



Talking about Horses: Control and Freedom in the World of “Natural Horsemanship”

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Sent 2 July 2007, Accepted 16 October 2007

Abstract

This paper explores how horses are represented in the discourses of “natural horsemanship” (NH), an approach to training and handling horses that advocates see as better (kinder, more gentle) than traditional methods. In speaking about their horses, NH enthusiasts move between two registers: On one hand, they use a quasi-scientific narrative, relying on terms and ideas drawn from ethology, to explain the instinctive behavior of horses. Within this mode of narrative, the horse is “other” and must be understood through the human learning to communicate and through appropriate training. On the other hand, NH enthusiasts—like many horse owners—seek to emphasize partnership. In this type of discourse, people portray their horses as almost human. The tensions between these two ways of talking about horses reflect contradictory ideas about control versus freedom in relating to horses, especially as related to emotions expressed by caregivers (owners) about their relationships with horses.

Keywords

natural horsemanship, discourse, instinctive behavior, partnership, control, freedom

Introduction

“I wouldn’t mind feeling it again, the first time I fell in love.” No doubt many agree, but Pierson (2002, p. 11) refers not to a person but to her childhood passion for a horse. Being in love is a powerful metaphor to describe relationships with horses. Even in the hard-bitten world of racing, the word “love” appears: Cassidy (2005) notes how bloodstock breeders justify their choices at thoroughbred auctions, sometimes admitting they had to “fall in love” to know that horse had an extra something. Outside of the world of elite racehorses, many owners of quite ordinary—and far less glamorous—horses also speak about being in love with their horses. But, for them, this is not a

falling-in-love based particularly on the horse's potential to win races: rather, it can be falling in love through learning how to communicate with the horse.

Horses are rich sources of myths and metaphors, held in high regard by many cultures: They are part work-animal but also part symbol-of-freedom or-wildness (Barclay, 1980; Lawrence, 1985). These rather contradictory understandings of horses, as both horses in the wild and horses who are tame, play out in how horse people think or talk about their animals. In popular horsey culture, for instance, contributors to equestrian websites write enthusiastically about the liberty of the horse, while at the same time asking questions about how better to ride (and thus control) their nonhuman animals.

Natural Horsemanship (NH) and the Leisure-Horse World

These understandings are particularly explicit in the leisure-horse industry, where many people keep horses more as companion animals (pets) than as work animals. In this paper, I draw on a study of people in a particular sector of the leisure-horse world—that is, practitioners of what has been called “natural horsemanship” (NH)¹—to explore how they talk about horses and attribute meaning. By “leisure horse,” I mean those horses kept for, say, pleasure riding and/or some competitive work as part of the guardian's (owner) use of leisure time. I use the term NH here to cover a range of approaches advertised as being “new” methods. Although these methods are disparate, what they have in common is that they are advertised as being based on gentleness and are seen as departing radically from traditional approaches.²

Broadly speaking, NH³ is a fairly recent cultural change in the horse world, both in North America and Europe, and involves a variety of trainers and methods of handling horse—Birke (2007) provides additional details. What they have in common, however, is the belief that their approaches to training and horse husbandry are different, based on kindness and learning to “speak horse.” Not surprisingly, respondents often mention the need to handle and manage the horse as “naturally” as possible (Birke). They see these methods, moreover, in opposition to what they portray as “traditional” methods. Whether or not that is true in practice, the discourses of NH practitioners show very clearly the tensions in how we think about horses—extolling both the wildness/freedom of horses and specific methods of taming them.

Apart from changes in equestrian practice, NH also means potential changes in the way that horses are represented in popular equestrian culture. Those representations in turn both potentially reflect and reproduce changing relationships between horses and humans. Here, I focus on how these owners and users of NH speak about their horses and their relationships with them:

1. What kinds of discourse do they use?
2. How do they express the tension between seeing horses as friends and seeing them as valuable tools? And
3. What do these ways of speaking about horses accomplish, for both human and horse?

Among other things, I will argue, the emphasis on partnership in NH appears to permit greater space for emotionality, for being in love, even while it encourages emotional control.

Growing public interest in different forms of NH reflects a larger shift in our attitudes toward nonhuman animals, from an attitude of instrumentality to one of a growing empathy with animals (Franklin, 1999). There are several reasons for this change: among them, a growing awareness of animal sentience and subjectivity, which flies in the face of beliefs that animals are there simply for us to use. As a result, there have been dramatic changes in how people understand—and talk—about animals close to them; we now speak of companion animals to describe dogs and cats, for example, or talk of guardianship rather than ownership (Irvine, 2004). There have also, significantly, been changes of emphasis in dog training—from advocacy of largely coercive methods to insistence on using gentler approaches. Thus, the rise in popularity of NH is part of a wider trend in how we relate to—and train—those animals who are close to us. Whatever ideals participants in this research might have about human/horse relationships, it was clear that most felt those ideals were not met through conventional approaches to equitation (Birke, 2007). NH, most felt, offered a completely new approach, which allowed them to begin to understand horses and develop a partnership—to learn to “speak horse”.⁴ Yet, although they were unanimous in talking about partnership with their animals, their narratives portray horses in several, sometimes contradictory, ways. Some of these may be identical to narratives throughout equestrianism; what I explore here, however, are ways that this particular sub-group of equestrians—participants in what has been called a “revolution in horsemanship” (Miller & Lamb, 2005)—articulate beliefs about horses and equine behavior.

Two distinct themes of discourse about horses emerged from my analysis: At times, NH advocates sought to understand the horse as animal, as instinct-driven, a need expressed by reference to scientific ideas about horse behavior. In this sense, the horse is “other,” an animal apart, driven by a genetic inheritance; the horse can be tamed and brought into human worlds only by understanding that heritage and overcoming it by training. In contrast to the image of horses as other (whether misunderstood or better understood through science), is the partnership narrative, in which the horse becomes almost human,

a subject—"he's part of my soul," explained several respondents. Horses in this narrative were (to some extent) free to make their own decisions.

Portraying horses as other is not necessarily antithetical in daily practice to portraying them as partners—it may be possible, for instance, to overcome a horse's instinctive tendency toward flight and so build a partnership. Nor is the other/partner contrast unique to NH—it draws, after all, on narrative themes about companion animals that are common in our culture. By contrasting them, however, I want to emphasize how they are expressed in NH discourse in particular and how these narratives accomplish different things.

The Horse as "Other," the Horse as Partner

Comfort Zones : The Behavior of the Horse as Instinctive

NH advocates tend to be very passionate about their new-found methods (although a few of my interviewees were critical of at least some NH methods). They see these methods as quite different from their previous experiences of traditional approaches: the latter were cruel, forceful, whereas NH offers them the chance to "learn to speak the horse's language" (Birke, 2007). Yet despite this powerful story of partnership (discussed further below), horses are also "other." "Horses are still horses." several argued, meaning that they should be understood as akin to horses in the wild, not-human. In speaking about horse behavior, respondents drew on a kind of scientific (ethological) discourse and the psychology of learning theory. These are emphases foregrounded in much NH instruction (they are often less explicit in traditional training), yet they are also contested. Horses within these narratives can, moreover, be misunderstood—if, for example, they are not trained through the appropriate mechanisms of learning theory, or if the human fails to understand equine instincts.

Horses, respondents suggested several times, are herd animals who recognize leaders—humans. People must in turn establish dominance. Horses are also prey animals who would respond to humans as predators. One-third of respondents talked about leadership and/or dominance, expressing the need for the human to become the horse's leader, and expecting the horse to accept leadership from the human. "Horses don't need teaching to accept our leadership skills, in almost all cases they would like to accept our leadership skills if it's offered," explained Sarah, an NH trainer.⁵

Establishing leadership is not always easy, however: Dom, a trainer working temporarily in the United Kingdom, pointed out that horses in European countries are usually handled by people from the day they are born, unlike

many of those in the Western United States (from where many forms of NH originated). This means, he felt, that—in Europe—horses “are so close to, they get very confident then its more that those horses, when you start to work with them, you have more like leadership issues, because they are so confident [compared] to the human.” In short, for many owners, the first step is to persuade the horse that he is *not* the leader. In this sense, the path to partnership begins with a struggle.

Most respondents also referenced ethological ideas about horses as prey animals, whose first reaction is flight. To understand them, they believed, we must recognize the prey/predator relationship. As Sandy, a teacher in a riding school, explained,

In the wild, a tiger would jump on its back, so therefore why should a horse accept a human, who is a predator on its back, so they have to accept a saddle, first of all. . . . we are predators, and they are prey animals, a lot of horses you find haven't accepted a human, you find a lot of those in the conventional world, a lot of people say the horse is being naughty. . . . but the horse is just going, there's a predator on my back I've got to get it off.

Similarly, Jenny, who had been trained as an instructor through conventional routes, explained the importance to her of learning through NH how horses behave:

. . . well it was almost a moral issue, I felt morally obliged then to try to understand my horse, I felt that there was an injustice in the system expecting him to read my mind and read my behavior, where you know predatory behavior is just that, it's predatory behavior—he's not going to stand there and think why am I behaving like a predator, he just thinks I *am* a predator. . . . that hadn't occurred to me before, I like the idea of looking at a horse and trying to understand, to get into his head a little bit.

Responding like a prey animal, some respondents argued, was a function of being “right-brained.” The purpose, then, of the training method is to “teach the horse to think and take responsibility”—to become “less right-brained,” explained Felicity, a self-taught owner/rider:

The thing to understand here is the difference between right brain and left brain modes. A horse in his so-called right brain is not thinking. He is reacting purely out of instinct, because, in the wild, if a predator is trying to get him, it's his instinctive reactions that will save his life. He doesn't have time to think.⁶

Most interviews referenced instinctive behavior. Some of this was straightforward: For example, few would disagree that wild horses are a prey species.

However, some stories about wild-horse behavior were more contested. Critics argued that domesticated horses were rarely so easily fooled that a rider on their back constituted a predator; in particular, they challenged the related ideas of leadership and dominance, suggesting that “dominance” in ethology is a much-contested concept that should not be taken to mean a fixed social relationship between individuals but rather a fluid and changing kind of behavior. An animal, for instance, might be acting dominantly in a specific situation (Skipper, 2005). They also suggested that it should not be extended to relationships with humans. Thus, Jan—a trainer with a background in psychology—suggested that NH is called

... “natural” because instructors believe they really are interacting as another horse might. [But] dominance related behavior between horses is highly salient to the human mind because it is probably the most overt social interaction made between horses and so sticks in the mind. But extrapolating to human/horse is to take it out of context.

For her, using the concept of dominance meant misunderstanding the animal.

Misunderstanding was mentioned by several respondents, particularly in relation to training and equine learning—most notably in reference to conventional training. Most respondents pointed to the need to avoid “punishment” (Macleay, 2003), explicitly associating punishment and infliction of pain with traditional methods. Thus, Miller and Lamb (2005) describing equine training, suggest that in NH methods, “Pain is not inflicted. The horse experiences discomfort, but it is not extreme. This is where natural horsemanship differs from most traditional methods” (p. 106). Several of my interviewees expressed similar ideas—that NH meant less punishment and/or pressure. Thus, speaking about training for competition work, Lesley, an Australian horse owner studying Parelli techniques in the United Kingdom, explained that NH has for her meant that the horse receives

a lot more understanding, a lot less pressure... well, actually no, you still put pressure on, but [in traditional approaches] you never released it—if you got a good jump or one stride of piaffe, you’d just ask for more and more; but in NH, you reward”.⁷ Here, she expresses a contrast between the rewards of NH and the way that horse learning is misunderstood in traditional approaches.

Several interviewees spoke at length about making the “right things comfortable and the wrong things uncomfortable” for the horse (or using forms of negative reinforcement (McLean, 2005; Hockenull, 2006). Yet what constitutes comfortable was clearly contested. While most respondents agreed that

positive reward was best—that some pressure was acceptable, and too much pressure was to be avoided—there was little consensus about what these terms meant (except in the sense that you could recognize too much pressure when the horse objected!). On the whole, respondents expressed ambivalence about pressure—as the quotation from Lesley indicates. Most condemned traditional practices precisely because these often used cruel methods based on punishment, and put too much pressure on the horse to learn. But, having set apart the new methods from traditional ones, they were sometimes at a loss to explain how pressure was involved in those new methods.

Good trainers may be able to recognize equine signs of comfort or discomfort,⁸ however, learning to do so can take years of experience. The result, critics suggested, was that many owners were not able to behave consistently toward their horses because they could not judge equine behavior; as a result, the horses reacted to NH methods with bewilderment, unsure what was expected of them. Jan, a trainer critical of many NH techniques, likened this to psychology experiments with rats in which one group (B) received unpredictable electric shocks, while another group learned to predict them with a light as cue. “This is how I see the practice of NH techniques, the horses subjected to it are like Group B rats,” she explained.

Communication, in effect, does sometimes break down. Critics of NH typically felt that confusion, rather than communication, was common. Partly, explained Ellie, another trainer, this can result from changing the dynamics of the human/horse relationship as the owner adopts new methods; but partly too, it can result because owners sometimes pick and choose from different approaches, which can,

... drive their horses literally mad by... changing from one method to another using their horse to experiment on. [Thus] horses becoming confused, unmanageable, unpredictable, depressed, reluctant, sometimes aggressive, often agitated and uncooperative.

Similarly Jackie, an owner who had been on several NH training courses, spoke about attending a clinic where the instructor failed to explain how horses learn and did nothing to encourage people to recognize when the horse was trying; as a result, she said, one participant tried to increase the pressure on her horse, but did so without warning, so that “the poor horse was trying to climb the rails to get away from her.” So, for critics, some methods of NH did not promote partnership but, on the contrary, created a space where communication could break down.

In the discourses of NH, understanding the ethology of the horse is foregrounded. In that sense, NH is quite different from traditional worlds: In

traditional leisure-horse worlds, knowledge of horses is typically gained through engagement in communities (the Pony Club, for example) and families (Birke & Latimer, 2007), while in NH it is something gained from scientific accounts told through specific experts (a process which in turn gives the scientific explanation greater authority). In these circumstances, it is not surprising to find scientific narratives predominating in interviews. Yet such language also serves to objectify horses who were, in these narratives, both other and partners, object and subject. They were portrayed as highly intelligent, problem-solving animals—having a high degree of agency in their interaction with people—which humans must learn about to become responsible horse owners. On the other hand, the animals were also portrayed as driven by irrational instincts.

Partly, such ambivalence maps onto the multiple and ambiguous ways nonhuman animals are portrayed—in general—in Western culture. Yet the use of scientific language furthers that ambivalence. Analyzing the forms of narrative used in descriptions of animal behavior, Crist (1999) points out the contrast between narratives in natural history that posit the animals as subjects—aware of their world—and those in scientific ethology that tend to position the animal as an object, as passive. Historically, the science of ethology has focused on observable behavior, largely avoiding any discussion of animal minds and agency (though that is rapidly changing, with the development of cognitive ethology (Bekoff, 2002)). So, to draw on the language of ethology to explain horse behavior is inevitably to use a language that renders the horse acted-upon—whether that is by external stimuli or inherent instincts, or via human action. As Noske (2005) points out, the use of such language in scientific analyses of horse training not only ignores horses as subjects but also creates a knowledge based on domination.

Referring to scientific language and ideas creates a dilemma; for however much horse owners sought to understand equine behavior on the basis of scientific studies, their own experiences were with horses as animals with agency—intelligent, thoughtful, and loving. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the stories they told of learning and instinct were often contradictory. Moreover, when participants spoke about the principles behind their practice—about scientific ideas of leadership for example—they referred either to horses in general (as in the species) or to “the” horse. By contrast, when they spoke about their own horse and partnership, they would refer to that animal by name, as “he” or “she.” That polarity, moreover, contributes in turn to the resistance spoken about in interviews to “conventional training,” as several respondents described the “production line” approach of many riding schools and the focus on technique in Pony Club manuals and practices. In all this emphasis on techniques of riding and grooming, there is little room

for the personality of individual horses to shine through. Yet it is precisely that understanding of individual horses as partners that horse owners sought to emphasize.

Partners: Speaking the Same Language

Participants used a quite different language when they talked about their own horses. In this situation, they moved into talking about partnership, one-ness, and relationship. As Laura, amateur horse owner, explained: since working with NH, “We become as ONE—horse and human totally relaxed and in tune with one another.” This is quite a different kind of discourse from the quasi-scientific one used to talk about horses as prey: by contrast, as partners, horses become almost people. Recent work from symbolic inter-actionist perspectives has emphasized how humans and animals sharing in the co-creation of meaning produce inter-subjectivity: about horses, Brandt (2004); about dogs, Irvine (2004) and Sanders (1999). Indeed, Irvine notes, “Self-history, or continuity, is what makes interaction into relationships” (p.139); it is only in relationships, she argues, that a sense of self is produced (whether the relationships are between humans or human and nonhuman). It is just this sense of inter-subjectivity and self-history—partnership—that horse owners wanted to stress in interviews. Here, it was not the generic “horse,” but specific individuals who are spoken about.

Probably most horsey people yearn for that deep relationship—becoming as one—with a horse that is expressed in interviews.⁹ But many experienced horsepeople believe that they either have it now or have experienced it with some horses in the past. The people I interviewed were not, on the whole, beginners at horse-keeping. Yet, the story they frequently told was one of epiphany, of suddenly discovering a meaningful relationship, in the context of learning about NH. To some extent, they may be reinscribing their past relationships with horses, deliberately contrasting them with relationships after their new discoveries. Indeed, this may be a likely consequence of the contrastive narratives of traditional horse training worlds (before) and the new techniques of NH (after), as interviewees built up a story of the rigidity and lack of sympathy in conventional approaches.

Like dog owners, people with horses often see them as friends, partners on particular journeys—above all, as individuals. They have to learn to read each other, to be “in tune”; this is not only a benefit to the human but also to the horse. Horse owner Sue explained: “She definitely understands what I’m asking for [now] as I’m trying to talk her language, we’re much more aware of each other. . . . she’s getting much more confident which is fabulous to see.”

This learning to read each other—partnership—was a striking theme in the interviews. In some ways, this theme reiterates how most methods of NH are taught; in some ways, respondents produced a “partnership narrative” specifically for the interview: put another way, participants in effect perform or reproduce a discourse of partnership and kindness.

What this meant was that the *way* in which that partnership was described was often enthusiastic and emotional, even ecstatic at times¹⁰—tales of total harmony, being one with the horse, totally in tune. As Felicity explained:

It's about true communication and understanding of your horse. [It implies] a brilliant relationship—happiness—... it's such an emotive journey and on that journey you take along your best friend and they experience it too.

Susie, another amateur owner, concurred, saying that NH meant that the relationship

... can become more than just the horse and her owner, more like partners... it's a wonderful feeling to know that such a powerful, graceful animal wants to be in [your] company and that [you] are a team.

Sometimes, the narrative of horse-as-other intruded: For example, 15 year old Emily spoke about her relationship:

I'm looking for an unbreakable bond between my horse and I. Something no one else can ever break or ruin... However, I feel the horse is far more superior... All in all... a horse is a horse. He doesn't need to learn anything about being a horse... My ideal relationship would be that I could understand every little thing my horse told me... He would be in total harmony with me, and I with him... We could do anything we wanted."

What she expresses here is both a yearning for partnership with such a big animal, and simultaneously a recognition that “a horse is a horse.”

In general, all forms of NH emphasize learning to “speak the horse’s language.” Once you understand that, respondents insisted, you can learn to communicate properly with horses and build a relationship. As livery-yard owner Susie explained, “It’s a wonderful feeling to know that such a powerful, graceful animal wants to be in your company and that you are a team.” Jenny, who ran a large equestrian centre, spoke about her transition into NH from a conventional background, saying that she had never before

assumed it was necessary to understand to a greater extent the language of horses... I'd always worked in a way that I wanted to fit with me... then I realised that my

understanding of horse behavior [was very little]—in terms of equine behaviour . . . patterns I wasn't really interested in. [But then] well it was almost a moral issue, I felt morally obliged then to try to understand my horse, I felt that there was an injustice in the system expecting him to read my mind and read my behavior.

Although several spoke of their own sudden conversion on discovering NH, some also felt there had been an epiphany for the horse—sudden relief that at last their human was speaking their language. A third of respondents expressed this idea of “relief.” Laura, owner of a pleasure horse, explained that now her horse “sees me in a different light. I can see the respect in her eyes when I have her tuned to me,” while Susie explained,

I think she enjoys it, it's like someone speaking Chinese to you for years and you can't understand them and then suddenly they speak English and it all comes clear. . . . I think she's learned that humans are fun to be around now.

In these narratives of partnership, the horse—although indisputably still a horse—becomes almost human, wanting the same things as the human partner.

Associated with that “relief”—attribution of horse feelings—respondents frequently also attributed the horse's behavior to the new methods and/or to the human's new-found ability to “read horse.” It is not important here whether they had actually altered the horse's behavior; the point is here that people reported a change, which they then interpreted in terms of NH. Thus, Karen, a horse owner and manager of a livery yard, described how her mare repeatedly lifted the wrong foot when she was trying to clean the feet out. But, it turned out, there was a large stone wedged in the horse's foot: “[S]he couldn't put her weight on it and therefore decided that it needed cleaning first before I could do the other one!” Before the NH training, Karen felt,

she would never have asked me to do the other hoof first. . . . I know this because we had NO relationship worth talking about. . . . I believe that my horse now has the confidence to ask me things because she knows I will listen.

Here, then, the horse's behavior is presented as intentional and attributed to a relationship, to an intelligence and decision-making capability that was not previously accessible. The horse may previously have done exactly the same thing; but the person did not attribute it to intentionality. Moreover, whatever went before, it was not a relationship; so the horse was seen as unable or unwilling to communicate (or the human to understand).

Over and over again, respondents suggested that their relationships with their horses had improved dramatically since they began working with NH,

developing into real partnerships. After discussing their relationships with their horses in the interviews, I also asked people to describe their ideal horse. One suggested Pegasus, but most felt that they had, or were close to having, their ideal horse in the one they already owned. As amateur owner Kelly went on to explain, regarding her use of Parelli techniques, saying it was,

... a lot more fun ... when you're at liberty with your horse, I've always dreamt of having a horse that would follow me around because it wants to, that comes when it's called ... be my partner, basically ... when you stop, it stops, when you walk, it walks ... that's the safety thing.

Katie, who had discovered Parelli techniques while on a course with her mother, felt that the ideal relationship "is what I'm nearly getting to now with my horse ... wanting to be with me, wanting to PLAY with me, treating me like another horse and another playmate."

There was a striking contrast in these interviews, then, between the emotional tone of talk about communication and relationships and the rational/scientific tone of talk about horses and their natural behavior. There was, moreover, near-unanimity in talking about partnership—everyone sought it—while talk about horses' natural behavior was often contested. When respondents wanted to emphasize partnership, they spoke about the horse in quasi-human terms: The horse became a thinking participant, yet linked emotionally to the human. Lesley, for example, felt,

If we give them time, we learn that they're a hell of a lot brighter, hell of a lot more sensitive than I'd ever have guessed ... and their ability to shut down, just put up with humans, is absolutely amazing—they are so amiable, easy-going!

Thinking about how to train horses inevitably focuses attention on their ability to learn—and some horses are less quick than others. Thus, Carla, a competition rider who had trained conventionally but now switched to Parelli techniques, described one of her ponies who didn't "get" one of the Parelli games:

We call him a "diesel" model ... he just gets confused and stressed if you simply ask the same thing again—if he'd understood it, he'd already have done it ... He'd be in a remedial class if he was a child and hence needs a bit more 'special needs' approach.

Although this pony is not spoken of as especially intelligent, he is still portrayed as a thinking participant in the process.

This kind of description contrasts with images of the horse controlled by irrational instincts, described scientifically. The work of the human is to overcome equine instincts by careful training. When people spoke in these terms, they used language that was detached, distant—a far cry from the partnership narrative. For example, Sally, an owner attending a training clinic, having spoken lyrically about the romance of working your horse at liberty (when the horse is not bridled or haltered, but is asked to move at the human's command from the ground); then switched to describing how NH emphasized

... horse psychology. . . . You use principles of comfort and discomfort, you make sure the horse is comfortable standing still. . . . then he gets rubbed. . . . Trailer loading is very important—you keep asking them until they do put one foot on.

Here, her speech was straightforwardly descriptive, quite in contrast to the enthusiasm in her voice when she spoke previously about the romance of liberty work, which gave her “a really big feeling.”

Underlying the tension between instincts and partnership as ways of understanding horses is the pervasive wild/tame dichotomy (Lawrence, 1985). What seems to thread through NH discourse is an image of the wild horse, manifest in both the emphasis on instincts and on liberty. The imagery of the wild horse is furthered by popular tales of horse whisperers who catch and ride wild Mustangs, so that what emerges is a belief that relating to horses as wild—even in the process of taming—is the only way to develop a relationship. However, what this disguises is recognition of the effects of domestication, which means that horses are usually relatively well socialized into human/horse relationships by the time they begin training.¹¹ NH advocates often spoke of horses trained traditionally as looking dull (Birke, 2007), as though they were simply too tame, too over-controlled (though critics in the traditional world said much the same about NH horses!). Wildness, then, figures in these narratives as a way of separating off NH advocates from the traditional world: In NH, wildness is a motif to celebrate—or at least to understand—while, in traditional horsey worlds, horses must be (and must be seen to be) controlled, docile, and tamed (Birke & Latimer, 2007).

Contradictions and Control

Indeed, for all that owners eulogized liberty, horsemanship of any sort is about control. Yet to talk of control is to express ambivalence. Dog owners, too, draw ambiguously on notions of “wild” and “free,” as Irvine (2004) points out, even while those animals are expected to fit human expectations. Similarly, while horse owners spoke about ensuring that horses could go softly and

without constraint, they were also asking horses to do specific tasks required by riding or NH groundwork. Asking horses to go sideways or backward is still asking them to do something on human terms. Most horse owners recognize that, and find justifications, such as insisting that horses want to do these tasks—if not for themselves, then at least to please the human. For example, Sophie, who kept her own horses at home, described her ideal horse as

... [o]ne that was a perfect partner and did everything because he wanted to and you could play with him and get him to circle, back up, go sideways, run with you etc. etc. all at liberty in a big area. . . . a horse that truly wants to be with you and stays with you by choice.

Despite the rhetoric of partnership and liberty here, the aim is still to control the horse's movements.¹² In addition, however much people might speak of freedom, they also articulate a language in which horses do what they want. Discourses of control serve both to maintain and to justify human power over the animal through the physical restraints put upon the horse. Although NH advocates espouse a softer approach to handling horses, control of what the horse does is still the name of the game. Brandt (2005) points out that, despite the "gentle cowboy" imagery at the heart of NH, he is still "commander of the 'beast'" (p. 33), and control remains central whether we speak about gently starting horses or the "breaking" associated with rodeo.

Control is built into the way humans relate to horses (perhaps necessarily so, given the large size of horses compared to humans). Analyzing historical changes in riding and horsemanship, Mason (2000) argues that "the modern system of horse management is a nearly perfect manifestation of disciplinary control. Trained in this system, equine bodies are docile bodies" (p. 512). There is, she suggests, a parallel between the discursive construction of equine bodies and of women's bodies: both are subjected to control, which in turn must become internalized. Thus, ponies who "stand like lambs" became highly valued for children and remain so. Latimer (n.d., n.p.) similarly describes the importance of the form of control exercised through "turnout"—of grooming and preparing the horse; this is a way of cultivating and enhancing nature "to help bring into being a world of elegant, powerful horses whose lines are sleek and untainted by dirt and too much hair, a little bit like women's bodies." Observing the world of the ridden hunt in Britain, Latimer notes how both horses and hounds must be fit and bursting with energy—almost threatening to become out of control—while the riders must be seen to be able to control them. This, she suggests, is how memberships of particular rural communities in Britain are performed—at least partly, through relationship to, and man-

agement of, horses. Here, too, is the tension between management/docility and the potential for (some degree of) freedom.

Language both reflects existing relationships of power and simultaneously creates them (Fairclough, 1989); how we relate to, and speak about, animals is no exception (Stibbe, 2001).¹³ Disciplinary control is part of the fabric of discourse and practice in horsey worlds: the discipline of dressage, the management of fitness in hunt horses, or the work on the ground emphasized by many NH trainers. Such discourse displays our ability to manage horses (or not) while it reproduces the systems and infrastructure of control. How such control is exerted is contested—that, indeed, is the basis of the opposition and incomprehension between many NH and traditional practitioners¹⁴ But the use of specifically scientific referents and language may serve to reinforce relations of power and inequality in relation to horses—through, for example, representing animals as instinctively driven (Crist, 1999). In that sense, the theme of horse-as-other in interviews reinscribes horses as separate from people.

Yet despite the tension between control and freedom in how people talk about—and relate to—horses, they also seek ways out of that opposition. However much NH practitioners draw upon a problematic scientific language, they also stress “learning to speak horse” and building a partnership. Partly, this is about learning to “read” minute changes in horse body language; it is also about relating human body language to the horse. It may not be a verbal one, but this interactive body language is still a form of discourse, performed through bodies of both human and horse.

The partnership narrative stressed by participants implies that horses want to engage in relationship. Like dogs (Sanders, 1999), horses probably are adept at reading human body signals—both while ridden (Game, 2001) and while interacting on the ground. Despret (2004) analyzed how humans and animals attune to each other, bodily and affectively; she used two examples—that of Clever Hans, the horse whose owner claimed could count (and whose correct answers can be understood as a fine tuning of body language) and that of students learning to work with particular strains of lab rat. Both human and animal participants in these exchanges, she argued,

... transform the practice that articulates them into what we may call an “anthropo-zoo-genetic practice.” a practice that constructs animal and human... On the one hand, [Clever Hans] gave to his human questioners the chance of “becoming with a horse” performing a body that a horse can read, acquiring a horse-sensitivity. On the other, humans domesticating horses offer them a new identity: being a horseth-with-human (p.122).

Just as Clever Hans and his humans learned not only to read—but also to modify—fine details of the other's bodily movements, so too do horses and people during riding or when interacting on the ground.

This “being-with” is what horsepeople yearn for and is clearly prioritized in NH discourses. For people who are, literally, in close contact with horses through riding, it is about carrying “horseness” within them. On the whole, respondents did not put doing competitions in the foreground of their relationships with horses (as many do in the equestrian world); rather, they sought relationship first, and—if they were interested at all in competition—performance would follow. This almost mystical belief in union is not unique to NH: but NH practitioners do emphasize it in ways that distance themselves from traditional horse worlds. “Being-with,” they felt, had for them only been possible when they discovered NH. In that sense, talk of “being-with” not only reflects a discourse of partnership but also makes possible the performance of that partnership and constructs the equine partner as almost-human.

These horse owners, advocates of methods of NH, are not unique in this kind of construction of horses as partners. In the interviews, this talk of partnership served two roles. First, it made social connections—not only to other people within networks of horse owners but also to me, the researcher (I had explained that I had experience of horses). It also brings the horse into that set of social connections: As noted above, it was specifically in talking about partnership that horses were referred to by name or definite pronouns. Second, the way that these NH enthusiasts spoke about it set boundaries; that is, they saw partnership as coming about because of NH. In that sense, what the narrative accomplishes is a (partial) separation from mainstream horse culture. To many of the participants in this study, NH had made possible an emotional drama that simply had not been there before for them—falling in love, as several explained.

“I Wouldn't Mind Feeling it Again”: The Paradoxes of Being in Love

Pierson (2002) tries to rediscover the sheer emotionality of being with horses, feelings that she feels are easily squashed in our culture. That search epitomizes a central paradox for many horse people—the horse symbolizes freedom. We speak about being overawed by the beauty of the horse, about being in love: yet, while we seek to tame and control them, we try to understand horses through the objectifying language of science. However, underlying all this is a search for connection with the horse, an opportunity to “speak the same language.”

However, although the discourses of NH express similar kinds of contradictions to those found in other areas of horse/human interaction, they also

express something more. Writing about the (often fraught) tension in Western culture between the dominant rationality and emotionality, Lupton (1998) notes a recent cultural shift from emotional management to (increasingly) emotional revelation. Western rationality has, she argues, favored emotional control: Doing so, however, creates the conditions for a rebellion. Thus, in the face of an apparently highly managed social life, people increasingly yearn for intense emotions, such as love (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Many people trained in traditional horsey culture also yearn for partnership, for “being in love” with a horse. But deeply embedded in that culture lies an emphasis on emotional management. In British horse culture, for instance, children are routinely exhorted to “get back on the pony” if they fall off, to control their fears and tears, and “get on with the job”; riders injuring themselves are praised for getting back on board (even at times with broken bones, as I myself have done). It is this kind of control that interviewees seemed to reject: for some, it left no room for their own fears, so that they welcomed NH as providing opportunities for them to work with horses without having to “get back on board.” Although NH practices strongly discourage expression of emotions such as anger or frustration, they seem to allow more space to express emotions of partnership—giving opportunities for a quiet rebellion.

Conclusion

There is an irony here, of course, in that while humans seek to express their emotions more fully, the horse is effectively denied such expression. The partnership—that may well bring pleasures to the horse as well as the person—is one in which human control over the horse is consolidated. Indeed, in the way that NH advocates spoke about training and the need to overcome equine instincts, they were talking about the horse learning not to display a full range of emotional expression—to learn to manage emotions when working with a human (Noske, 2005).

For the human, however, rejecting control leaves more space to express positive emotions. Although all kinds of horse people might admit to having “fallen in love,” the “emotionally managed” world of traditional equestrian culture tends to dissuade people from speaking about it. What NH does, with its emphasis on gentleness and freedom, is to loosen restraints on talking about at least some kinds of emotionality, to revisit what Williams (2001) calls the “(un)managed heart.” In this world, perhaps it is easier to fall in love—or at least to talk about it.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Keri Brandt and Mike Michael, and Joanna Latimer for helpful comments on this paper and ongoing discussion; to Dave Stuart, for discussions of what “horsemanship” means; and, of course, to all the participants who shared freely of their time to discuss horses.

Notes

1. This is based on a qualitative analysis of 48 interviews (14 of which were conducted face-to-face and the rest via iterative email correspondence), alongside analysis of written materials about natural horsemanship produced for training purposes, in website chatrooms and at conferences. People were recruited via snowball sampling and interviews transcribed and coded for subsequent discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Many participants chose to “mix and match” their methods, so that separating out interviews by methods was not possible. I also observed demonstrations of NH and watched training DVDs to provide context. Birke (2007) further details methods.

2. By traditional approaches, respondents meant approaches traditionally used in the worlds of leisure horses, including competition disciplines such as show jumping. This is a largely fragmented part of the wider horse world, consisting of small-scale owners keeping horses in small barns or yards—so distinguishing these from, say, the more intensive (and industrialized) areas of racing and polo. The people I interviewed had experience of “traditional” horsekeeping in small yards; it was this from which they differentiated themselves.

3. Despite the sexism of this term, there is a marked gender disparity in natural horsemanship—which in turn reflects the gender composition within the world of pleasure horse owners: The vast majority of this group are women. I retain the term here simply because it is so widely used.

4. Critics of NH would contest this claim. There have long been advocates of gentle methods of handling horses, from Xenophon’s *Art of Horsemanship* in ancient Greece, to writers such as Blake (1975). What is new, however, is that these new methods are energetically marketed, a task made easier by communications technologies. So, while there may now be more people from non-horsey backgrounds learning to ride (and hence having less ready access to tacit knowledge about horses) there is also a plethora of advice available on the internet and through chatrooms. Although some of this may not be useful, or may be harmful to either horse or human, some of it is indeed valuable information; It does, moreover, help to create a climate of opinion in which gentle methods of horse training are favored (Birke, 2007). The point about NH practitioners, however, is that they do not feel that they encountered partnership in practice in their dealings with traditional approaches to horses and their management.

5. All names of respondents given here are pseudonyms.

6. There is evidence that, like many other mammals and birds, horses’ brains show lateralization (McGreevy & Rogers, 2005), just as do those of humans.

7. Taking this position meant that people did not want to see technologies of control as possibly harsh, insisting, for example, on calling the long stick used in Parelli work a “carrot stick” rather than a whip even though (several respondents told me) it was sometimes used to tap or hit. (Birke, 2007).

8. Similarly, experienced horse owners are more consistent in their recognition of equine emotions, while novice owners are less so: Russell (2003).

9. Certainly that would be my experience, from a lifetime of engagement in the horse world.

10. Interestingly, this was more noticeable in email interviews, the relative anonymity of which seemed to give respondents an opening to wax lyrical about their horses/relationship. Face-to-face interviews took on a more serious tone.

11. I am grateful to Keri Brandt for this observation.

12. Significantly, there is little space here for the horse to refuse the relationship with the human—to try would mean being judged as not cooperating with the programme and/or a failure on the part of the human to make the horse understand. Either way, the horse has little choice. I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for pointing this out.

13. Lykke and Bryld (2004) have usefully coined the term “animaling” to refer to the discursive processes whereby humans create and recreate relationships of power between humans and nonhumans: Birke, Lykke, and Bryld (2004) discuss this.

14. Practitioners in both spheres note the yawning incomprehension of each other and recreate a division between the methods of each (although in practice they overlap considerably). Horses themselves presumably do not benefit from this chasm.

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