go to the loo! So he said "I think (the dog) needs to go outside," and then he took (the dog) outside. So he actually taught me a few things. "No, she's going to sniff a while and then she's going to wee." And that gave him a little sense of control, so I think a sense of "this is mine, it's not yours" which he needed because he felt he didn't feel worthy, he felt that he didn't have control; his relational needs were definitely not met by his family. So, he's almost authentically stepping outside of the animal relationship.

As is evident from the above statements, animals tend to provide the client with the opportunity to feel in control of their environment, even if for the brief time period of the therapeutic session, hence enhancing their self-esteem. However, research with regards to AAI and its positive effect on clients' self-esteem has also shown a positive correlation between social

skills and self-esteem. Animals as instruments in teaching social skills was yet another theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants of this study and will be discussed next.

### **Instruments in Teaching Social Skills**

The presence of an animal within the therapeutic environment has been found to provide the client with ample opportunities to learn social skills (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). Often just the process of forming a relationship within the therapeutic environment, be it with the therapy animal or with the therapist, provides the client with examples of social skills that are required to form relationships outside of therapy (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). And as previously highlighted, animals tend to make the process of bonding easier for the client as they portray empathy and unconditional positive regard and acceptance towards the client, making the client feel heard, validated, accepted and worthy of nurturance and support. Not only does the client have the opportunity to experience these skills first hand, but these skills are further modelled by the therapy animal and the therapist (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010).

These findings with regards to AAI providing opportunities for enhanced social skills were confirmed by the participants of this study. One of the participants reported:

So when you get an abandoned dog when that dog came into my garden the first time, it dug a hole and wanted to bury itself. That's how abused and abandoned it was. Then (the dog) immediately starts socialising with the other dogs. But people look at this dog and they say 'it's so well trained, it's so unbelievable!' It took hours! Because again, it's a therapy, it's a bond; you're developing a bond with the animal. It makes a lot of sense because I mean the bond ultimately the dog is modelling to the patient social skills!

Another participant reported:

I'd definitely recommend it to people that haveô that can bond with animals themselves. Because I think it would be so uncomfortable for the therapist to bring in the animal and the client can instantly notice that you don't have a bond. Because you're also modelling the relationship for them.

One of the participants further reflected on the animal providing opportunities for children to learn through firsthand experience and concrete examples that enables them to better integrate what they have learnt through the process of therapy:

Ok, so if the animal does, at some stage, do something that you can reflect on, then it often is a living period [sic] to the child that makes sense to the childí Speaking hypothetically to a child does not work! Even the very intelligent ones, they still struggle with it; they want concrete examples that they can see! But it's much better for them to see it, and experience it, and for you to kind of know the moment and speak about it straight away.

Another participant stated:

... which is a massive [success], with an autistic child that is literally housebound with agoraphobia! And yet that child will bond and develop enough self-esteem to venture forth into the real world. Because ultimately, the social skills that we learn or hopefully we add to our repertoire in therapy, needs to be generalised. And the research does indicate that in AAIs, the gains are transferred more readily outside.



A third participant touched on the importance of flexibility in relationships and how the animal's presence may have allowed her to model the importance of flexibility and authenticity to the client:

í but I think that was also good for our relationship because it also shows flexibility, and adjusting to a situation that you might not always enjoy; but, in the outside world that's also going to happen sometimes! You are also going to have to experience things that you might not enjoy, and that's okay! You can still be authentic in that without harming yourself or anybody else.

There were a range of specific social skills that participants referred to as being facilitated by the presence of the animal. For example, one participant in response to the interview question expressed:

So many, so many things! I think it can teach them how to nurture, how to receive nurturance, how to trust the space that they're in, trust that the animal is not going to hurt them, because the animal is good! It will teach them empathy. It will teach them that all kinds are unique, and all kinds should be loved and deserve love. It will also teach them to be [adaptive] and flexible with theô so the dog may decide to run away, and that's ok! Because it will come back later. And maybe even teach them to be ok with rejection in a sense; maybe the animal will want to first play with the ball and come say hello to you later. And that should be ok because we are different, and we have got our own needs! But, I mean, this can go on and on.

There were however two specific social skills that emerged repeatedly during the process of data analysis. These specific social skills make up the following subthemes: empathy and responsibility.

### **Empathy.**

As previously discussed, animals are authentic beings that portray exactly how they feel through their body language and behaviour. This simplistic manner of self-expression makes it much easier for clients to determine the animal's feelings and intentions within the moment, hence enabling clients to learn to appreciate and be sensitive to the unique, individual needs of the animal, as well as provide them with an outlet for the loving parts of themselves (Gonski, 1985; Ross, 1992). This process fosters a sense of empathy within the client; a skill that is valuable and essential in the formation of authentic relationships (DePrekel, 2012; Fine, 2010; Parish-Plass & Oren, 2013). This skill is further reinforced as the client is provided with opportunities to not only experience empathy first hand, as it is portrayed by the animal towards the client, but also to observe the therapist's portrayal of empathy towards the animal as it is modelled (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017).

Most of the participants in this study expressed that the presence of the animal enabled the clients to establish within themselves a sense of empathy, through providing opportunities for this skill to be modelled, through firsthand experience of the animal's portrayal of empathy, through learning the individual needs of the animal, as well as through allowing the client to feel safe enough to express the loving parts of themselves. This was reflected by participants' statements. One participant reported that "It will teach them empathy. It will teach them that all kinds are unique, and all kinds should be loved and deserve love because we are different, and we have got our own needs!" This participant further reflected:

And I think so maybe also that! Having animals that's [sic] not perfect, having an animal that might have a limp or that might have one eye! Because we get patients that are different, or that feels not worthy, and [who] needs [sic] nurturance and kindness, and that struggles to relate to humans because humans can really be cruel!

Another participant stated: "So, socially I think it teaches them a lot of skills, and in terms of empathy as well, I think." This participant further explained:

so they definitely see us being affectionate towards the dog, hands on with the dog, we stroke and we love. With the tortoises as well, we always feed first, we explain everything; we scratch their necks, so that they can see how to handle the animals before they're allowed near the animal. I'll call the dog and we'll sit and we'll stroke, and we'll love the dog and talk to the dog.

A third participant stated:

Um, sometimes there's no talking. So the children just sit and stroke, um, and just be with the dog. I think sometimes children get a lot of pleasure from nurturing an animal, especially if they don't have animals at home. So I think they feel better about the fact that that is time that they can love. It will teach them to nurture and to receive nurturance.

Based on the above statements, the presence of the animal, as perceived by a number of the participants, provided ample opportunities for the clients to learn and foster within themselves a sense of empathy and compassion.

### **Responsibility.**

Therapists practicing AAI have the opportunity to get the client involved in caring for and taking responsibility for the therapy animal through simple exercises (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). The client would in such instances be responsible for understanding the body language of the therapy animal, as well as to evaluate the needs of the therapy animal (DePrekel, 2012). This enables the client to feel a sense of control, as discussed previously, and to learn and understand the concept of responsibility in relation to the self, others and the relationship as a whole (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017).

The concept of AAI facilitating responsibility in clients is very closely related to establishing a sense of control, which was discussed as a subtheme of enhancing the self-esteem of the client. The participants often referred to the animal's ability to enhance the client's sense of control; however, it is important to acknowledge that this was done by providing opportunities that required the client to take responsibility for the animal. One of the participants described handing over the lead of the therapy dog to the client upon introduction, as a means to communicate to the client that "it's their time now" –

Another participant expressed that, because of her own unfamiliarity with dogs, the client alone was given the responsibility to care for and interact with the animal; "So he had to – he had to engage with the animal. I didn't step into that role of attempting to bring the animal, or to, you know, pet the animal – he had to do that!" This participant further expressed that the client was therewith automatically placed in the role of having to take responsibility for the vulnerable animal and that the client took this responsibility and advocated for the needs of the therapy animal, as illustrated in the participant's statement:

He would in fact, and I mean he went and picked up on that (the dog) needed to go to the loo! So he said 'I think (the dog) needs to go outside', and then he took (the dog) outside. So he actually taught me a few things. 'No, she's going to sniff a while and then she's going to wee.' So he really enjoyed the sessions. I didn't have to do much activity wise.

A third participant expressed 'it's that, doesn't matter how vulnerable we are, doesn't matter how distressed we are, doesn't matter how disempowered we are, an animal, a dog, is completely vulnerable! It's completely dependent.' This statement illustrates that the human, in this case the client, will inevitably be responsible for the well-being of the animal.

The above statements illustrate a number of participants' observation of the numerous opportunities that can foster a sense of responsibility in clients. One of the participants summed up the process of facilitating opportunities for the client to acquire social skills, specifically empathy and responsibility, quite adequately by stating:

'but inevitably it would be it would definitely help them to realise that any creature, regardless of whether it's an animal or human animal [sic], any creature can have an impact. And you as an individual have an impact, not only on animals but on others as well. So however you look at it, whether you work with personality or whether you work with depression or bipolar [sic], or whatever you work with, it will go both ways. It will teach them to nurture and to receive nurturance. It will teach them responsibility; to take responsibility but to also realise that not everything is but also to realise that they don't have to take responsibility for everything.'

### **Presence in the Here and Now**

One of the themes that emerged during the semi-structured interviews was that the presence of the animal within the therapeutic milieu facilitated presence in the here and now. According to Chassman and Kinny (as cited in Bruneau & Johnson, 2011, p. 4) animals are free spirits that respond within the present moment and hence bring a certain spontaneity to the therapeutic environment. As such, they provide opportunities to explore issues in the here and now, consequently, increasing the client's self awareness and providing the therapist with rich data to reflect on (Yalom, 2006).

Most of the participants in this study reflected on the therapy animal's tendency to facilitate presence in the moment and thereby providing opportunities for both the therapist and client to gain awareness of and reflect on the issues that arise in the moment. One of the participants simply reflected that the presence of the animal facilitated presence in the here and now in the client:

And I think, with him, it was just a case of being able to relax and almost being more present. If I look at that other little boy that was in grade 3, the puppy allowed him to be present. And I think that's kind of like what the animals bring; what I've seen in my personal experience here at the school.

Another participant reflected on the importance of remaining in the present moment within the therapeutic environment:

I think that's part of my rebellion as well, bringing the animal in! There's a fluidity, there's a lack of structure there. There's a spontaneity. And at the end of the day, I think there's a glimpse of reality there. So the focus is on relationships or anything that enhances the relationship; remaining in the here and now impacts

on the then and there. So in terms of your present interaction, the then and there will come into the here and now.

This participant further provided the following example:

I mean look here, sometimes erroneously, I sometimes use the cat. But the cat is not invited; the cat just walks in! But again the cat has to because the cat will lie there on a specific patient's lap and then the patient will interact with it! But that's not controlled; the cat, as I say, just because you have no control, the cat might then just walk out and the patient might feel rejected! [And you reflect on that], how do you feel about it you know, what's happening here?

A third participant expressed a similar experience with a client that was struggling with depression. This participant reported:

I did notice the one the day that the client was particularly down that (the dog) was also really down and he actually went to sit by the door! Well I basically just asked her how does she feel about (the dog) sitting by the door? And then she kind of said yeah, that's how people feel around me when I'm sad. So then we kind of had to process that and kind of validate that sadness is not a problem, just that there are different ways to communicate sadness! I think it facilitated what actually happens! and a way for her to show me and explain to me that that's how she is feeling, she's feeling that when she is feeling sad or depressed her family kind of moves away from her! And then she feels guilty.

Yet another participant reflected that the animal's tendency to operate in the present moment, combined with the animal's ability to mirror the emotions of the client, enabled the therapist to gain awareness of the client's state of mind:

Well some of the things that children are going through is demonstrated through the animal. So that's a big thing, like the ADHD when our animals are more excitable. And it's interesting because our animals' behaviours change according to the child we're seeing. And I've proven that over and over. So with an anxious, withdrawn child, our therapy dog – the retriever, she will be a lot calmer and she'll try and wrap her body around the child, for example, or she'll come down to the child's level.

This participant further explained that the animal was a great tool in facilitating mindfulness through simple exercises:

And often is, um – ok, even mindfulness you can incorporate when you're working with the dogs! Because you can make them stroke the dog, and [ask] – how does it feel? What does it smell like? – You know, those sorts of things.

The majority of the participants of this study observed that the animal facilitated presence in the moment. In fact, one of the participants highlighted that the animal's presence resulted in a change in the perspective of the client and facilitated the emergence of a more positive and mindful outlook. According to this participant:

– also (the animal) – it was almost like it put things in perspective for them a little bit like, I think I need to expand. It's not like they want to dismiss their problems but more like it puts things into perspective; like life, and not only focusing on the issue, or – something that bothers you, but also considering other things as well. I don't know if that makes sense? – I think it definitely, having an animal in the room almost puts a different perspective on things; you see life, you



see everything, you don't just see the problem. And that is what solution focused is all about; noticing other things outside your frame of reference.

The ability of the animal to react within the moment, and hence facilitate presence in the moment for the client influences the client's expression and access to emotions within the therapeutic environment. This was one of the themes that emerged during the semi-structured interviews and will be discussed in the following section.

### **Catalysts for Emotion**

The presence of an animal in the therapeutic environment has been shown to have an immediate calming effect that results in the client feeling comfortable and safe in what may have otherwise been perceived as an intimidating environment (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017). This unique effect of the therapy animal's presence remains intact throughout the treatment process and tends to provide the client with a sense of warmth that aids the client to be more willing to not only access, but also to express their emotions without the fear of judgement (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2010). As a result, the presence of an animal can provide the client with the space to release emotions that they may otherwise be unwilling to access or express. This is one of the most commonly highlighted benefits of AAT and AAI emerging from the research findings. The present study confirmed these cathartic effects of AAI and AAT.

All of the participants in this study reported that the presence of the animal facilitated the expression of emotions in clients be it through providing opportunities for therapeutic touch and affection, a distraction, and/ or through providing a transitional object or objects of projection for the client and therapist. Participants, in addition, reported that the presence of the animal would in some instances diffuse excessive emotion and reactive behaviour hence allowing for a healthy

release of emotion in the present moment. These four elements make up the sub-themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, and will be discussed below.

### **Therapeutic touch and affection.**

It is well-known that therapists are extremely limited in their ability to provide soothing touch and physical affection towards clients due to the real or perceived threat of client exploitation (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). One of the benefits of AAI is that the animal can provide the client with opportunities for therapeutic touch and affection, especially in times when the client may be experiencing painful and difficult emotions (Bruneau & Johnson, 2011; Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). This therapeutic touch has been found to have a calming effect on the client and hence it does not only help to soothe the client's pain just long enough for the client to examine and work through their emotions during this otherwise overwhelming experience, but may also assist the client to sit with that emotion and explore the emotion more deeply and for a longer period of time (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010).

The majority of the participants reflected on the beneficial effects of the animal's ability to provide the client with opportunities for therapeutic touch and affection. One participant explained:

(The dog) at once would go to sit on his lap, and you could see the reaction. I mean sometimes you can't explain the actual reaction of the patient, but you could see he really wants it and really appreciated the fact that (the dog) engaged so well with him. Yeah, so it calmed him down, it gave him nurturance, he felt nurtured. He really started to open up in the concerns he would share in therapy about how the relationship between his parents and him, like the whole dynamic was

Another participant reported:

And she just sat there and rubbed the dog the whole time. And that was the whole therapy... And I couldn't believe that that dog just sat there for an hour, or 40 minutes or whatever. And therapy is also about timing and I think we as human beings, with all our lofty goals, become very impatient.

A third participant reflected:

Maybe because obviously we don't hold children we nurture children in an indirect way in therapy but we don't physically. And then obviously I try and integrate the dog into therapy and we'll love the dog and talk to the dog. Um, sometimes there's no talking. I think sometimes children get a lot of pleasure from nurturing an animal. So I think they feel better about the fact that that is time that they can love.

Yet another participant reflected:

We've mainly used the puppy with a child on the Autistic [sic] Spectrum, and this one that has [a] very bad bereavement situation, and it's just allowed the expression of emotion a lot more with him. For example, with the bereavement little boy, (the dog) lay with her head on his lap for the whole session and just stared at him. And then with the autistic, um, little boy, he likes grooming her and she loves him. I think the fact that she's very calm, the fact that he can touch her anywhere, and stroke her, and stuff like that (the dog) engages very nicely with the kids.

It is evident from the above statements that the participants of this study have experienced that animals can facilitate therapeutic touch and affection resulting in the client feeling calm and

nurtured, and as a result the clients were in some instances able to express their emotions more readily, and in others, it enabled the client to sit with and explore their emotions more deeply and for a longer period of time. Furthermore, interaction with the therapy animal can at times act as a form of distraction, allowing clients to express their emotions freely. Animals presenting a form of distraction was another subtheme that emerged during the process of data analysis.

### **Distraction.**

It has been noted that at times the presence of an animal within the therapeutic environment can act as a form of distraction (Fine, 2010). It is well known that often in therapy, therapists may introduce some sort of activity, especially with child clients, to act as a form of distraction and enable the flow of thoughts and emotions freely and within the present moment (Bruneau & Johnson, 2011). Having an animal present during the therapeutic process has been found to fulfil this role appropriately (Chandler, 2005, 2012, 2017; Fine, 2010). This was echoed in the responses of the participants of this study.

A number of the participants found that the presence of the animal presented the client with a form of distraction that enabled the clients to access their emotions more readily and without concerns about how they may be presenting themselves to the therapist; hence feeling safe within the therapeutic space. This was reflected in the participants' responses:

In my experience with my 2 clients, it helped a lot because especially with the adult one, because she was very uncomfortable, and very nervous it was almost like it distracted her from the actual process. Although we still spoke about the same things, she wasn't as focused on what she was saying and how she was saying it. She was holding the dog and looking at him and touching him; it's like it calmed her down. But it was a bit of distraction, but she could still access her

emotionsí I think it depends on the client, with her, having all the focus on herô then definitely the dog helped a lot. They almost forget that they're actually talking about things because they're so busy focusing on the dog.

öYeah I think the most important part for me, because I am a registered Counsellor, and I only use (the dog) for rapport building or for a bit of a distraction to get to the real emotions.ö

öí I don't want animals to ever be a distraction, but it's actually a distraction half the time; so because they're focusing on what the animal is doing, you can get a lot out of them.ö

Based on the above, the presence of the animal within the therapeutic environment can act as a form of distraction for the client, allowing them to better access and communicate their emotions within the given moment. Furthermore, the participants expressed that once these emotions were expressed, the animal held and contained the client's emotions, hence taking the role of a transitional object and/ or object of projection as discussed below.

### **Transitional object or object of projection.**

The role of a transitional object within the therapeutic process is to öalleviates the stress of the initial phases of therapy by serving a comforting, diverting role until the therapist and patient have developed a sound rapportö (Kruger & Serpell, 2006, p. 30). Based on the literature available on AAI, the therapy animal creates an opportunity for clients to take their subjective experiences and project them onto the therapy animal; hence, bestowing upon the therapy animal the role of a transitional object, allowing them to hold their needs and emotions until such time as they are ready and able to move to a higher, more socially acceptable level of functioning (Chandler, 2005; Kruger & Serpell, 2006).

The majority of the participants in this study reflected on the role of the animal as a transitional object for the client, holding and containing the client's emotions, and enabling the client to communicate and process their emotions.

One participant stated:

And so the way he would interact with (the dog), made it possible for him to share his own experiences, by using the animal almost as an object. So we'd tell a story, actually we used (the dog) to tell a story about (the dog's) life.

Another participant reflected:

Well obviously, you see the dog is a, what's the word, not transference object, what do you call it? Yes, transitional object. So by talking about the dog, you're actually talking about yourself and your own woundedness. So it's also deflected a bit. So you have to be careful, it is a form of triangulation, but ultimately you're talking through the dog and the patient talks to you through the dog. So the dog is there nonverbally obviously. And that's what we bring to therapy, and that's what the animal. I may say maybe I'm a bit manipulative but obviously people ask me about the therapy dog, and that introduction enables me to share with them the dog's own woundedness. So you're also modelling the importance of that in this space; it's ok to share about your woundedness. This is what we need to do here. Because ultimately the light is only going to appear in your wound; the wound is the gateway to the light. So by sharing the dog's brokenness with the patient, the patient then feels much more comfortable sharing their [own] brokenness. And therefore the healing then takes place.

A third participant explained:

He really started to open up, and he also showed his more because I work very relationally, I saw his relational needs come out through how he interacted with the animal, and that was just amazing to see. Yeah, just the way he would speak to him, the concerns he would share in therapy about how the relationship between his parents and him, like the whole dynamic was I could see that play out with the dog; so the way he would speak to the dog was the way he wanted his parents to speak to him. I also think that specifically with that client, because he needed a lot of nurturance himself, he was actually showing what he needed without having to use words to say it.

In addition to the above, animals possess mirror neurons that enable them to closely reflect the emotions of the client. This ability of the animal enables both the client and the therapist to gain awareness of the client's inner turmoil so that they may be reflected on and resolved (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003; Chandler, 2005; Chandler et al., 2010; Coleman, 2012).

One of the participants reported:

I did notice the one the day that the client was particularly down that (the dog) was also really down and he actually went to sit by the door. Well I basically just asked her "how does she feel about (the dog) sitting by the door?" And then she kind of said "yeah, that's how people feel around me when I'm sad." So then we kind of had to process that. I think it facilitated a way for her to show me and explain to me that that's how she is feeling, she's feeling that when she is feeling sad or depressed her family kind of moves away from her. And then she feels guilty. Um, so that helped for me also to get an image and also to explain to her, or to be able to also discuss it together at the end of the day.

Another participant reflected on the change in the animal's behaviour in accordance with the client:

But I can't say that I haven't used the other [dog], he's a lot more boisterous, and with my ADHD children it works so beautifully! And sometimes won't listen like the first time, if you give him a command, then he'll listen the second time, and then we always bring that to therapy. So we chat about it and I always say "look how much energy he has!" And the kids will be like "yeah, no, I've also got energy." You know what I mean? So you kind of integrate it when you use it.

This participant further reflected on how the dog's reaction to certain child clients led the therapist to ask the relevant questions that enabled the children to reveal their stories and hence begin the process of healing:

We have [had] amazing cases where our dogs have confirmed sexual abuse! So children not speaking about it, parents having no idea about it, and the way our dogs reacted to the certain children that had been sexually abused! I don't know what it is, but the difference in our dogs led us to say "let's just ask certain questions", which led to a lot coming out.

Based on the above statements, animals can at times act as transitional objects, allowing clients to reveal their own "woundedness" through the animal, they further hold these emotions for the client, allowing them to process their "woundedness" until such time as they are ready to move forward. Participants also expressed that because the clients project their own feelings onto the animal, and that the animal is able to mirror the client's emotions, they have been able to gain awareness of the client's inner turmoil, and, ultimately, reflect on and begin the process of healing.



In addition, the presence of the animal has been found to act as a buffer in times where clients experience and express excessive emotions or reactive behaviours. This is partly due to the clients gaining awareness of their impact on the therapy animal, as well the therapy animal's tendency to mirror the client's emotions and behaviour. This was yet another subtheme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

### **Diffuses excessive emotion and reactive behaviour.**

Based on the findings of this study, animals tend to act as a buffer in terms of diffusing the excessive expression of emotions and reactive behaviours within the therapeutic space. As discussed previously, the presence of the animal within the therapeutic environment has an uncanny way of getting clients to become more aware of the impact of their presence on others (DePrekel, 2012). For example, during couples or family therapy, issues may surface that may overwhelm the clients and result in a dispute (Fine, 2010). However, the presence of the animal in the session has been found to diffuse and stabilise the situation and clients become more aware of how they express overwhelming emotions, such as hurt or anger, hence eliminating counterproductive expressions of emotion (Fine, 2010). The presence of the animal can also diffuse reactive behaviours, especially in children that present with impulsivity issues (Fine, 2010). In such instances, the client becomes aware of the impact of their behaviour and how it may pose a threat to themselves as well as to the therapy animal, and hence clients implement control over their disruptive behaviours and focus more on the purpose of therapy (Bruneau & Johnson, 2011; Fine, 2010).

A number of the participants of this study had similar experiences with regards to the animal acting as a buffer and diffusing excessive expression of emotions. One of the participants reported:

í in one of our sessions, it was a joint session with mum and the teenager, and (the dog) was in the session. And when the mum started crying, (the dog) actually went to go sit next to her. And it actually also diffused the situation, because immediately the teenager, who would have been shouting and screaming in [sic] that stage, didn't, because the dog was present. And so as soon as the teenager started speaking, (the dog) moved over to his side. And he started to you know, I don't know the word, but still speak to his mum, but it was almost like a buffering effect.

Another participant reported:

í (the dog) doesn't like conflict at all, so he defused that and everyone in the session picked up on that. So when they would raise their voice a little bit, (the dog) would go sit in the corner!í But if they spokeô [even] if they were still talking about stuff that was hurtfulí that was ok for him as long as it was still in a respectful manner.

A third participant explained:

So, when he's very anxious he gets facial ticsí and with the ADHD, I used to have a swerve [sic] chair and he'd move like this [demonstrated rapid swerving] the whole time. And when the puppy is in the room, he sits still and he can still communicate his thoughts without, you know, being distracted and he has zero facial tics.

As is evident from the above statements, a number of the participants of this study found that the presence of the animal would at times, and appropriately so, have a buffering effect on clients' expressions and behaviours. The animal's presence would enable clients to not only

regulate their expression of excessive emotions, but also to regulate disruptive behaviours that may otherwise be disruptive to the therapeutic process.

### **Summary of Findings**

In summary, different themes and subthemes emerged from this study. Each theme has been illustrated by various statements made by the participants of this study, and the relevant available literature has been incorporated in the discussion of these themes and subthemes. The first theme that was identified was animals as social lubricants for therapy. This theme included three subthemes, namely, the therapy and therapist viewed as less threatening, enhanced feelings of safety, and creating a calming effect. The second identified theme was facilitating rapport. This was thereafter followed by the third theme enhancing client's self-esteem, which included an enhanced sense of control as a subtheme. The next theme identified was animals as instruments in teaching social skills. This theme included two identified subthemes, namely, enhanced empathy and responsibility. The fifth theme identified through the process of data analysis was presence in the here and now. Finally, catalysts for emotion was the sixth theme identified. This theme included four subthemes; therapeutic touch and affection, distraction, transitional objects or objects of projection, and diffusing excessive emotion and reactive behaviour.

### **Conclusions**

The focus of this chapter was to report the findings of this study. First, the sample used for this study was described. Next, the researcher introduced the identified themes and subthemes that emerged through the process of thematic analysis, and discussed each theme and subtheme using both relevant available literature as well as direct statements made by the participants. The findings were thereafter summarised. The following chapter will provide the conclusions, limitations and recommendations of the current research study.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the main findings of this research study and the conclusions reached. The value of the research is highlighted and the limitations of the study are briefly discussed. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research in this field.

#### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the healing variables of Animal Assisted Intervention as perceived by therapists who actively incorporate an animal into the therapeutic milieu.

The first theme that emerged was that participants perceived animals as social lubricants for therapy. Participants observed that the animal's presence within the therapeutic environment enhanced clients' feelings of safety, changed the clients' negative perceptions of the therapist and the therapeutic process, as well as provided the clients with a sense of calm. As a result, clients were perceived as more willing to interact with the therapist and, inevitably, more open to the therapeutic process.

The second emerging finding was that the participants perceived that the presence of the animal facilitated the process of rapport building. As a consequence of the animal's presence facilitating interaction between the client and the therapist, participants found that building rapport with clients was much easier and was achieved at a more rapid pace than usual. Additionally, this was associated with the clients' enhanced feelings of safety and sense of calm because of the animal's presence within the therapeutic environment. Participants reported that because of the empathic nature of the animal, the animal's portrayal of unconditional positive

regard and acceptance, clients were able to share their thoughts and emotions without the fear of judgement, and inevitably form authentic relationships with both the therapy animal and the therapists themselves.

Participants further reported that clients' self-esteem improved significantly because of the presence of the animal. This was further perceived to be as a result of the animal's empathic and unconditionally accepting nature, as well as because the presence of the animal provided clients with the opportunity to give and receive love and affection. Furthermore, as perceived by the participants, the presence of the animal provided clients with opportunities, as facilitated by the therapist, to take responsibility for the animal, hence providing the client with a sense of control. An increased sense of control was reported to positively affect clients' self-esteem and self-worth.

As perceived by the participants of this study, the presence of the animal provided ample opportunities for clients to learn social skills, especially empathy and responsibility. Participants reported that in their opinion, the animal's presence allowed the client to experience empathy firsthand, as well as facilitating opportunities for this skill to be modeled. Furthermore, the participants perceived that clients were more attuned to the needs of the animal, hence it fostered in them compassion towards the needs of another living being. Participants also perceived an increased sense of responsibility in clients as a result of having to take responsibility for the needs and the wellbeing of the therapy animal. Furthermore, participants reported that they believed these learnt skills were better integrated by the client as they were given the opportunity to experience these skills firsthand.

Another key finding was that the presence of the animal facilitated the client's presence in the here and now. Participants reported observing that clients were more aware of themselves

and others in the present moment because of the presence of the animal. Additionally, participants perceived an increase in therapeutic data to work with during the therapeutic process. This was associated with having the opportunity to observe the interaction between the client and the therapy animal, as well as the animal's behaviour in response to the client. Animals have been reported as closely attuned to the emotions of the client, and because of their ability to mirror the client's emotions in the moment, the therapist is able to gain insight into the client's inner turmoil and reflect on these findings with the client.

The final theme that was identified was participants' perceptions that the animal's presence acted as a catalyst for clients' emotions. At one point or another, clients were observed as being able to not only access deeper or more difficult emotions, but also to sit with these emotions for a longer period of time. The presence of the animal provided clients with therapeutic touch and affection which enabled them to feel comforted when experiencing difficult emotions. Based on the participants' perceptions, the animal also acted as a form of a distraction, allowing clients to share information and access emotions that they would have otherwise avoided. The animal further provided clients with a transitional object or object of projection, allowing clients to not only share their own turmoil through stories about the animal, but also to project their emotions onto the animal and allow the animal to hold and contain their emotions until such time as they felt ready to move forward. The presence of the animal was, in addition, perceived to act as a buffer at times when clients were experiencing excessive emotions or portraying reactive behaviour. Participants perceived calmer behaviour from children with impulse control problems because of the presence of the animal. Participants also reported that clients were able to regulate their expression of excessive emotions, such as anger, because of their awareness of

their impact on the animal. The animal's perceived ability to diffuse excessive emotions enabled clients to communicate and process overwhelming emotions more effectively.

Previous research explored appears to support the findings of this research study. The literature reviewed with regards to AAI and AAT demonstrated ways in which having an animal present during the therapeutic process can be beneficial to clients' wellbeing as well as the therapeutic treatment as a whole. The findings of this study suggest that AAI within therapeutic practices can positively affect the therapeutic process and facilitate healing in clients. Animals possess inherent qualities that facilitate movement in therapy and they do so at a pace that may have been harder to achieve in their absence and are therefore a great tool in the therapeutic treatment of patients and/ or clients.

### **Value of the Research**

The present study contributes to the expanding body of knowledge available on AAI practices within therapeutic settings. Within the South African context, AAI and AAT are both under practiced and underutilised. Many professionals within the field of psychology continue to view AAI with scepticism. Furthermore, because of the limited awareness of and knowledge regarding AAI, the average population within the South African context have preconceived ideas regarding AAI and AAT. Many continue to regard it as a risky form of practice, and as a result there is a limited demand for this form of practice, resulting in a lack of available resources for professionals who wish to pursue AAI or AAT.

This research study provides findings based on the anecdotal reports of professionals within the field of psychology and counselling, and in so doing it can appeal to more professionals that are interested in pursuing AAI and making use of the animal's inherent qualities in the therapeutic treatment of patients and/ or clients. Furthermore, this research study is based on the

perceptions of professionals that practice AAI within the South African context where research in this regard is highly limited.

Through providing findings in support of the healing variables of AAI as perceived by practicing registered psychologists and counsellors, this research study can increase professionals' awareness of the benefits of the human animal bond and of incorporating animals into the therapeutic milieu, and, in turn, increase the demand for resources such as animal training and certification schools.

This study has proved to be of significant importance to the researcher and has broadened the researcher's knowledge of not only AAI practices, but also the importance of the human animal bond, comparative psychology, and the value of nature in the therapeutic treatment of clients. The current study has, in addition, enabled the researcher to identify other areas of study in this field that require further attention and scientific validation.

The qualitative nature of this study and the use of open ended questions in the semi-structured interviews with participants allowed the participants to share a depth of information that would have not been attained otherwise should quantitative methods have been used. Therefore, the findings of this study allowed for an in-depth understanding of the healing variables of AAI as perceived by professionals that actively and strategically incorporate animals into their therapeutic practices.

Although this research study contributes to expanding the body of knowledge regarding AAI in the South African context, it has its limitations. These limitations will be discussed in the next section.



### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, with regards to the methodology of the study, non-probability purposive sampling and snowballing methods were used to identify participants for the study. This implies that the sample of participants selected for this study were chosen for a particular purpose and in an uncontrolled manner, rather than acquiring participants using random selection (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012). As a result, the sample of participants selected for this study may not be an accurate representation of the general population of professionals that purposefully incorporate animals into the therapeutic milieu. This can negatively impact the trustworthiness of the study, and limit the generalisations drawn from this study.

Furthermore, the sample selected for participation in this study consisted of professionals that primarily incorporate a dog into their practice of AAI. Hence, the research sample does not appropriately represent professionals that incorporate other animals into their therapeutic practice. In addition, all the participants selected for this study were Caucasian. This could be due to the use of non-probability purposive and snowball sampling, limiting the researcher's control over the representativeness of the sample, as well as the researcher's lack of further knowledge with regards to non-Caucasian candidates that incorporate animals into their therapeutic practices. In addition, the researcher is only fluent in the English language and hence fluency in the English language was one of the selection criteria that may have further limited the potential sample pool. These factors with regards to methodology and sampling are considered as limitations to the study as the participants in this study do not represent variation with regards to ethnicity. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the ethnicity of clientele may vary depending on the ethnicity of the professional; hence, the study may not be an accurate representative of the

healing variables of AAI among a culturally diverse population. Yet again, this poses a limitation with regards to the generalisation of results and findings to the general population.

The recommendations for future studies in this area are discussed next.

### **Recommendations**

Future researchers that would want to study a similar phenomenon in a similar context should try and use random probability sampling to assess perceptions from various ethnic groups.

It is further recommended that homogenous samples of an ethnic variation be used. This may enable future researchers to compare and contrast research findings and results and provide findings that allow for better generalisation to the general population.

It is further suggested that future researchers approach participants that incorporate a variety of non human animals in their therapeutic practices to widen the perspective and hence the accessibility of AAI in such practices.

This research additionally made use of mostly international publications on AAI and AAT as local research with regards to AAI practices is limited. It is therefore recommended that future researchers make use of studies conducted within the South African context in order to better represent the benefits of AAI practices within the South African context.

Finally, it has been suggested repeatedly throughout the literature that the biggest obstacles to AAT and AAI practices in therapeutic settings is that the efficacy of such practices have not been proven through empirical research, and rather rely on qualitative and anecdotal research methods. The current researcher thus recommends that future researchers select quantitative research methods and experimental randomly controlled designs in order to provide empirical findings in this area and hence eliminate the obstacles and stigmas that surround AAT and AAI practices.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this chapter was to report the conclusions of this study and a summary of the overall findings of this study was presented, highlighting the value of the research study. Next, the researcher briefly discussed the limitations of the current study as a means to provide appropriate baseline for the readers of this study. Finally, the researcher provided possible recommendations for future prospective researchers that aim to study related topics within a similar context.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Biographical Information:**

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Profession :
4. Registration Title:
5. Place of practice:
6. Type of animal/s used for the purpose of AAI or AAT:

#### **General Information:**

1. Have you specialised in AAT?
2. When did you become interested in AAI? And why?
3. How often do you practice AAI?
4. Do you have a preference for the type of animal to use while practicing AAI? And why?
5. Is there a particular group of clientele that you believe benefit from AAI?
6. Is there a particular group of clientele that you believe would not benefit from AAI?
7. Is there a particular group of clientele that you believe pose a risk to the practice of AAI/  
the therapy animal?
8. How do you usually introduce the therapy animal to the client?
9. What do you find to be the general reaction of clients when introduced to the therapy  
animal? And what are the exceptions?

10. Are there a specific number of sessions that you believe will take for clients to reach their goals for therapy when practicing AAI? Does this differ from the number of sessions when AAI is not practiced?
11. In your opinion, what qualities does the therapy animal bring to the sessions?
12. In your opinion, what are the immediate benefits of AAI for the client?
13. In your opinion, what are the long term benefits of AAI for the client?
14. In your opinion, what are the benefits of AAI for you as the practitioner?
15. In your opinion, what are the benefits of AAI for the therapy animal?
16. In your opinion, is there a specific therapeutic modality that best complements AAI? And why?
17. Have you ever experienced limitations in practicing AAI?
18. Would you suggest AAI to other professionals? And why?
19. Is there any further information with regards to AAI that you believe the interview questions have not sufficiently explored?
20. Is there a particular case study you would like to share?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Participation Information**

The significance of the bond that is formed through animal companionship can be found in narratives throughout history. In fact, often a pet is viewed as an integral part of the family and valued as deeply as a member if not more. This has resulted in numerous studies regarding the incorporation of animals within the therapeutic environment and the unique positive impact of their presence on the client.

The aim of this study is to highlight the healing variables of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) as perceived by therapists that actively and purposefully incorporate animals into the therapeutic milieu. A qualitative research approach will be used for the purpose of this study and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants. The semi-structured interview is estimated to take between 45 to 60 minutes in total. The interview will focus on different factors surrounding the practice of Animal Assisted Intervention, with specific focus on benefits of AAI for the therapy clients.

A consent form will be provided should you be interested in participating in this study. This consent form will include further information regarding participation and what it entails. You will be able to withdraw from participation at any time before or during the study. The contact information of the researcher is provided on this form as well as the consent form.

Should you consent to participation, we will go ahead and schedule the interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. You will also be provided with a preliminary interview questionnaire that will provide you with insight into nature of questions that will be asked. This will also enable you to reflect on the questions at hand.

Your time, insight and participation is highly appreciated by the researcher and hence you are welcome to contact the researcher at any given time during the study to ask any further questions with regards to the study, to share further input, or share any concerns that you may have.

Additionally, the researcher will provide a copy of the completed treatise should you be interested in the findings of the study and request feedback.

Kindest regards,

Parnaz Salmani Torghi

(Contact number removed)

### Appendix 3



PO Box 77000, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, 6031, South Africa mandela.ac.za

#### Consent Form

**TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:**

THERAPISTS' PERCEPTION OF THE HEALING VARIABLES OF ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTION

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Parnaz Salmani Torghi

**CONTACT NUMBER:**

(Contact number removed)

**DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), \_\_\_\_\_ ..

(Profession) agree that Parnaz Salmani Torghi has invited me to participate in this research project being undertaken at the Nelson Mandela University Department of Psychology.

The reason for this study is to explore and describe the healing variables of Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI) as perceived by Psychologists who practice AAI or Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT). This has been explained to me by the researcher.

I understand that the information will be used for the completion of a Treatise in partial fulfilment of a Master of Arts degree in Clinical Psychology.

I understand that I will take part in an interview session, where I will be asked various questions regarding the practice of AAI or AAT, and the various positive impacts of such practice. In these interview sessions, I understand that only the researcher and I will be present, and that the interview will be audio-recorded. I understand that only I, the researcher, and the research supervisor will listen to and have access to the recordings. The recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and shredded after a period of five years. This has been explained to me by the researcher.

I do not know of any risks, but if I become concerned about my participation in the study, I will contact the researcher through the contact number provided above.

I understand that my identity will not be revealed and that the information gained during the study will be kept confidential.

I understand that the findings of the study will be shared with me at my request and any new information that may develop during the study will be communicated to me.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any point in time. I know that my decision to participate, or not, will not affect or impact negatively on my life.

The information was explained to me by the researcher, Parnaz Salmani Torghi, in English, as this is a language that I fully understand. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered satisfactorily.

I HEREBY CONSENT VOLUNTARILY TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS AND TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ABOVEMENTIONED RESEARCH STUDY:

Signed at í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í . (place) on í í í í í í í í í í í í í  
20í í .. (date)

Signature of participant í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í