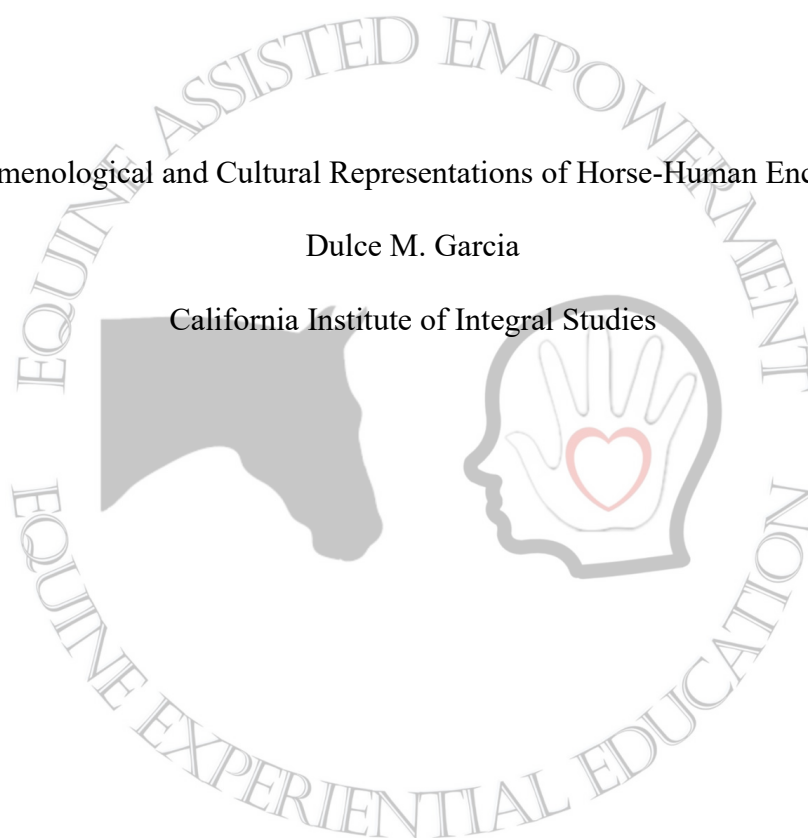


Running head: INTEGRAL PERSPECTIVES ON EQUINE FACILITATED ACTIVITIES

Phenomenological and Cultural Representations of Horse-Human Encounters

Dulce M. Garcia

California Institute of Integral Studies



This research proposal is a qualitative study that aims to investigate two dimensions of the horse-human relationship from the perspective of two quadrants of experience grounded in Ken Wilber's model of Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP). One aspect/quadrant of the study addresses the essence nature of horse-human interaction from a phenomenological perspective. The second aspect/quadrant of the study addresses how people who work with horses construct specific language and dimensions of meaning as members of an equine culture.

The investigator's purpose was first, to describe what the inner world of equines looks like to a human observer. In what ways do horses communicate or express emotion and how does the human perceive these? A second purpose of this research paper was to conduct an ethnographic exploration of how horses help humans enact non-verbal communication and construct systems of shared meanings.

How people who interact with horses describe their experience, and how horses help people to construct communities of shared values and beliefs might be a key to deepening our understanding of the potential of the horse-human relationship in fields such as: a) equine-facilitated psychotherapy/healing; b) competitive and pleasure riding; c) experiential education, including leadership development; and d) natural horsemanship training.

Phenomenological and Cultural Representations of Horse-Human Encounters

Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL)

The National American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) is a regulatory body that provides training and credentials to therapeutic riding and equine-facilitated mental health programs in the U.S. Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) is defined by NAHRA (2007) 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.

The practice of EFL has varying forms of expression. For example, sessions generally combine some of the goal-oriented activities related to horsemanship (grooming, lounging, riding, ground-work), either individually or in teams, with other practices that may explore

intra/inter personal relationship styles, leadership styles, and a range of emotional and behavioral issues related to dynamic pairs of: a) fear/courage; b) dominance/partnership; c) empowerment/disempowerment; d) (un)clear/(in)consistent communication patterns, to name a few possibilities. While leading edge, innovative modalities of EFL integrate goal-oriented activities, they utilize a larger component of creative improvisation that include unstructured experiences with the horses, combined with expressive arts and other body-centering practices such as meditation, music, dance, and yoga. Examples of unstructured activities include exploratory sessions co-created by horse and human with no pre-conceived agenda or prescribed activities (the spontaneous unfolding of the story that needs to be made conscious or that needs to be *re-storied*), such as: 1) *reflective* round-pen work; 2) horse dance, where the person enacts a dance session with the horse from the ground; 3) expressive arts exercises that aim to stimulate 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 non-traditional equine encounters ranging from equine art to imagery to mythology.

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, there is little scholarly research to support these findings. According to Bates (2002), “it is possible to effectively treat adults or children as individuals, families, or parent-child dyads. However, there is little research to support those who have been helped by horses” (p. 17). A review of the literature by Bates reports three studies that were conducted in 1997 with severely emotionally disturbed adolescents. She reports, “The results of these studies indicate that contact with horses and horseback riding decreased the number of acts of aggression in young people who are seriously emotionally disturbed” (pp. 17-18). Research in equine-facilitated activities is difficult

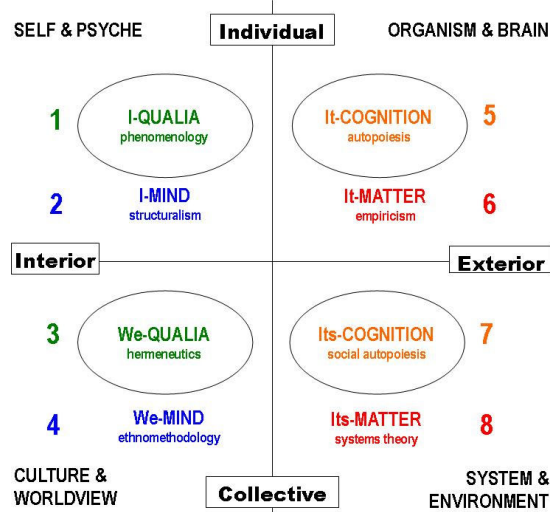
to conduct because the number of programs is small, producing small samples. Nonetheless, Bates reports, “Despite the sparse statistical support in the research, there is strong clinical evidence that [equine-facilitated psychotherapy, EFP] reduces impulsivity, improves self-concept, and increases both the subjects’ sense of responsibility and their ability to engage in emotional relationships” (p. 18).

Scholarly research is scarce in EFP and even more limited in EFL, and yet highly creative practices are being developed in non-academic and non-traditional clinical contexts that expand the horse-human relationship into areas of spiritual psychotherapy, personal growth, and leadership development. We argue that deepening our understanding of the *essence nature* of horse-human relationship may support the expansion of the promising field of EFL in the aforementioned applications. Furthermore, research can also help to support the emergence of transdisciplinary dialogue that integrates the areas of ecological/sustainability studies, feminist studies, natural horsemanship training, experiential leadership development, and experiential trauma resolution. Most importantly, by deepening our phenomenological and cultural understanding of horse-human encounters we pave the way for the expression of broader interpretative frameworks that support the field of horse-facilitated activities from both a clinical (EFP) and educational (EFL) perspective.

This pilot study research proposal, in support of a future doctoral dissertation, aims to investigate two dimensions of the horse-human relationship from the perspective of two quadrants of experience. One aspect/quadrant of the study addresses the *essence nature* of horse-human interaction from a phenomenological perspective. The second aspect/quadrant of the study addresses how experiences with horses help humans construct specific dimensions of cultural meaning, including dimensions of language/communication in horse-human encounters.

Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP)

Figure I. IMP Quadrants (Snow, 2006)



IMP is a research methodology based on an epistemology that supports multiple ways of knowing. First expounded by philosopher Ken Wilber, IMP attempts to approach an inquiry from an integral perspective that constructs a map of experience with four quadrants: 1) the “I” or first-person subjective perspective – Upper Left (UL) quadrant; 2) the “we” or second-person intersubjective perspective – Lower Left (LL) quadrant; 3) the third-person singular (it), objective perspective – Upper Right (UR) quadrant; and 4) the third-person plural (its) interobjective perspective – Lower Right (LR) quadrant. The latter two quadrants (domains) of experience deal with the cognitive domain of the organism and its environment, while the former two deal with the aesthetic domain of the self and the normative domain of culture. For purposes of this paper, an in-depth review of IMP will not be attempted. Rather, the idea is to provide a brief introduction to IMP as an approach to research that aims to present a holistic perspective that integrates various interconnected dimensions of experience. These quadrants of experience do not necessarily follow a lineal cause-effect pattern, but may operate simultaneously in more circular patterns of *arising*s. I like to think of IMP as an integrative approach to exploring

specific territories of human experience.

Esbjorn-Hargens (2008) describes integrative research as requiring more than an inter/trans-disciplinary approach “because such complex systems are best understood from within multiple perspectives and methods. While many ecologists and environmentalists recognize this, they rarely include subjective and intersubjective methods and techniques” (p. 15). The purpose of this research proposal is precisely to work with these Left Hand quadrants of experience to present a first-person phenomenological perspective (UL quadrant) and a second-person cultural perspective (LL quadrant) of horse-human relationship. It is argued that an integrative approach in research is critical for deepening our understanding and appreciation of the communication, cultural, and transpersonal aspects relevant to equine-facilitated activities. Research in the EFL field must go beyond the prevalent empirical methods that tend to focus on measuring behavior modification alone. While relevant and important, there are areas of application and dimensions of experience in horse-human encounters that must be understood if we are going to expand this emergent field of experiential psychotherapy and learning.

Goal 1

Produce a description of the phenomenological structure of horse-human encounters, by understanding what the latter feel and look like from the perspective of the observer.

Subjects who are actively participating in EFL sessions -either as participants, facilitators or apprentices- will be observed and subsequently interviewed and/or surveyed. The investigation will be conducted at the Epona International Equestrian Center, Sonoita, AZ., throughout the one-year investigation period. The study will aim to a present textural and structural description of horse-human encounters, in the context of equine-facilitated learning activities.

The UL Quadrant of Wilber's IMP model attempts to describe how the individual consciousness apprehends phenomena from an *interior* perspective. The goal here is to evoke description of immediate thoughts, feelings, and sensations —i.e. subjective awareness. In this case, we explore the *look and feel* of horse-human encounters, ranging from its archaic/instinctual to its rational forms of expression.

Goal 2

Describe the non-verbal signaling mechanism (communication loops) between horse and human and how meaning is created through this interactive, highly sensate language.

An in-depth exploration of the communications dimension between horses and humans is essential to expand our understanding of the signaling mechanisms that create informational feedback loops of equine-human *speak*. Through a combination of observation and interviews, both the equine and human participants will produce a structural/mechanistic description of horse-human communication. The communications dimension is the underlying structure for understanding *what* is evoked in the human subject, as well as for understanding *how* EFL experiences evoke learning and healing.

This portion of the study is still dealing with the LL Quadrant of Wilber's IMP model, and its aim is to understand the communication pathways/mechanisms, and exchange of informational signals between horse and humans. In other words, we are operating within the realm of experience of the horse/human *we* pair, in this case looking at the structures of this specific non-verbal language or *horse speak*.

Goal 3

Describe how EFL experiences help humans in the social construction of meaning.

Subjects will also participate in a cultural (ethnographic) exploration of how horses help

humans construct systems of shared meanings, values and beliefs. The study aims to describe the effect of equine-facilitated activities on positive reframing (transformation) of self-image, relational skills, and aesthetic appreciation of the world. We argue that horse encounters -in this case those facilitated via EFL sessions- help raise human awareness of issues related to personal responsibility, power relations (dominator/partnership relational approaches), and environmental-level responses, all of which have substantial impact and implications in a broader social systems context.

This portion of the study is operating within the LL Quadrant, in this case exploring aspects of culture that deal with worldviews and frameworks of shared values and beliefs.

Background and Significance

A review of the literature led to a limited series of journal articles and dissertations, written primarily within the disciplinary discourse of clinical psychology. In the field of psychiatric nursing and in more recent doctoral dissertations, there is an emergent trend toward the use of qualitative methods that contextualize the EFP/L experience beyond more traditional scientific-method approaches. While still primarily in the context of mental health, there is an emerging interest in the research for exploring important dimensions of equine-human encounters: a) identification and description of patterns of experience; b) acknowledgement of the horse as co-therapist/facilitator; c) suggestion that horses are able to project positive feelings, such as compassion and unconditional love; d) how these positive feelings in turn provide opportunities for corrective emotional experiences, positive reframing of previous negative patterns of behavior, and even transformational/life-changing events; and d) the topic of gender, primarily in the context of dominator/partnership relational models.

The purpose of the investigation is not to advance or test any specific hypothesis. Rather its purpose is to describe how the horse-human relationship can advance a state of mind/consciousness that positively (re)frames the individual's relationship to self, to others, and to the greater ecology of the Earth. This state of mind/consciousness is relevant to EFP in more specific clinical settings, and is highly relevant to the expansion and advancement of EFL in a wide variety of applications: a) personal and artistic development; b) leadership development; c) women's and environmental studies, among others.

We argue that the potential of EFL to advance a positive state of mind that evokes a healthy relationship to self and environment is vast, and as yet unexplored in any serious research undertaking. We anticipate this pilot qualitative study will result in:

1. Advancing our understanding of the role of emotions, cognition and consciousness in horse-human encounters, as expressed in the context of EFL.
2. Supporting further research, via a dissertation, with the purpose of advancing an integral model of equine-facilitated learning. This integral model will use the phenomenological and cultural descriptions derived in this investigation as a foundation for expanding into a more holistic/integrative approach to EFL.

Preliminary Study

In a pilot investigation four subjects from 36 – 58 years old were interviewed, one male and three females. Subjects possess varying degrees of experience with horses, ranging from participation in or observation of EFL sessions to horseback riding, horse training, and horse ownership experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because they support the phenomenological 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. By employing qualitative analysis the investigator is then able to identify rich themes that emerge from the dialogue, rather than merely reducing responses to quantitative categories.

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (as cited in Creswell, 2007) phenomenological method was utilized in analyzing interviewee transcripts. This method of analysis calls for the following steps:

1. After reflecting on the researcher's own experience with horses, several readings of the interview transcripts were made -mindful to hold the researcher's experiences with the topic in a *space* that would not interfere with those of the interviewees. This essential step in the analysis is generally referred to as *bracketing* the researcher's experience.
2. A list of significant statements was developed.
3. Significant statements were analyzed to determine what themes or meanings emerged from the data.
4. Clusters of themes were developed, common to all of the participants' transcripts.
5. Themes were integrated into an in-depth description of the phenomenon of inquiry.

For the ethnographic interviews, Wolcott's (as cited in Creswell, 2007) data analysis recommendations were followed, consisting of description, analysis and interpretation of the culture-sharing group. The analysis was primarily focused on finding patterned regularities in the data. In addition to finding thematic patterns common to all subjects, I interpreted these in terms of my own experience and/or by raising questions or making suggestions for further research. Ethnographic/cultural themes were discussed in narrative format.

Methodological rigor for the preliminary pilot study has been attained to the extent that

verification standard was met through: a) literature searches; b) using an adequate sample for the scope of the pilot; c) adherence to the phenomenological method; d) bracketing past experiences; and e) interviewing until saturating of the data was met, based on project scope (Creswell, 2007).

Validation will be sought in the expanded research project, subject to funding, via: a) multiple methods of data collection (observation and surveys will be added), and b) external review by experienced researcher at California Institute of Integral Studies (TBD).

Following are the interview questions that were conducted for the preliminary pilot study:

Table 1 *Interview Schedule: Phenomenology of Horse-human Relationship*

Equine-human relationship: 1. Can you briefly tell me how your relationship with horses began? ^[L]_[SEP] 2. Can you describe what it is like to be in the presence of horses?
Communication: 3. How would you describe the process of communicating with horses? ^[L]_[SEP] Prompt: signaling mechanisms, recognizing responses/meaning, physical or emotional cues ^[L]_[SEP] 4. Can you describe a time during a horse encounter that felt particularly loaded with emotion (e.g. frustration, anger, joy, love)? What was it like?
Meaning: 5. If you had to describe the meaning of your relationship with horses (what horses <i>mean</i> to you) what words or images would you use? ^[L]_[SEP] Prompt: metaphors of image/color/texture/sensation 6. Can you think of a time when something special happened during a horse encounter? Prompt: state/feeling of heightened boy/emotion awareness; suddenly becoming conscious of something that you were not aware of; feeling transformed/changed in some way

Table 2 Interview Schedule: Cultural aspects of horse-human relationship

What it means to be a <i>horse person</i>: People who own horses or work with horses regularly generally refer to each other as <i>horse people</i>. Can you describe what it means to be a horse person? Think back to a time when you were part of a horse community that felt particularly meaningful. Can you describe what it felt like to be part of that horse community? Describe your experience and what was meaningful about it/what stands out for you.
Communication and language: Horse people tend to use specific language/lingo. Can you talk about what it means to you to have this <i>special</i> language? Horse-human communication is non-verbal, and as a horse person you have mastered <i>talking</i> to horses to some degree. Can you describe how mastering horse communication has influenced how you communicate in the world in general? Can you give some examples? Prompt: e.g. are there ways of communicating w/horses that you transfer to you relations with people?
Cultural meaning: Culture has sometimes been defined as a community where people share the same values and belief systems (system of shared meaning). Can you describe specific values and beliefs that you feel horse people share? Prompts: e.g. values/beliefs related to how you behave in your relationships, or to the environment, or to spiritual dimensions of life. Please think of an encounter with a horse that felt particularly loaded with meaning or learning for you. Prompt: describe the encounter, e.g. what happened, how did the horse behave, how did the situation influence your own behavior/affect you?

Preliminary Phenomenological Findings

Table 3 Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Related Formulated Meanings

<i>Significant Statement</i>	<i>Formulated Meaning</i>
Communication: So, I start looking at the body cues to get not only an idea of what's going on for the horse, but what's going on <u>inside</u> me. You know that's what they're doing because they'll give you a certain look or there's a certain body language. They're [also] reading what's going on <u>inside</u> you, so they're mirroring you when you're walking inside there. There's nothing wrong with the horse; they're showing you what's wrong with you - and that's the truth.	Through body language horses are able to give the person information about his/her inner mental or emotional states (mirroring).
I think I'm much more <u>intuitive</u> than I was, or more aware. I can sense where other people are coming from...a <u>sensory perception</u> of what other people are feeling. I'm looking at the horse and engaging with the horse purely from <u>sensory perception</u>...it's the same sort of <u>intuitive</u> perceptions you have with humans.	Working with horses enhances the human's ability to use the body as a sensing mechanism. This appears to go beyond learning to read visible body language, to developing more intuitive levels of awareness with others/environment (an <i>environmental scanning</i> skill).
It's a connection where you actually feel that horse knows what you're thinking. And pretty soon you realize what they're thinking. Sally Swift [horse trainer] told me that when she was riding she never had to really cue the horse – she just had to think it. This horse speak, it's almost magical...to have a dance of sorts. She [horse] knows what I'm thinking. She'll sense as soon as I'm going to give her a command; she just senses it and will do it before I give her the command. It's a heart-to-heart or consciousness-to-consciousness communication that we have.	Horse-human non verbal communication appears to function on two levels: 1) body language: both horse and human "cue" each other or send each other signals that are interpreted and responded to; 2) a deeper, intuitive level of speak that functions almost telepathically.
The connection with [my horse] Dollar...you know he taught me a lot. When you are trying to teach a horse, it's also a reciprocal relationship and they teach you as well. I'm trying to do something and it doesn't work...and I read what the horse is trying to tell	Reciprocal learning relationship; feedback loops of communication that create corrective action and learning opportunities.

me to do...and the response is immediate.	
Essence-nature of horse human relationship: There's a connection to the equine spirit that is almost indefinable –it's like a soul-to-soul connection. Horses mean everything to me; they're part of my life, part of life itself; they give life meaning. They bond with you...so that really happens and you know that they do. It's a pretty special thing; it's very, very special. I was born a horse person. I had a love of horses from day one. I don't remember not having a love of horses. I don't know if you're born with it, but I know I've always loved horses. To be without horses feels like I have a vacancy in my life. The relationship with horses feels like it comes from the heart rather than this kind of mind experience. We have a sort of spirit connection, and that sort of closeness is deeper than some sort of physical experience.	The horse human bond is described by people as <i>magical</i> and <i>special</i>. Horse-human relationship is a spiritual, heart-based connection that is expressed as and/or evokes feelings of love. The subjects who described their experience, frequently and easily recognize the emotional and spiritual dimension of the horse human bond. Descriptions of cognitive/mental dimension of the relationship are lacking or non-existent in these accounts. 
And so that horse...from that time forward nothing's been the same. That was something that struck right to your very spirit that's inside you. That was a moment that I'll never forget, 'cause it made me wake up, it brought me conscious in that profound moment. When I arrived [at the EFL] session we were both [she and the horse] sort of in this state of distance and collapse, and by the time I was ready to leave I had moved through that. I recognized that I was able to make choices and decisions about my life that would allow me to be in a place of constant renewal and creativity, rather than heaviness and breakdown.	Encounters with horses have the potential to produce transformative/transpersonal experiences in humans.

Table 4 *Example of Two Theme Clusters With Their Associated Formulated Meanings*

Increasing/Shifting Levels of Conscious Awareness Shift from dominance/mastery of the animal to a collaborative relationship Understanding of the interdependence of man and horse Realization that there is an intuitive dimension to horse-human communication Awareness of special moments of sudden change/transformation/learning Awareness of a heart/emotional connection with horses Transpersonal dimension dominates over cognitive/mental dimension
Personal Growth Through Relationship Horses mirror a person's emotional/mental state The mirror that horses present is extremely accurate Understanding of the movement of internal emotional states: e.g. from fear to safety, from anger to release, etc.

Preliminary Ethnographic Findings

A core set of values and ideas gave meaning to members' behaviors in equine communities: sense of connection to the Earth, awareness of ecological issues, and socio-political activism on policy issues related to environmental 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.

The respondents' description of horse communities suggests that the connection with horses is a strong *glue* of social relationships in horse communities. The glue comes in the shape of a system of values and beliefs that include the upholding of life in its fullest expression: strongly felt connections to all animals, forests, Nature, Earth. This connection was seen as promoting other behaviors such as kindness, generosity, and patience. Listening to the interviews gave me a sense that the respondents had an awareness (more or less conscious) of the holographic principle in the ecology that sustains life. However, the respondents 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 that was so difficult for the respondents to describe. The interviewees insisted, throughout the discussion, that not every horse person could *see the magic* of this deep horse-human bond. This led me to question the connection between states of consciousness and how these may influence our ability to *tap into* the horse-human connection as a source of eco-systemic learning and healing. Do horse encounters promote evolutionary leaps of consciousness or do humans need to be at a certain point in the evolutionary continuum of consciousness to access equine wisdom? Are both sides of this question mutually exclusive or not, and what opportunities does this pose for future research?

At the same time, during the process of the research I came to question the usefulness of pursuing such a line of inquiry at all. As subjects described the values and beliefs that they associated with horse people, I began to wonder how much value would the understanding of this cultural aspect contribute to the discourse on EFL. However, the cultural dimension unquestionably allows for the construction of a more integral picture of horse-human relationship by deepening our understanding of how horses help humans construct social meaning. This in

turn suggests that, if nothing else, equine-guided activities assist humans to make meaning of their experience, whether in the context of healing, leadership development, or personal growth. Therefore, this quadrant of the research deserves deeper consideration and perhaps a re-evaluation of the questions asked in the preliminary study, in terms of optimizing their relevance and contribution to the field of EFL.

Methods

To develop a more informed understanding of animal cognition and consciousness -and its co-creative potential with humans- requires an epistemological shift in how we conduct scientific research. This shift may in turn uncover the many ways in which Nature in general, and horses in particular, may contribute to the human journey of *learning* and *healing*. The epistemological foundations of science can either limit or advance our understanding of the world. We argue that an integral epistemology that explores the horse-human relationship from *first-person consciousness* and *second-person cultural* perspectives will enhance the mental health discourse that dominates EFP/L academic research. Renowned ethologist, Mark Bekoff (2006), questions, “What does it mean to *know* something? What are some other ways of knowing, and how do they compare with what we call *science*? (p. 75). Bekoff’s work recognizes the complexity inherent in animal-human encounters by: a) advancing the notion that the observed [horse-human relationship] needs to be properly *contextualized* to be fully understood, which would include multiple/integral ways of approaching research; b) by shedding light on the complex web of relationships of animal beings playing-out in the larger ecology of the planet, where beast and human are but interconnected sentient beings embedded in a complex ecology of evolutionary continuum; c) by challenging more mechanistic and reductionist

behavior theories that reject the value of anecdote and anthropomorphism in scientific inquiry of animal minds; and d) by arguing for an interdisciplinary/integral approach to the study of animal consciousness and/or animal-human (co)consciousness.

In the aforementioned spirit of inquiry, observations will be made of EFL sessions conducted at the Epona International Equestrian Center, Sonoita, AZ, throughout a nine-month period. The Epona website describes the organization as, “Founded in 1997 by author, lecturer and horse trainer Linda Kohanov, Epona Equestrian Services has received international attention for horse training and breeding innovations, as well as educational programs that employ horses in teaching people leadership, assertiveness, personal empowerment, relationship, intuition, and emotional fitness skills” (<http://www.taoofequus.com>). Additionally, two other methods of data collection will be utilized: semi-structured interviews and surveys will be conducted with EFL participants after their experiences with EFL sessions. Workshops are generally conducted in 3-day to one-week formats, which means that each participant would have sufficient exposure to equine-facilitated activities to form an adequate experiential basis for describing their experience.

Completing the preliminary pilot study has reinforced my interest in the following aspects of horse-human relationship, which would be the basis for constructing the specific research instruments to address these questions with a larger study sample:

- Recursive patterns of (non-verbal) communication -e.g. how are specific communication loops between horse and human created and understood?
- The transformative potential of horse-human encounters. How do corrective emotional experiences, or even profound changes in states of awareness, arise out of the aforementioned feedback loops? From simple behavior modification to complex

transpersonal experiences, EFL sessions offer an exciting theater for deepening our understanding of the role of emotion, cognition and consciousness in horse-human encounters.

- Thematic congruence in terms of how the experience (horse-human encounter) is *language*d and described, which allows a specific texture and structure to emerge. I would propose that there are shared ways in which Equus is experienced and how that experience is in turn expressed through language or patterns of language. The language patterns can then be analyzed to understand how cultural meaning (arising from experience) is constructed in equestrian communities.

The method of observation would consist of field notes that would capture the horse-human dynamics during the EFL sessions. A set of semi-structured interview schedules would need to be developed, similar to those used in the preliminary study that would specifically address the three questions mentioned above. In addition to the traditional interview, I would also use a supplemental alternative method of what I call aesthetic/non-verbal interview, consisting of images that we would ask the participants to draw before and after their EFL workshop experience. At the Epona Center, these drawings are generally part of the EFL sessions, so the research instrument would be an organic/natural construction arising in the EFL process itself. It would be useful to consider if the use of surveys would be helpful in this process, for purposes of triangulating the data among observation, interviews and surveys. Both interview and survey questions are still to be determined at this stage, based on additional review of the preliminary pilot study and the lessons learned in that process (to be developed).

Musings on Future research

In terms of further research, it might be useful to contextualize horse communities in

terms of Wilber's stages or levels of development: egocentric, ethnocentric, world-centric, and to track how these shift (or not) after extended exposure to EFL. Since EFL has a highly creative content that puts the individual in touch with aesthetics/beauty, it might be interesting to track if effects occur in an individual's (or a group's) stage of consciousness development as a result of this approach (i.e. experiential EFL) to horse-human encounters. Furthermore, it would be fascinating to frame these findings in the context of Gregory Bateson's epistemology, or his "mature understanding of the links between beauty, ecosystemic health, artistic process, and the possibility of refinding the 'grace' of reconnection between humanity and the rest of the living Earth" (Charlton, 2008, p. 8). Based on the researcher's experience with creative, improvisational forms of EFL practice, I would argue that the practice of EFL with a highly creative/aesthetic content does indeed provide richer windows of opportunities for transformative and transpersonal experiences.

As a last commentary, current academic research on equine-guided experiences suffers from a serious omission: the voice of Equus. As I conducted my interviews, I could at times visualize what the participant was trying to convey, by forming a *picture* in my mind. Therefore, as I continue my future research, the use of imagery and videotaping will be integrated to provide the audience an experience of the look and feel, the aesthetic expression of and the beauty inherent in the equine-human bond. One of the respondents commented:

I think [horses] helped me achieve a level of tenderness that I wouldn't have known otherwise. They really are like gentle giants, and he [childhood horse], just by being a horse, was able to soothe what was hurt for me.



References

- Bates, A. (2002). Of patients & horses: equine-facilitated psychotherapy. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health*, 40(5), 16-20.
- Bekoff, M. (2006). Animal passions and beastly virtues: cognitive ethology as the unifying science for understanding the subjective, emotional, empathic, and moral lives of animals. *Zygon*, 41(1), 71-104.
- Charlton, N. (2008). *Understanding Gregory Bateson: mind, beauty and the sacred earth*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Cresswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ebsjorn-Hargens, S. (2008). Integral ecological research: using IMP to examine animal consciousness and sustainability. *Integral Ecological Research*, (3)1, 15-59.
- Irwin, C. (2001). *Horses don't lie: what horses teach us about our natural capacity for awareness, confidence, courage, and trust*. NY: Marlowe & Company.
- Kohanov, L. (2001). *The tao of equus: a woman's journey of healing & transformation through the way of the horse*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Lawrence, E. (1994). The centaur: its history and meaning in human culture, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(4), 57-68.
- McCormick, A., McCormick, M., McCormick, T. (2004). *Horses and the mystical path*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Snow, B. (2007). Reflections on Integral Methodological Pluralism. Retrieved May 15, 2009 from <http://www.kenwilber.com/blog/show/379>

Wilber, K. (2006). *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

