

Of Equines and Humans: Toward a New Ecology

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Abstract

Since the domestication of the horse ~6000 years ago, the equine-human relationship has played a crucial role in the evolution of humankind. Horses enabled the conquering of new worlds and civilizations, forging an intimate interspecies relationship that is complex and difficult to articulate. No longer used primarily as companions in battle and beasts of burden, horses are today predominantly visible in the Western world of competitive sports and pleasure riding. New fields have also opened up in the past two decades, where horses are being utilized as friends, teachers, and therapists—namely, therapeutic riding and equine-facilitated psychotherapy/learning. This article explores two dimensions of equine-facilitated learning: (1) ways in which horses communicate, and how the human perceives this phenomenon, and (2) ways in which horses help humans construct systems of shared meanings (i.e., community). Both of these dimensions may have important implications for understanding how horse-human encounters can promote emotional well-being and ecological awareness. Further, the study contextualizes this exploration by drawing connections to Gregory Bateson's thought on esthetics, grace, and ecosystemic health.

Introduction

We are parts of a living world. . . . Most of us have lost that sense of unity of biosphere and humanity which would bind and reassure us all with an affirmation of beauty. . . . We have lost totemism, the sense of parallelism between man's organization and that of the animals and plants. We are beginning to play with ideas of ecology. (Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*).

This quote from Gregory Bateson was chosen as the epigraph of this introduction because it provides an appropriate and often-overlooked ecological context within which to frame the art of equine-facilitated learning (EFL). EFL is commonly defined as

An educational approach that includes equine facilitated activities incorporating the experience of equine/human interaction in an environment of learning or self-discovery. EFL encourages personal explorations of feelings and behaviors to help promote human growth and development. (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association Web site, www.nahra.org)

The field of EFL has evolved from the clinical settings of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP). EFP research has focused on measuring the effects of equine-facilitated clinical sessions and therapeutic riding on various mental health disorders and physical disabilities. Anecdotal evidence is strong in support of the effectiveness of equine-facilitated activities in addressing a variety of physical and emotional issues in humans. However, research in this new, experiential field is difficult to conduct because the number of programs is small, producing small samples that have called statistical strength into question. Nonetheless, Bates (2002) reports, "Despite the sparse statistical support in the research, there is strong clinical evidence that [equine-facilitated psychotherapy, EFP] reduces impulsivity, improves self-concept, and increases both the subjects' sense of responsibility and their ability to engage in emotional relationships" (p. 18). Besides its therapeutic benefits, working with horses is also a wonderful way to learn about creating and sustaining *presence*:

Working with horses in a therapeutic setting, we are presented with the immediacy of establishing a relationship in which lack of alertness gets immediate feedback [from the horse] in the form of unruly, indifferent, confused, or rebellious behavior from the animal. Our attentiveness gains love. (McCormick *et al.*, 2004, p. 42)

The Emergence Creative EFL Practices

Emergent practices in EFL (learning vs. psychotherapy focus) are exploring increasingly creative forms of equine–human relational expression and learning. These practices offer goal-oriented activities related to horsemanship, such as grooming, lounging, riding, and groundwork, either individually or in teams. These activities assist in illuminating intra/interpersonal relationship styles, leadership approaches, and a range of emotional and behavioral issues related to dynamic pairs of (1) fear–courage, (2) dominance–partnership, (3) empowerment–disempowerment, and (4) clarity–ambiguity in communication patterns, to name a few possibilities. The more leading edge, innovative modalities of EFL emphasize creative improvisation that includes unstructured experiences with horses, expressive arts, and body-centering practices such as meditation, music, dance, and yoga. Examples of creative activities include exploratory sessions cocreated by horse and human with no preconceived agenda or prescribed activities (i.e., the spontaneous unfolding of the story that needs to be made conscious or that needs to be *re-storied*). These activities may include (1) *self-reflective* round pen work; (2) horse dance, where the person enacts a dance session with the horse from the ground; (3) expressive arts exercises, aimed at stimulating creative thinking and team inspired co-creation of art pieces; and (4) various improvisational forms of artistic expression from mandala painting to storytelling to poetry, inspired by nontraditional equine encounters such as art and mythology.

The horse–human relationship, when enacted as esthetic engagement, as a form of creative expression, as metaphor, as art, may open the door of what Bateson called the possibility of finding *grace*. As Charlton (2008) stated,

He [Bateson] believes it possible that we can recover “the grace” of realizing our interrelated membership of the community of living organisms on this planet. The route to this realization is via personal engagement with the more-than-rational processes of the natural world. (p. 8)

This article aims to bring forth two dimensions of equine–human interaction from the perspective of two experiential domains: the one addressing the *essence nature* of horse–human relationship (subjective “I” domain), and the second addressing how experiences with horses help humans construct systems of *meaning*, including unique dimensions of language and communication (intersubjective “we” domain). Subjectivity refers to the esthetic domain of self, and intersubjectivity refers to the normative domain of culture. The results of an unpublished pilot qualitative study conducted by the author

suggest that there may be an esthetic component of horse–human interaction that leads to individual emotional and spiritual well-being. Esthetics, in a Batesonian sense, are not only encounters with beauty, but also the awareness of an engagement with the processes of the living world. This awareness, when it leads to a sense of our interconnection with the Earth, Bateson referred to as *ecosystemic health*.

Horse–Human Relationship and Emotional Well-being

A review of the literature concludes that there is a recent, growing trend in the use of qualitative methods that contextualize equine-facilitated therapy and learning beyond what empirical approaches have been able to accomplish. While still primarily in the context of clinical psychology, important dimensions of equine–human encounters are emerging in qualitative research that broadens the discourse. For example, recent qualitative studies suggest that horses are able to project positive feelings, such as compassion and unconditional love, which in turn provide opportunities for corrective emotional experiences. These corrective experiences entail positive reframing of previous negative patterns of behavior, and even transformational or life-changing events (Aardoom, 2007; Esbjorn, 2006; Hallberg, 2008; Held, 2006; Irwin (2001); Meinersmann *et al.*, 2008); Rector (2005); Webb, W. (2002).

In addition, two recent studies on horse–human relationship research the topic of gender, primarily in the context of dominator–partnership relational models and embodied knowing, or the role of the body in knowledge construction (Brandt, 2005; Held, 2006). Other areas of horse–human experience that have surfaced in recent qualitative research include heightened awareness of and connection with nature, and transpersonal experiences such as meditative states, mystical experiences, and telepathy (Aardoom, 2007; Brandt, 2005; Esbjorn, 2006; Hallberg, 2008; Held, 2006).

Data gathered by the author (Garcia, 2009) suggest that the horse–human relationship may facilitate a positive re-framing of the individual’s relationship to self, to others, and to the greater ecology of the Earth. In a pilot investigation, extensive interviews were conducted with four subjects (one man and three women) aged from 36 to 58 years. Participants were chosen who possess varying degrees of experience with horses, including participation in EFL sessions, horseback riding, horse training, and horse ownership experience. Semistructured interviews were utilized because they support the position that the investigator already has an idea of the area of interest and a set of questions related to the inquiry. However, there is also a desire to enter, as far as it is possible, the psychological and

social world of the subject (Creswell, 2007). By employing qualitative analysis the investigator is then able to identify rich themes that emerge from the dialog, rather than merely reducing responses to quantitative categories.

Two separate sets of six questions each were asked in the interviews, addressing these two dimensions of horse-human relationship: (1) how horses communicate and how the human perceives this, and (2) how horses help humans construct systems of shared meanings. Data (interview transcripts) were analyzed using Colaizzi's and Wolcott's (as cited in Creswell, 2007) phenomenological and ethnographic methods, primarily focused on finding patterned regularities in the data and clusters of themes common to all subjects. Common themes found were as follows:

1. Through body language horses are able to give the person information about his/her inner mental or emotional states (commonly referred to as *mirroring*).
2. Horse-human nonverbal communication appears to function at the level of body language and at a deeply intuitive level.
3. Horse-human relationship can be experienced as a spiritual, heart-based connection that evokes feelings of love.
4. Members of equine communities appear to share a core set of values, including sense of connection to the Earth, awareness of ecological issues, and sociopolitical activism on policy issues related to environmental sustainability.

Horse-human encounters can produce experiences that are both intellectual and fully embodied, or what Berman (1981) calls a "*totality of experience: the 'sensuous intellect'*" (p. 76). Perhaps it is this totality of experience that may lead to a greater sense of interconnection with the world and enhanced systemic understanding of the individual's *ecological self*. As one participant commented during her interview about experiences in EFL sessions,

[Before] I needed to somehow master the animal. When mastery of the animal went away and a more collaborative and closer connection to horses opened-up, I saw the horse as just being another intelligent sentient being. I think that really contributed to being able to see that it's not only horses but also other animals. It [horse relationship] opened my experience, my understanding, and my ability to connect with and love all creatures in a different way. (Garcia, 2009)

One important benefit that surfaced not only in the referenced research project but also in related literature on the subject of EFP/learning (EFP/L) is that of learning to shift from dominance to collaboration in relationship, a skill that is applicable in our personal

and professional daily lives. This dominator-partnership dynamic is one that EFP/L pioneer Linda Kohanov and EFL leadership coach Ariana Strozzi have consistently emphasized in their research and work (Kohanov, 2001, 2003; Strozzi, 2004).

Both quantitative and qualitative research results suggest that the potential of equine-facilitated activities to advance a positive state of mind and ecological awareness may be significant. Following Bateson's line of thinking, engagement in ecology-based embodiment practices such as horse-guided activities may be a hopeful sign that "there is an impulse still in the human breast to unify and thereby sanctify the total natural world, of which we are" (2002, p. 16). A deeper understanding of nature-based therapies and learning modalities may connect us to the wider ecological context that Bateson saw as critical to address the pathology that threatens the survival of our planet.

Horse-Human Conversations and Emotional Well-being

Further research on the communication dimension between horses and humans is essential to expand our understanding of the signaling mechanisms that create informational feedback loops between equines and humans. Communication is the underlying structure for understanding *what* is evoked in the human partner, as well as for understanding *how* horse-human encounters promote learning, healing, inner growth, and heightened awareness of *self* and *other*. Horse-human communication may be defined as non/preverbal, forcing humans to access a way of speaking and using language that is unfamiliar and archaic. By archaic I mean the "notion that in a literal or figurative sense, everything in the universe is alive and interrelated, and that we know the world through direct identification with it, or immersion its phenomena (subject/object merger)" (Berman, 1981, p. 343).

Through body language horses are able to give the person very accurate feedback about his/her inner mental or emotional states, that is, mirroring. This is described by cowboy and equine-facilitated therapist Wyatt Web in the following manner: "Whichever horse you choose will serve as a mirror to your energy system—what you think, what you feel, and every move your body does or doesn't make" (p. 5). Working with horses enhances the human's ability to use the body as a sensing mechanism, which appears to go beyond learning to read body language to developing more intuitive levels of awareness and *environmental scanning* skills. Kohanov (2001) stated, "Whenever I was with the horses, I felt connected to a part of myself that seemed more ancient, more mysterious. . . and I yearned to return to a much older form of human awareness" (p. 46).

Horses and the Social Construction of Meaning

Participating in equine-facilitated activities may also have important implications in terms of influencing conditioned values and beliefs, which may result in the positive reframing or transformation of self-image and relational skills, and in an esthetic and environmental appreciation of the world. Horse-human encounters, including those facilitated via EFP/L sessions, also help raise human awareness of issues related to personal responsibility, power relations, and ecological-level responses, all of which have substantial impact and implications in a broader social systems context. With respect to cultural paradigms (dominant societal values and beliefs), in this case related to gender issues, Brandt (2005) conducted a two-and-a-half-year study of women's relationships to horses. The study included 30 in-depth interviews and observed relationships between women and horses in different barn settings. She concluded, "Though many women have a lifetime of knowledge about horses, when it comes to knowledge of horses and human-horse relationships, the cowboy continues [to play a dominant role]" (p. 48). Through her exploration of the feminist voice in horse-human relationship, Brandt makes important connections to larger issues of women's status in society. There are a large number of women involved in the horse industry, which suggests that the horse-human relationship may offer illuminating perspectives for the field of feminist studies.

The horse also serves as a strong *glue* of social relationships in horse communities. Results in the pilot study conducted by the author suggest that people who view themselves as "horse people" may share common values and beliefs related to the ecology of the planet, including a strongly felt connections to all animals, forests, the Nature, and the Earth. This connection was seen as promoting other behaviors such as kindness, generosity, patience, and social activism on issues of the environment and sustainability. As Traci, a 32-year-old horse trainer, explained,

I think they [horse people] value space and land. They don't want totally an urban setting. So you sometimes find that these people politically want to keep farmland secure and kind of value those things. I'm not talking like liberals versus conservatives or democrats versus republicans, but they want their national forests to be preserved and they want their farmland. So they work together to achieve things that are sustainable, that we can continue to use. (Garcia, 2009, p. 16)

However, the respondents in the pilot study emphasized that there is a critical difference between *true* horse people and those who just happen to own horses. In other words, not every person related with

horses has this deeper sense of soul/spiritual level connection to horses and to the Earth. Further investigation of the influence of horses on social values is required to inform our understanding of this particular phenomenon and of other variables that may be at play. Results may have important implications for the field of EFL and experiential, ecology-based education. If the horse-human relationship helps raise ecological awareness and feelings of inter-connectedness with nature, it could further the individual's well-being in terms of (1) his/her inclusion in community, (2) seeing self reflected in other/other reflected in self, and (3) sociopolitical responsibility toward creating a sustainable environment.

Conclusion

Further research is needed that views the horse-human relationship from multiple, systemic, and integral/integrating perspectives. In the context of clinical psychology, EFP is growing as an accepted, effective, and credible alternative diagnosing and treatment modality. However, a multidisciplinary view is also important in addressing the complexity of the horse-human relationship and its impact on the subjective (the "I") and intersubjective (the "we") domains of experience. A multidisciplinary approach also expands the discourse beyond clinical psychology and into broader contexts where equines may play a larger role in the future, especially its potential in experiential, ecology-based learning.

It is appropriate and interesting to frame the discourse in the context of Gregory Bateson's ecological epistemology, or his "mature understanding of the links between beauty, ecosystemic health, artistic process, and the possibility of refinding the 'grace' of re-connection between humanity and the rest of the living Earth" (Charlton, 2008, p. 8). The researcher's experience as horsemanship and EFL facilitator, supported by the findings of others in the field, suggests that the practice of equine-facilitated activities plays a positive role in supporting individual and communal well-being. Encounters with horses, especially those conducted in creative and improvisational contexts, indeed provide rich opportunities for transformative experiences that positively influence relationship to self, others, and the ecology of the Earth.

It appears important to increase the research focus that informs our understanding of what happens in the relational space of horse-human, versus the dominant focus on quantifying the effects of horse-facilitated activities on human behavior. The *how* of what happens is equally important, which requires further research in addressing how horses and humans communicate and how they learn with/from each other. A focus on relationship requires an in-depth

exploration of what Bateson called the “interface.” He felt that at the edge of a forest or the borders of a swamp we find a wealth of interacting species. This place of interface is “where the action is.” Bateson’s multidisciplinary training as biologist, anthropologist, animal communication researcher, and family therapist impacted his systemic approach to the study of phenomena: “All mental life is ‘rigged around, dependent upon, made of . . . these multiple interface meeting points where something different from something else meets that something else and something happens.’ All that we can perceive is change” (cited in Charlton, 2008, p. 38). The dominant disciplinary discourse in horse–human relationship (clinical psychology) has focused much effort in measuring and describing the “change” that Bateson refers to, which has been a positive influence on this emergent field. There is equally vast potential in exploring the “meeting points” of horses and humans, including communication, learning, and esthetics.

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