

“WE GO THE EXTRA MILE FOR EACH OTHER”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN-
HORSE RELATIONSHIPS IN NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

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ABSTRACT

“WE GO THE EXTRA MILE FOR EACH OTHER”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN HORSE RELATIONSHIPS IN NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

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In this paper, I examine how Natural Horsemanship participants perceive the human-horse relationship. This is based on a survey of 154 respondents in the United States aged 18-70, 82% women and 18% men. The responses centered on two major themes of human-horse relationships: leadership/partnership and the influence of gender. These themes are representative of the shifting relationships between humans and horses due to the Natural Horsemanship movement's focus on specific aspects of working with horses, such as attention to ground work, viewing the horse as an individual, and maintaining established routines. I find that these interactions place a premium on the horses' agency within the human-horse relationship and that the practitioner's belief in the horse's agency informs the human's sense-of-self beyond their interactions with horse

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INTRODUCTION

Sociology has only recently turned their attention to the inclusion of animals as participants in social relationships, labelling this new interdisciplinary wave of inquiry “the animal turn” (Kalof & Montgomery 2011). This “turn” seeks to include animals where they were once ignored or marginalized as objects as a response to a public that both knows more, and cares more, about the countless animals in their lives, from the meat on their plate to the pets in their home. This is especially true for horses, who are situated in a grey area between companion animal and livestock – marking them both significant and complex by both horse enthusiasts and scholars involved in the animal turn. Furthermore, with the recognition of multispecies ethnography, researchers are examining the horse-human relationship with horses as engaged and entangled (Haraway 2003; Maurstad, Davis, and Cowles 2013).

Based on survey data, my study interrogates the ways humans navigate relationships with horses, identifying how humans and horses respond to each other as individuals through established routines, training methods, and other one-on-one interactions. I find that these human-horse relationships recognize agency in horses, with the inter-embodied activities forging shared meanings between the human and the horse. These shared meanings serve as a large component of the human’s self-concept, translating to their beliefs about themselves as a person in their everyday life.

Symbolic Interactionism and Animals

Symbolic interactionist literature excluded animals until 1979, when Bryant challenged longstanding beliefs that animals are not active agents in interactions, contributing to ethnographic research on contextual relations between humans and animals (Irvine 2012). In the past decade, scholars have begun to posit that human/animal interactions are intersubjective, with

the non-human animal and human individual sharing intentions, beliefs, and understandings of the situation (Irvine 2004; Brandt 2004; Maurstad et al. 2013). As Porcher (2014:1) explains, “society is human *with* and indeed *through* domestic animals,” demonstrating the need to include animals into social and academic thought.

The symbolic interactionist approach to human-animal relationships relies on the actors’ interpretation of outcomes from situations, with meaning being the product of active interpretation through social interaction (Dennis 2011). Irvine (2012) brings symbolic interactionism to the forefront of human-animal studies, allowing social scientists to place human-animal interactions in context and evaluate non-human animals as minded actors. This perspective acknowledges that humans categorize animals based on pre-conceived stereotypes including breed, sex, and age (Irvine 2012, Ramirez 2006). Because interest in social interaction has focused on a “human-only tradition,” non-human animals are often viewed as objects, rather than minded social actors Cerulo (2009:532). Arluke and Sanders (1993) found that human interactions with companion animals are a central part of contemporary social life. Importantly, the interactionist approach brings to the forefront ideas of identity and personhood in non-human animals, and asks questions of identity formation and attachment in human-animal interactions (Irvine 2012).

Human-Horse Relationships

In the United States, horses have moved away from their role as beasts of burden into new terrains, and relationships with horses have now evolved to situate them as family members, companion animals, therapy animals and performance partners rather than livestock animal or investment (Davis & Maurstad, 2016). Davis and Maurstad (2016) found that human-horse intra-action influences identity, self-awareness, and self-concept. In the social sciences, scholarly

investigation into human-horse relationships has increased with the advent of multispecies ethnography and new attention to the influence of the horse in therapeutic and recreational arenas (Davis & Maurstad, 2016). Attention to horse temperament and personality, training methods, and horse-keeping practices has increased in the animal sciences, with Hausberger et al. (2008)'s review of the horse-human relationship pointing to the need to identify copacetic matches between horse and human to lessen human injury and increase horse welfare.

Irvine (2004:3) argues “[w]hen interaction develops into a relationship, additional dimensions of animal selfhood become available as the animal’s intersubjective capacities become apparent.” Communication becomes a central part of human-horse relationships, often when humans shift their attention to a meaningful relationship with an individual horse (Bike 2008). This intersubjective friendship is an essential and central element to the ways that meanings are created and interpreted between humans and horses (Brandt 2004). Further, scholars such as Brandt (2004) and Sanders (2003) challenge Mead’s reliance on verbal language as the foundation of social experience, explaining non-verbal interspecies communication as an extension of symbolic interaction: humans and nonhuman animals work together, creating their own shared body language which each understands. Brandt (2004) explains that communication between humans and horses is through body language, causing the human to increase their bodily sensitivity and awareness to offer intent to the horse and, in return, the horse dynamically engages with the human. Brandt (2004:310) notes that this process of recognizing and responding to body language is a communicative action “that enables complex human-horse working and emotional relationships.” Maurstad et al. (2013:323) explains this communicative action as “intra-activities.” Intra-activities, or the process of “becoming together,” explores categories of co-being that affect the horse and their human, “focusing on how parties meet and

change as a result of their meeting” (Maurstad et al. 2013:323). Individual horse-human interactions evolve over time, with human and horse changing because of the relationship that is formed during these intersubjective engagements.

Most models of equine training recognize the horse as an individual, with specific behaviors attributed to either temperament or personality (DeAraugo et al. 2014). In an interrogation of the relationship between perceived personality traits of horse and female rider, Wolframm and Meulenbroek (2012) conclude self-reported personality traits of the human are predictive of perceptions of the horse’s temperament, predicting that the quality of the relationship influences the human’s interpretation of the horse. In a narrative analysis of the everyday practice of “becoming with,” Schuurman (2013) found that emotion work, scripts, and everyday practices are central elements to the human- horse relationships. Similarly, DeAraugo et al.’s (2014) investigation into training methods and human attachment noted that humans who needed less emotional support from the horse preferred a behavioral model of training—a model that cautions against projecting human emotional ideas and abstract thought in training. Finding significant difference between the training groups studied, DeAraugo et al. (2014) comment that horsepersons are likely react in a myriad of ways based on how they interpret the horse’s behavioral responses. Further, in a review of the human-horse relationship, Hausberger et al. (2007:8) noted horsepersons in Anglo-American horse communities report an emotional bond with the horse, though “little is still known... on how the reciprocal bond builds and what each partner put into the relationship.” Because human practices are a central element of the human-horse relationship, beliefs about the meaning of the horse’s behavior and/or personality play a significant role in training methods, approach, and interpretation of the horse.

Natural Horsemanship

In the last few decades, some attitudes toward horses have shifted toward an interest in “natural horsemanship.” Natural horsemanship (NH) is a turn that often extols getting back to ‘true’ nature of both humans and horses, less use of force and punishment, and finding a connection with the horse as a subject, rather than the use of the horse as a tool (Birke 2007, 2008). Originating in the United States, natural horsemanship has led to significant income and media coverage for select horsepersons who are typically male, but there has been a lack of academic interest in this social movement (Birke 2007; Latimer and Birke 2009). Birke’s (2007; 2008) exploration of the popularity behind the NH turn in Great Britain led to the discovery of similarities and differences in the discourse, technologies, and understandings of the horse’s point of view between NH and traditional horsemanship approaches. Birke and Latimer (2009) found that Natural horsemanship practitioners construct their identity as discursive, setting themselves up in opposition to traditional horsemanship practices. Many NH practitioners see traditional approaches as treating the horse like a tool, overusing equipment that treats the horse harshly rather than improving riding skills (Birke 2007). While there are major themes of partnership, trust, and co-being in Natural Horsemanship discourse, a common ground for most practitioners and advocates is a rejection of mainstream or traditional equestrian values and a belief in training and management methods that are closer to a horse’s natural behavior (Birke 2007). Natural horsemanship communities separate themselves from other horse communities due to their emphasis on connecting with the horse through an approach that uses trust and communication in contrast with a domineering approach that NH practitioners identify in traditional training approaches (Savvides 2012).

Gender

Research on traditional horse communities have looked at aspects of class, status, sexuality, and gender. Equestrian sports are marginalized due to being seen as elitist, classist, and feminine—though men still dominate the top tiers of competition (Dashper 2012). Due to the lack of sex segregation in equestrian sport, however, Dashper (2012) argues that a variety of masculinities, femininities, and sexualities are accepted, including openly gay men. Dashper (2012) found, in the dressage community she studied, heterosexual and homosexual men constructed their masculinity in opposition to femininity, showing that while a variety of masculinities and sexualities are accepted in a competitive equestrian community, men continued to devalue femininity and construct themselves in opposition to it. Gender order is still highly visible in equestrian sport such as harness and thoroughbred racing (Hedenborg 2015; Larsen 2015). Similarly, Dashper (2015b: 351), in an ethnography of British equestrians, found: “the feminization of horse riding offers women many opportunities to demonstrate their physical capabilities, skills and prowess in what was once a strongly male-dominated milieu.” Equestrian sports and leisure, she argues, challenges gender norms surrounding masculinity and femininity, particularly beliefs about strength and physicality (Dashper 2015b).

While Barclay (1980) attempts to explain girls and horses being suited to each other due to essential female qualities of nurturance and patience, he also points out that when riding is seen as a paid, professional sport, men still dominate the field. Many also believe that the “males who stick to it eventually become superior” (Barclay 1980:345). Thus, competitive equestrian sport is still a highly masculine activity, regardless of the seat and style the rider chooses to compete (Barclay 1980, Dashper 2012). Similarly, Birke and Brandt (2009:192) note that the NH movement is reminiscent of the iconographic cowboy, encompassing the masculine values of

toughness while embracing feminine values of “gentleness and caring.” Savvides (2011) challenges the woman-horse essentialization, noting that women initially used equine pursuits to challenge their status and ascribed gender roles. Dashper (2015b) concludes that equestrian women place their feminine identity of strength and physicality in opposition to non-equestrian women, though still conforming to feminine gender norms of caring and nurturing. However, in the NH community, gender is less marked, except when participants interact with larger horse worlds or when the practice of this style of horsemanship becomes a career venture (Birke and Brandt 2009; Savvides 2011).

Replicating Birke’s research questions (2007; 2008), my focus is not on what horse people do with horses but on how they interpret the actions and meanings of the human-horse relationship. Focusing on the natural horsemanship community, I ask: 1) *How does interaction with horses change the way people see themselves?* and conversely, 2) *How does that self-concept shape how they engage with horses?* Ideally, this will contribute to understanding horse-human relations by adding to current literature on the interplay between human self-concept and beliefs about horses with whom these humans have significant relationships. Additionally, understanding self-concept in relationships with horses informs on whether and how gender is marked in an equestrian community that sees itself as in opposition to traditional arenas.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME

Cooley (1902) asserted that without society, the individual does not exist. Because society and the individual are in a reciprocal relationship, self-concept is malleable over time and aligned with how the individual believes he or she is perceived (Rosenberg 1979; Schrauger and Schoenman 1979). Self-concept is “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to himself [or herself] as an object, shaped in part by self-identity, group context, and interaction with significant others (Rosenberg 1979: ix). Thus, self-concept is formed and sustained through human accounts of their interactions with others, including animal-others. Accounting for horses as social beings, and the ways that they are interpreted as such by humans, is an important aspect of social research (Sevillano and Fiske 2016).

Horsepersons often have increased and significant interactions with horses, giving them cause to think and care deeply about the horse’s mind. When humans know an individual animal, they are more likely to attribute internal reasons for the animal’s behavior (Morris et al. 2012). In this way, humans attempt to take the animal’s perspective, identifying the assumed causes and reasons for behavior as external or internal, depending on assumed motivations (Rajecki et al. 1995). Thus, in human-horse interactions, humans attempt to “take the role of the other” when interacting with horses, making assumptions about the horse’s perceptions of the human and the subjective feelings the horse has about the relationship (Mead 1934) This role-taking allows humans to make causal inferences about the horse’s behavior, attributing human *or* perceived equine motivations to the responses they receive (Gecas 1982). Natural horsemanship, in particular, informs how self-concept contributes to and creates meaning in horse-human interactions because its underlying tenets endorse the horse’s point of view (Miller and Lamb 2005; Birke 2007). Brandt (2004:3) states:

Natural horsemanship is a style of working with horses that is based on the premise that humans must understand the horse's thought process and way of being in the world and structure their interactions with horses based on this premise. As a training philosophy it endorses humane, non-forceful, and compassionate interactions between humans and horse.

In this way, NH practitioners align themselves with a style of being with horses that offers subjective agency to the horse: perceiving needs of care, awareness of size and strength, herd/prey animal responses, and finally, interest in a close relationship with humans.

Incorporating ideas of self-concept informs how interaction with horses changes the way people see themselves and how this self-concept shapes current engagements and intra-actions with the horse.

Bringing animals into sociological consideration includes attention the animal mindedness and the experiences that animals have in their interactions with humans and the world (Cohen 1989; Arluke and Sanders 1993; Jerolmack 2009). Drawing on this previous literature, I argue that, in their interactions with horse, humans: 1) Attempt to take the role of the horse; 2) Consider options and restrictions in their exchanges; and 3) Assume mutuality and/or intersubjectivity in these interactions (Cohen 1989).

THE CURRENT STUDY

Using a symbolic interactionist frame, informed by Cohen (1989), I explore the ways participants of Natural Horsemanship perceive their relationship and interaction with horses. I investigate if, why, and how respondent training methods have changed and the ways in which participants' beliefs about horses influence horse care and handling. This study contributes to current animal studies discourse on shifting human-horse relationships, identifying how horse communities create meaning with and understanding of the horse. Further, using open-ended and yes/no survey questions, I elicit participant's views about horses, training methods, and their interpretation of their relationship with the horse and the larger horse community. Replicating Birke's research questions (2007; 2008), my focus is not on what horse people do with horses but on how they interpret the actions and meanings of the human-horse relationship.

METHODS

Participants were self-selecting, identifying themselves as members of the NH community, and filled out an online survey after being recruited through snowball and purposive sampling such as common-interest friendship groups and directed social media posts targeting individuals actively involved in communities connected to Tom Dorrance, who is often viewed as one of the founding fathers of the NH movement (Miller and Lamb 2005; Tongco 2007). Sampling for this survey was aimed at the community of interest rather than the generalized horse owning public in order to investigate how NH practitioners interact with horses (Tongco 2007). To generate initial interest for my survey I contacted two prominent members of the NH community, one located in Tennessee and one in California, both regularly host and participate in training clinics, are active leaders in online communities surrounding NH methods of horsemanship, and overall are well-connected to the NH community in the United States. After taking the online survey, they forwarded the survey to other NH practitioners and/or endorsed my social media posts to increase attention and responses.

In sum, 154 individuals responded to the online survey, with the sample consisting of 127 women (82%) and 27 men (18%), demographics that are consistent with current data in the realm of horsemanship (Savvides 2011). The gender disparity is reflective of almost all arenas of the horse-world, though men still typically occupy the highest professional levels of the horse-world (Birke 2007; Coulter 2014). Participant ages ranged from 23 to 72 with 35% of respondents currently living in Washington, California, or Oregon. Most respondents have been involved with horses for all or a significant portion of their lives. Survey respondents varied from keeping horses on personal property to boarding horses at a facility. Following Birke's previous studies (2007, 2008) I did not ask any demographic questions regarding race, ethnic background, or

class. My focus was on participant experiences and beliefs about the human-horse relationship particularly how interactions with horses are interpreted and assigned meaning. Replicating Birke's (2007) questions, I asked participants how they defined their relationship with horses, if, how and why their approaches have changed, what has changed, and how these changes influence their relationship with horses and with the wider horse industry.

Engaging with the responses, I sorted the initial themes utilizing past findings by Birke (2007, 2008) and my own experience in the Natural horsemanship community. The initial themes included opposition to the traditional horse community, partnership, horse's point of view, communication and gendered descriptions of the horse and/or human. Being a horsewoman myself and actively engaged in the NH community, I had to consider pre-conceived notions about NH practitioners and approach this inquiry with careful analysis and reflexivity (Adler and Adler 1987). Because my initial membership into the NH community was that of member rather than researcher, my approach to analyzing themes and picking out key quotes involved expanding my focus and broadening my perspective (Adler and Adler 1987). The themes that emerged from my analysis arose from past research on the subject of natural horsemanship and noticings of word repetitions and keywords-in-context (Dey 1993; Glaser 2002; Ryan and Bernard 2003).

PARTNERSHIP/LEADERSHIP

The strongest theme that emerged from this study was that of partnership, though of course the meaning of partnership holds different connotations for individual NH practitioners. Participants perceived that horses viewed them as providers of food, safety, comfort, and work. Often, participants noted that their horses appear to like or *not be too bothered* by them because they appear to choose to be with them when not physically restrained. Oma (2010:177) comments “humans trust animals to be docile and cooperative, while animals trust humans to protect them, feed them and care for them.” This concept of trust is apparent in the responses gathered. For example, Patricia, a 69-year-old woman from Utah, states: “I think she values our time together, she chooses to be with me at liberty. She also likes her cookies.” Many respondents commented that they do not want to anthropomorphize the horse, though some also noted themselves as herd leader, placing themselves as a horse rather than human. Almost all survey respondents mentioned the need to see things from the horse’s point of view, attempting to take into account the horse’s motivations for the interaction. The participants struggle with their contradiction of wanting a relationship that benefits and speaks to human and horse desires, rather than simply human wants and needs. Jane, an Indiana-based horsewoman for over 40 years, discusses the complexities behind simple interactions with her horses:

I don't want to humanize him in any way, but I feel like he gets that I get how important it is to treat him like a horse and let him live as much like a horse as I can. I still hug and kiss him—I'm only human--but I know that's for my benefit, not his. Horses don't hug and kiss each other. But for his benefit, I scratch his withers and help keep flies off him when I'm around him. These are things he understands because that's what horses do with each other. We also sniff noses and they get to sniff all over me. They can be relaxed when we're around each other because they have the majority of their day to just be a horse. I tried doing this as much as possible when my horse was on the track, also. I think it helped both of us.

Power dynamics and agency in horse-human interactions are complex and contradictory, change over time, and are significant to the human and the horse in terms of collective well-being and welfare (Irvine 2004; Birke & Hockenhull 2015, Dashper 2015a). Coulter (2016:6) states that our connections to animals “are not only material and utilitarian, but also symbolic, emotional, and personal.” Jane’s acknowledgment of her and her horses having separate needs is common in the NH world, along with pride in allowing the horse to ‘be a horse.’ Jane in particular bases some of her self-concept through how she believes the horses perceives her, which she states is “hopefully, the same way-- I hope they feel I respect them as individuals with individual thoughts and feelings – on a horse level.” NH participants want their horses to feel like individuals who matter in the relationship and also derive meaning and pleasure from the interaction. Jane explains further why she believes seeing the horse as an individual is important, stating: I’m trying to see things from the horse's perspective instead of trying to make them see things from mine. We are asking them into our world, therefore, we bear the burden of finding a way to communicate with them as a horse.” Respondents talked often about trying to see things “from the horse’s point of view,” directly connecting back to a main message from Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt, founding fathers of the NH turn (Miller & Lamb 2005). Seeing things from the horse’s perspective is important in the NH community because they believe this is a central key to creating a partnership. Claire, a 47-year-old woman from Washington, explains the benefit of trying to understand the horse’s point of view in their interactions as “a partnership in which they don't always understand what I want or mean but have the overall feeling that I care about their opinions.” In this way, horsepersons see horses as individuals; the person is not only sending signals to the horse, but the horse is attempting to interpret and respond to the signals (Brandt 2004; Birke 2008). Partnership, to NH practitioners, involves the human’s self-concept

in that they engage with the horse with the belief that they are offering a relationship that the horse will perceive as agreeable and will respond thusly. NH practitioners interpret the horse's responses as interpretation of what the human is asking them, attributing their actions as an interesting and willingness to participate.

For some individuals in and outside of NH, the goal of the horse-human relationship changes over time due to the mutual, embodied relationship that forms during training and/or time spent with the horse (Schuurman 2013). Indeed, some respondents became interested in natural horsemanship after they practiced conventional methods and found them lacking in the emotional connection they desired. For instance, Jill, a 62-year-old woman from Indiana, explains her reasons for turning to Natural Horsemanship:

In the beginning, I tried to dominate the horse to be his/her leader and gain their respect. It never felt right to me because I wanted a partner instead of a slave. Now, I try to gain the horses' respect by being a calm confident leader who builds on my horse's confidence in me and her/his self. I also try to wait on my horse to figure things out for her/his self.

Jill's response touches on many key points in the NH community: partnership, confidence, and patience. She explains further how she has internalized the natural horsemanship philosophy: "It helps me to be more patient and also to try to figure out ways of getting my horses to understand what I want from them. Frustration and anger are not things that are conducive to good horsemanship." Waiting for the horse to 'figure things out' and recognition that the horse is placed in deference to human wants and desires are discussed in a multitude of ways by participants, along with recognition that these interactions are a two-way street, with the horse communicating his or her own thoughts and emotions. In this way, many practitioners of NH see horses as minded actors. In other words, participants of Natural Horsemanship view horses similarly to Sanders's (1993) findings about humans and their canine companions. Sanders

(1993:208) explains that owners view their “companions as having an emotional life and as being ongoingly aware of and appropriately responsive to the emotional experience of their human companions.” This “partnership narrative” as defined by Birke (2008:109) is deeply evident, with numerous respondents explaining their interactions with horses as almost equal – “51% to 49%,” “a partnership with the human having the greater shareholding,” or “a partnership where I am a fair leader.” Many responses speak to the participants’ desires for a close relationship, a partnership with the horse, an interaction where the horse also communicates and feels heard. However, many struggle with the idea that their relationship is still unequal, or the power dynamics of the interaction. Indeed, the initial shift toward NH occurred due to changing ideas of what was possible with horses. As Debbie, as 60-year-old woman from California, explains:

When I was a kid, I loved my horse, but rode her as if she was a vehicle, a motorcycle, a machine. I wasn't outwardly mean to her, and let her express herself, but gave little consideration to her needs. Now, I recognize the gift they give when a partnership is formed. There are as many different ways to get to "that" as there are horses! But, the goal is attainable.

As her interactions with horses increased, Debbie’s connection and goals with horses shifted from one where the horse was a tool or object to a significant relationship where she wants the horse to express him/herself as well. Debbie, who has been involved with horses for approximately 50 years, uses partnership and leadership interchangeably as she further explains her way of working with horses: “being consistent and standing your ground and having good timing shifts instantly how a horse sees you. They HATE being the leader. Once they realize you are going to take that role, they gladly submit!” Debbie sees the partnership she has with horses as a gift, one where the horse is happy to take direction and offer leadership to the human. In this way, Debbie is interpreting the horse’s responses as accepting and willing to be given direction,

reinforcing her belief that the horse is offering her a gift rather than submitting to her will.

However, this idea of partnership is not without problems, noted in Debbie's commentary that the horse gladly submits to the human.

Many NH practitioners do not see much difference in how the horse perceives them and the type of person they are. Trudy, a 49-year old woman from Washington, similarly points to her evolution in handling to increased education and understanding of horses, as well as her own character traits of tolerance and patience, stating:

As I got older my relation to and how I handle my horses has evolved. I learned more and now have a better understanding of the horse. When I was young I would cowboy or force them to do what I wanted. I have a lot more tolerance and patience now than I used to, and my horse benefits from that.

Trudy's increased interactions with horses led her to thinking about what type of handling would benefit the horse, rather than simply meeting her own needs through force. Like Trudy and Debbie, Pam, a 62-year old woman from Virginia, feels as if her horse benefits because she allows expression and sees attempts to communicate:

I realized that my horse was asking questions of me and telling me things. Can I investigate that? Please look at my leg, something is wrong, I am scared, I am angry. I pay a great deal of attention to all horses' body language. My horse taught me about how rich it is.

Similar to Debbie, Pam sees the relationship she forms with horses a gift, with the richness of the interaction coming through when she feels as if the horse is demonstrating feelings or asking questions. Pam points to a specific horse that changed her approach to training:

One of our horses appears to have a history of abuse. His fear/flight response was very strong. He was very afraid of confinement and touching him forward of his shoulders - towards his head and ears. Over time, listening to his fears and helping him learn that he will no longer be treated in an abusive manner, he has become braver and more tolerant of people touching him or crowding around him.

Pam offers an abusive past to this horse's fear responses and interprets an increase in confidence to him feeling listened to and treated with care. NH practitioners often see components such as listening to the horse a central component to the difference between their methods and traditional horsemanship. However, the partnership/social contract between humans and horses in Natural Horsemanship, like the use of horses in sport, has high potential for exploitation, though most practitioners are aware of this potential and take pride in the horse's demonstrations of agency, or, the horse's "capacity for self-willed action" (Irvine 2004:10; Dashper 2015a). NH practitioners point to the horse communicating what they believe are symbols of his or her emotions and needs within the horse-human relationship, with many horsepersons telling stories of the horse's individual attributes coming through, particularly in subthemes of ground work and established routines. The NH practitioner finds that engaging with the horse as a subject allows new levels of interaction and co-creation of understanding, where the individual personality and needs of each horse gains importance.

Horse Individuality

Many respondents stated that their training is different now than when they first started, attributing the change as a maturing in their thoughts and beliefs about horses, that their approach now, as Clarice, a 59-year-old woman from Oregon believes, "works with how a horse thinks and has more respect for the horse's frame of mind." NH practitioners also note the complexity behind the interactions, believing that when the horse also interprets their interactions as mutual they will engage with the activities. Louise, a 51-year-old woman from California, comments:

I didn't realize how much the horse actually contributes to the relationship. I was taught and thought that most of it depended on the human and the human training the horse and that if the human can establish dominance and teach the horse all the right cues with

pressure and release one would have a nice horse. I am now finding that if the horse becomes a true partner it is actually a lot easier to teach them and they also teach me and we not only both have a lot more fun but also accomplish more. Horses seem positively excited when I can tell that they see me listening to them too.

Horsepersons involved in Natural Horsemanship embrace the individuality of the horses and utilize different methods and approaches depending on how they perceive the horse's personality and desires. Louise explains further: "I think of my horses as my partners and friends as well as that my horse is his own 'person,' that is, each horse is different and not everything that works with one works with another." When asked how she feels her horses perceive their relationship Louise responds along a similar vein, stating:

I think my horses perceive the relationship in a similar way - partners and friends. They greet me when they see me, they come in from pasture when I call them and when it comes to the work, they are willing partners and do not show behavioral signs of disliking or hating our work together.

NH practitioners like Louise put forth that their horses are willing partners, even friends, and look forward to the relationship and interactions as much as the human does. They look for behavioral indications that the horse is okay with the work and the training methods, and, in particular, look for signs that the horse wants to be with them.

Throughout the survey, participants stressed that horses are individuals, each with specific needs and character traits. For instance, Vanessa, 26-year-old woman from Indiana, comments:

Knowing a horse as an individual makes you realize all horses are individuals. Someone once told me, there is no such thing as a bad horse, just a horse that's wrong for a certain person. I don't want a horse with [specific physical traits] unless our personalities are also compatible.

Vanessa engages with horses as subjects, emphasizing the importance of compatible personalities, demonstrating the potential for a shared affective relationship (Porcher 2014).

While Vanessa focuses on compatibility, Dan, a 57-year-old man from California, talks about

conflict between horse and rider as the human's failing, emphasizing horsemanship skills as the limiting factor in the relationship:

I think things are getting better to some degree. People like Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt planted a seed that continues to grow. Overall I believe that folks are pretty set in their ways and there is a lot more buying, selling, trading of horses hoping to find one that works rather than, perhaps, working on their horsemanship so that they can make it through problems. I am still amazed every time I go to some kind of show or event at the general lack of horsemanship demonstrated by the participants, yet their horses do so much for them.

Dan and Vanessa are seeking “fluid intersubjectivity” in themselves and the horsepersons they observe, with their philosophies diverging in how these intersubjective and inter-embodied acts are accomplished (Birke and Brandt 2009:196; Dashper 2015a). Dan sees the humans as failing to feel of the horse, or correctly interpret what the horse needs and is asking, while Vanessa points to incompatible personalities when there is conflict in the relationship. Attributing internal human failings, Dan sees the horse as making up for the human's limitations. In contrast, Vanessa sees conflict between horse and rider due to personalities that are not copacetic. However, Vanessa and Dan, like most NH practitioners, identify that the horse has agency in that they choose how to respond to the human.

Ground Work

Participants who shifted toward Natural Horsemanship did so because they wanted a deeper connection with the horse and believed it was attainable by changing their methods (Latimer and Birke 2009). Some attribute the positive change in their relationship in part to their increased use of ground work instead of simply spending their time in the saddle. Many NH followers put quite a bit of stock in working with horses on the ground to resolve behavioral issues and to create a clearer understanding of what the human is asking. Natural horsemanship practices emphasize spending time teaching the horse what is expected on the ground, sometimes

spending equal or more amounts working on basic foundational concepts of foot patterns and movements with the horse in contrast with traditional methods that spend most of the time riding the horse. Or, Cassie, a 51-year-old woman from Pennsylvania simply puts it: “understanding ground work and how it translates to under saddle work.” Indeed, spending time working and simply being with horses on the ground has positive effects in connecting humans with horses and vice-versa. As Birke and Hockenhull (2015:98) argue: “these are not simply animals plodding around at the behest of a human, but they are mindful of how to read the human from moment to moment—mindful in moving and being moved.” This shared connection is about more than simple gestures and bodily movements, but is a co-creation of new languages and understandings (Maurstad et al. 2013:332).

NH practitioners often struggle with their and the horse’s roles in the relationship, acknowledging that their partnership is one where coercion and force requires acknowledgment and further discussion about the horse’s needs and desires. This struggle, however, offers insight into the ways identity is constructed and maintained through shared interactions with horses (Sanders 2003). Because we live “with and through each other,” human relationships with horses go beyond the physical and instead serve as an extension of self and identity (Game 2001:2). NH practitioners noted that their interactions with horses are a constant work in progress, though they were clear that they felt a deep attachment to the horse as an individual.

Established Routines

Beyond riding and ground work, respondents discussed the importance of established routines in their care and handling of horses, and the ways that this consistency was also important in their lives outside of their relationship with horses. Jamie, a 51-year-old woman from Oregon, comments on the ways her relationship with her horse transfers to other aspects of her life:

My relationship with my horse is a continuous learning experience. I find great comfort in the daily routine of their care and training. The routines allow an expectation of good results for the horses regarding their behavior and provide an opportunity to get to know them in a more predictable environment. The environment creates calm and that calm transfers directly into my life in a personal way.

Respondents see themselves as guardians and leaders of horses, providing them with food, comfort, and care. In this way, NH practitioners extend their attributed needs of self-concept and control to horses (Spilka et al. 1985). They perceive that the horses in their care see them in a similar way, though a few commented that they feel as if the horses are skeptical of them and their methods, particularly if it is a new human-horse interaction. Some respondents gave examples of the horses seeing them as their protector, explaining that the horse hides behind them when around people the respondent deems mean or cruel. When asked how the horse perceives them, many focus on food and brushing, Linda, a 60-year-old woman from Tennessee, comments: “benign menace, a reliable feeder, and a good itch scratcher. I don't think either of them know any different than having humans around so, as that goes, they feel pretty good about me being around.” Some participants discuss the subject of safety—both the safety and comfort they provide to the horse along with the trust and willingness given back to them— “he enjoys my company, trusts me, keeps me safe and does what I ask of him.” Spilka et al. (1985) comment that humans make causal attributions in an effort to maintain a sense of security in their self-concept. In this analysis, humans extend that meaning to the horses, who they interpret as extensions of themselves, therefore also needing the safety and comfort of a predictable world and a secure environment.

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON THE HORSE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

It was notable that there were not significant differences in the responses about partnership and/leadership between the men and women who responded to my survey, supporting literature by scholars such as Savvides (2011) and Birke and Brandt (2009), challenging typical notions that women have a stronger, emotional bond or kinship with horses and instead find outlets and empowerment through equestrian practice. The respondents to this survey were significantly female, in-line with current demographics of horsepersons in the United States (Savvides 2011). Many women are drawn to horses due to the romanticized beliefs about women/horse relations, particularly ideas that center on trust, harmony, and partnership (Maurstad et al. 2013; Savvides 2011; Brandt 2004). However, men and women respondents endorse NH methods for similar reasons. James, a 60-year-old man from Idaho, states that the horses are his “friends” and he follows NH because he receives “better results and as I've grown older [he is] more concerned about the horse.” Similarly, Erin a 52-year-old woman from Idaho, points to maturing as her interest in NH methods: “just like life, horsemanship is a work in progress. I have learned that most of the time when people think a horse is being spoiled, really they just don't understand the cues you are giving. You need to adjust, not the horse.” Because NH communities place an emphasis on the ideal of working-with horses, some practitioners embrace the philosophy because it rejects the idea of human strength and size in accomplishing activities with horses. As an adolescent, Trina had a mentor show her that communication with horses with a minimum of force was a possibility:

It has worked for me and the horses I have been around, and I had an excellent example in the woman who first introduced me to horses when I was 14 years old. She was 95 pounds and could get her horses to do anything and go anywhere, all without force.

Barclay (1980) hypothesizes that the surge of girls and women in competitive and recreational riding is due to multiple factors, including gendered barriers to other sports, emphasis on the feminine care ethic in horse husbandry, and the increase of horseback riding as a pleasure activity. Moreover, Barclay (1980) points to horse competitions as not being sex-segregated, creating friction and loss of self-esteem when boys lose against girls in the equine arena. Yet, within horse cultures, including Natural Horsemanship, men are still awarded expert status, using their image of the quintessential cowboy to “mak[e] millions of dollars from books and other materials” (Birke and Brandt 2009:192).

Survey participants, both men and women, stated that the horses they interacted with were individuals with their own needs, personalities, and ways of being that blended with their own senses of self. Ben, a 35-year-old man from Canada, states that practicing natural horsemanship is a character trait, explaining: “it's a perspective which highlights certain individual characteristics. It does not relate to the kind of person I am it simply is who I am.” NH practitioners put stock in their horsemanship skills as a part of themselves, with the ways the horse responds and reacts to them as an extension of these methods.

There is conflicting data on the sex of the person and their relationship with and attitude toward horses, with some pointing to higher aggression and dominance in male horse-owners in contrast with female horse-owners. Herzog (2007) found little difference in gender and animal attachment in relation to companion animals. While many respondents did not touch on their own gender, those that did placed it in empowering ways. For instance, Martha, a 49-year-old woman from Washington, when asked about the influence of Natural Horsemanship on the wider horse industry, comments:

How I work with horses relate to the wider horse industry? hmmm I see what others are doing, I attend horse expos, I buy feed and tack when needed, I guess how I work with my horses relates because of what I look for to purchase or learn. What I choose to go see and do in the horse world, be it shows, or expos or trail rides. I am sure I am not the only 49-year-old woman who still has horses after the kids are grown. How us older women chose to spend our time and money because of the choices we have made with our horses, has influenced the wider horse industry. I see a lot more interest in the trail sports with horses. I don't think we (the older demographic) are classically "showing" as much as in the past. So yes, how I work with my horses relates to the wider horse industry in our choices on where we spend our money and our time. This is a really hard question, and it can be answered several ways.

While NH practitioners appear flexible in their gendered performance, two female respondents told a story about a mare as the reason they turned to, or continued to hold, a strong belief in the efficacy of Natural Horsemanship. Eileen a 72-year-old woman from Washington, explains:

I have a horse that was seriously spoiled, afraid and dangerous when I first brought her home. She wouldn't let you put a halter on her without a fight, tried to bite me when I did get it on and sometimes rear up and strike out. She tried to challenge me for hay and was a nightmare with grain. I had never had a horse like her and I had to talk with people and study my natural horsemanship a lot. I discovered that I had to make some changes. She was fighting for her life and I had to help her realize that I wasn't her enemy.

Eileen's experience with her mare sent her on a search for answers, leading her to conclude that her horse needed her to make changes to her approach to feel secure in their relationship. Jessie, a 61-year-old woman from Florida, shares a similar story:

About 25 years ago, I bought a mare sight unseen that had been over faced and handled very poorly. She was a wonderful animal but quite dangerous to ride as she was very reactive and unpredictable. She was so bad there really wasn't any way to move her along, so I had to change how I worked with her. You couldn't make her do anything, she had to think it was her idea or that even if it was mine, I wouldn't let any harm come to her. She taught me a lot.

These interactions with mares demonstrate the ways that trust is formed between humans and horses, with these engagements demonstrating mutuality and observance of horses as individuals (Maurstad et al. 2013). Because humans reflect their sense-of-self in interpreting human-horse

interactions, Jessie shares pride in keeping her mare safe and not dominating her. Along the spectrum, Brenda, a 28-year-old woman from North Carolina, reflects on an interaction with a stallion:

I rehabbed an Arabian stallion that present with extremely pushy, bordering on dangerous energy. I met this energy with firm, consistent cues. Rather than bullying him, which seemed to be the easiest and most "acceptable" strategy. He and I became a great team. 5 years later, I still think of and miss that horse.

Brenda speaks about meeting her stallion with masculine cues of firmness and consistency.

These interactions with mares and a stallion indicate that the respondents may see the horses through a gendered lens, attributing their reactivity and energy to different underlying causes.

Ramirez (2006) found that individuals interpreted canine behavior through a gendered lens, attributing different personality traits to them depending on their ascribed gender, including reframing canine behavior to fit within normative gender ideologies. Birke and Brandt (2009) argue that horses are similarly constructed, with specific horse communities demonstrating views of horses through a gendered lens with the addition of embodied interactions beyond that of humans and dogs.

Intersubjective Selves

Participants put an emphasis on the willingness of horses to get along with humans throughout their responses, with some challenging the overuse of the word respect and the overuse of negative reinforcement in some NH approaches (Latimer and Birke 2009). Melanie, a 52-year-old woman from North Carolina, explains:

I think the evolution is toward kindness, but the whole prey/predator analysis and emphasis on ultimate respect every second from the horse can impede letting the horse be a full partner in the relationship. It's better than it was, but I'm most impressed with the trainers who stress flexibility in recognizing that horses are individuals, with moods and temperaments like the rest of us.

Respondents such as Melanie see many issues with the larger horse world arising from horses being treated as objects rather than individuals. All respondents discussed horses as subjects with their own minds and emotional needs. Within the production of meaning, humans begin to theorize the minds of horses and the meanings behind their actions. For example, Melanie attempts to explain her horse's emotional world:

She was a good girl, with good manners, but standoffish and not affectionate. Like she was good because she was trained to be good. Now she isn't perfect (she's a bossy alpha mare) but I can look at her in a certain way to tell her she has crossed a line, and she enjoys being with me and seeks out my company.

Melanie takes the role of her horse when considering their relationship and believes her horse responds with a similar level of intimacy (Irvine 2008). Ramirez (2006) claims that individuals choose their companions based on reflections of themselves, which also rings true in some NH practitioners. Mary, a 51-year-old woman from Idaho, comments: "I see my growth in horsemanship as personal growth for myself. I want to be the best horsewoman I can be and I know that will lead me to be a better person. I believe the old adage that horses are a mirror of the owner's soul." Mary sees her improvement in her horsemanship as a reflection of herself and who she is as a person in larger society. Improving her horsemanship skills, in Mary's opinion, improves who she is as a person. If her relationship with the horse improves, then Mary sees this as personal growth. NH practitioners take pride in the belief that horses want and choose to be with them, due to feeling safe and understood. Claire, a 47-year-old woman from Washington, shares: "I think with the idea they are safe with me. And with a willingness to participate. Can't hardly keep my mare's nose out of the halter." A possibility lies that, due to the preponderance of women in equestrian worlds, that this is a projection of self onto the horse, particularly because many discuss horses as an integral part of their lives. Claire connects how she believes her horse

perceives her with her self-concept: “My horses are honest and loyal. I guess I am too.” Human-horse relationships, especially in NH communities, are significant to the practitioners and they interpret the horse as extensions of themselves, taking pride in equine displays of loyalty and security.

For NH practitioners, their interactions and identity as a horseperson are a key part to how they see themselves. Margaret, a 69-year-old woman from California, states: “I could not imagine my life without my horse,” similarly, Agnes, a 65-year-old woman from Texas, notes “my horses are my heartbeat.” Indeed, many placed their connection with the horse as one of the most important pieces of their life. Emma, a 56-year-old woman from Oregon, expands of the importance of horses in her life: “The single most important aspect of my mental stability and happiness in life. It is so vital to me that I regard it just under my relationship with Jesus Christ and my husband. Very spiritual. Lifesaving.” NH practitioners experience intimacy with individual horses through embodied practices and regard these connections highly within their lives. They put an emphasis on the horse’s willingness to participate in contrast with objectifying the horse, and, while they may gender the horse, the human continues to focus on individual personality in horse-human interactions. In this light, human relationships with horses, particularly connections that foster intersubjectivity, are an essential element to sense of self.

CONCLUSION

Based on an online survey of 154 Natural horsemanship practitioners, I found that partnership/leadership and the influence of gender on the horse-human relationship were main themes. Respondents touched on subthemes of individuality, ground work, and established routines in the theme of partnership/leadership, demonstrating the importance of the horse as an actor in horse-human relationships. Because human-horse interactions are inter-embodied, these interspecies partnerships are an accomplishment to the human and the horse. Utilizing a symbolic interactionist framework, my findings demonstrate that NH practitioners extend a theory of mind to their horses, sometimes anthropomorphizing, but overall offering the horse agency and attributing meaning in these interactions. The relationship that NH practitioners have with horses, as well as their perceptions of the quality and meaning behind each relationship, directly informs the human's sense-of-self. This idea of self extends beyond the human's direct interactions with horses to other areas of their life. The NH practitioner's assumptions about intersubjectivity, their interest in taking the role of the horse, and their awareness of their and the horse's options and restrictions in human-horse interactions influence beliefs about what is important to both the human and the horse.

Natural horsemanship practitioners aim to create a partnership with horses that is attentive to the horses' individuality and needs through methods such as ground work, established routines, and seeing the world through the horses' point of view. While men still predominate in status and income in the NH community, gender differences are blurred within human-horse interactions. Other aspects including intersubjectivity and inter-embodiment create intra-actions between the horse and their person that are meaningful to both parties. The enthusiasm for Natural horsemanship is clear from the enthusiastic response to the survey, with

participants recruiting others involved in the community to respond. This research supports previous interrogations into Natural horsemanship, demonstrating consistency of driving factors in turning toward and maintaining identity toward the NH community.

Natural horsemanship is debated often in the horse community, with some rejecting the term, asserting “Natural horsemanship is a term that casts such a wide net that it means, at most, very little, and very likely nothing at all” (Moates 2009). While Moates is correct in his claim that this title has little meaning in terms of training technique, practitioner beliefs and connection to Natural Horsemanship is more closely connected to values than methods, with NH practitioners seeing their relationship with the horse as a reflection of self and who they inside and outside of interactions with horses. These embodied processes between horse and rider create shared experiences and understandings, though this process is not a given, and often riders struggle in forming this highly sought after connection (Birke and Brandt 2009). All individuals have to work to foster a shared bond between humans and horses. In effect, relations between human and horses are not an essence, but a doing. However, when humans and horses do connect, their bodies take on similar shapes and focus, implying shared understandings where the horse is also an actor, rather than an object that is acted upon (Game 2001; Birke and Brandt 2009). Overall, natural horsemanship practitioners aim for the intersubjective connection and understanding with horses, a mutual willingness and similar goals. Instead of traditional methods of dominance and control, they wish for a relationship with horses that is one of friendship and partnership-- a shared intra-action where horse and person “go the extra mile for each other.”

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Survey

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) Where are you located?
- 4) How did you find this survey?
- 5) How long have you been involved with horses?
- 6) Do you currently own a horse/horses?
- 7) How would you define your relationship with your horse?
- 8) How do you think your horse perceives your relationship?
- 9) Has your relationship with your horse had an impact on how you think about horses in general?
- 10) How do you describe your current practices and/or philosophy of working with horses?
- 11) Is this approach different from what you've tried in the past?
 - a. If this approach is different, please describe how?
- 12) If this approach is different, please describe how?
- 13) Do you perceive your horse responding differently to your current relationship as compared to past relationships?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
 - b. How do you interpret these changes?
- 14) Have any of the training methods or other ways that you work with horses changed?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 15) Has your training changed the ways that your horse/horses interact with you?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
 - b. How do you interpret these changes?
- 16) Has your equipment changed?
 - a. If so, why?
- 17) Do you have any specific experiences with your horse/a horse that changed what you thought about training? If so, please describe.
- 18) Describe your current relationship with your horse.
 - a. Is this current relationship different from past relationships you've had?
 - b. How does this relate to the kind of person you are?
- 19) How do you view your relationship with your horse/horses?
 - a. Has this view changed over time?
- 20) How does your horse perceive their relationship with you?
- 21) Has your horse responded to a change in your relationship?
 - a. If yes, in what ways?
- 22) Describe your care and management practices.
 - a. Are these similar or different from past practices?
 - b. If they are different, please explain how and why?
- 23) Do you perceive your horse relating differently to you based on the ways that you care for him/her?

- 24) How does your horse relate to you based on your care and management practices?
- 25) In your opinion, how does the way you work with horses relate to the wider horse industry?

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