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## **A Language of Their Own: An Interactionist Approach to Human-Horse Communication**

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the process of human-horse communication using ethnographic data of in-depth interviews and participant observation. Guided by symbolic interactionism, the paper argues that humans and horses co-create a language system by way of the body to facilitate the creation of shared meaning. This research challenges the privileged status of verbal language and suggests that non-verbal communication and language systems of the body have their own unique complexities. This investigation of human-horse communication offers new possibilities to understand the subjective and intersubjective world of non-verbal language using beings—human and nonhuman alike.

Within the social sciences there is scant research about the relationships humans share with their equine companions (Wipper, 2000; Lawrence, 1982, 1984). Most of the literature available examines cowboys of the Old West and Indian warriors and the purpose horses served in their lives (Werner 2001; Dyck, 1996; Lawrence, 1982; Roe, 1955; Haines, 1938; Wissler, 1914).

Currently, an exciting and growing body of literature on human-nonhuman animal relationships highlights

the ability of different species to achieve intersubjectivity and communicate with one another. Much of this research focuses specifically on cats and dogs and employs a symbolic interactionist perspective to investigate how humans and their nonhuman animal companions create shared meanings (Irvine, 2004; Flynn, 2000; Alger & Alger, 1997; Arluke & Sanders, 1993).

Little has been written about how humans and horses build a system of communication that allows the two to experience rewarding interactions and successful partnerships. Using the guiding principles of symbolic interaction to understand the ways in which two different species create a world of shared meaning, I will explore the process by which humans and horses co-create a language system—a language of their own.<sup>2</sup> Of particular interest will be the significance of the body as a vehicle for expression—given that the body as a basis for symbolic interaction has been largely unexplored. I also will explore the various elements and rules of the “grammar” that enables effective human-horse communication and allows the two to engage in a wide range of activities together. The embodied nature of human-horse communication raises two questions: How can the body be a vehicle for symbolic interaction and, more broadly, what is the possibility of symbolic interaction on a non-discursive basis? Finally, and perhaps most important, the application of symbolic interactionist theoretical approaches to the study of non-verbal communication challenges the human/animal binary it originally—and ironically—enforced, rendering all alingual beings—humans and nonhuman alike—inferior.

### **Unique Relationships**

New human-animal research within a symbolic interactionist tradition provides the theoretical and empirical groundings for understanding human-horse relationships. However, human-horse interaction differs greatly from human-dog and human-cat interaction; therefore, the unique quality of human-horse relationships must be noted. The most obvious difference is the large size of horses in comparison to their human partners. This brings an element of danger into the interaction that rarely is present with dogs and cats and makes crucial the establishment of an effective communication system.

Another important distinction is the high level of body-to-body contact between humans and horses when engaged in interaction. Certainly, humans

and their dog and cat companions connect their bodies for reasons of affection, play, occasional grooming, and, at times, for obedience training. Nonetheless, humans do not ride their dogs or cats and so do not ask them to do complicated physical and mental tasks while astride their backs.

Because of these unique qualities, an explicit exploration of the role of the body (both human and horse) in human-horse communication is essential. Given this, an understanding of symbolic interaction at the level of embodiment is central to understanding how non-verbal communication facilitates meaning making between the two species.

The language of the horse operates through the body such that horses must use their bodies to communicate their subjective presence. Because humans cannot convey intentions to horses through spoken language, they too must use their bodies to generate a communication style to which the horse can respond. In the human-horse relationship, the body is the basis from which a system of communication can grow. Like Shapiro's (1990) idea of "kinesthetic empathy," communication between humans and horses is an embodied experience. Given that the human ability to verbalize thoughts is seen as the starting point for language, suggesting that the body, too, can be a basis for language, challenges its privileged status. Symbolic interaction, in particular, traditionally privileges verbal communication. This tendency is born out of Mead's (1934) ideas that verbal language is the mechanism by which the mind is socially constituted. For Mead, language, in the form of vocal gestures, must be available for the emergence of the mind and the self. Through the agency of language, humans move from biological organisms to minded individuals. Animals, however, are impulsive beings because they have no capacity for verbal language (Mead).

By reformulating Mead's (1934) thinking about the role of verbal language, an interactionist approach to human-horse communication can explore how the two species create shared meanings that—even in the absence of shared verbal language—shape the way they interrelate and live together. In their research on human-feline relationships, Alger and Alger (1997, 1999), write, "there are many elements in Mead's thought that are compatible with the new animal research if one does not focus on language as the central mechanism through which a self emerges" (p. 69). They found that humans and felines can engage in symbolic interaction. Cats, they argue, have the ability

to take the role of the other and thus shape their interactions to achieve certain goals. "Cats have a sense of past and future, and these understandings do not depend on the existence of human-type language" (Alger & Alger, 1999, p. 207).

In her research on human and animal relationships, Irvine (2004), like Alger and Alger (1997, 1999), argues that a de-privileging of spoken language as the form of meaningful communication would create a model of the self that allows animals' subjective presence to become visible through interaction. Irvine writes, "in order for interaction to become a relationship, which is key to selfhood, both parties must sense the subjective presence of the other" (p. 183). Expanding what counts as language beyond the merely verbal further opens the door to a deeper understanding of human-animal interactions and provides a space for the body to be understood as a basis for symbolic interaction. The research of Alger and Alger and Irvine has demonstrated that animals communicate their feelings and desires to their human partners in a myriad of ways, lacking only the capacity to do so through the spoken word. By recognizing non-verbal forms of communication, an exploration and understanding of how humans and their nonhuman animal companions can come to know the "subjective presence of the other" becomes possible.

### **Methods and Data**

Over a two year period, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews and observed women and horses working together in various horse barn settings. I interviewed only women because men's relationships to horses have been amply showcased in the form of the cowboy, the ranch hand, and the Indian warrior. In line with feminist research principles, this research is an effort to bring women's relationships with horses to the center and to take seriously women's ways of thinking about horses as data. (Skeggs, 2000; Haraway, 1996; Mies, 1991; Harding, 1987.)

My research was conducted in a large city in the American West. Within this landscape, the three chief areas of English-style equestrian sports are hunter/jumper, dressage, and eventing. Each discipline is a subculture with specific trainers, riders, clinics, and show circuits. I focused mainly on participants in the hunter/jumper discipline of equestrian riding.

Like many scholars engaged in qualitative research, my current biography and personal history became a meaningful starting point for sociological research (Riemer, 1997; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Almost all my life with horses has been in the hunter/jumper community, a subculture of a larger world of show horses. Recently, I became a student of natural horsemanship training methods.<sup>3</sup> In this setting, as both a horse owner and rider, I was a known observer and full participant I was a complete member and added a research role to my existing membership role (Adler & Adler, 1987). My role as a full participant provided me invaluable insider knowledge and helped grant me entrée to the setting. Researchers like Bekoff (2002) and Sanders and Arluke (1993) assert that human-animal research requires the researcher to see the world through the eyes of the animals. This obvious challenge to traditional notions of objectivity, which is supported by feminist methodology, requires "that the investigator be intimately involved with the animal-other and the researcher's disciplined attention to his or her emotional experience can serve as an invaluable source of understanding" (Arluke & Sanders, 1993). My life experiences with horses provided me the required familiarity and knowledge of horse behavior and their unique way of relating in the world.

I chose to undertake in-depth interviewing and participant observation for this setting. My sample consisted of 25 in-depth interviews and hundreds of hours of participant observation. I knew several of the participants personally and used "snowball" or chain referral sampling to recruit informants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In addition, I attended various horsemanship clinics in the area, which allowed me to recruit women.

The women willingly granted me interviews. Many wanted to talk at length both about their horses and their ideas about human and horse communication and horsemanship. The interview format generated general descriptions of the women's history with horses, more detailed descriptions of their relationships with particular horses, and the processes by which the two species communicated.

I asked open-ended questions and remained open to taking the discussion in different directions. I taped and transcribed all the interviews and analyzed the data in keeping with a grounded theory approach (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I began by generating categories along recurring themes. This approach shaped future interviews by allowing me

to ask my participants more specifically about the categories I saw emerging, all the while continuing the search for generalities.

Each interview lasted about one and one-half to three hours. However, because I most often met with respondents where their horses lived, I regularly spent one to two hours before the interview—meeting the horses, touring the facility, looking at photographs, and listening to stories of horses now deceased. This posed a challenge in scheduling interviews, as I soon learned that I needed to have a large block of time available for each one. It was not until I began interviewing that I, too, started to see that meeting the horses was as important as meeting the human participants. I appreciated this pre-interview ritual and was aware that this wellspring of data gave me a greater context and a fuller picture of both the participants and the horses in their lives.

While engaged in observation, I took special note of how women—using their bodies and voices to convey their intention—worked with their horses. I also noted carefully how the horses responded to those acts. To minimize my impact as a researcher and to be as non-disruptive as possible, I rarely took notes in the setting. As soon as I left the barn, I would drive about a mile away, pull over, and record the events of the day.

### *Body to Body*

Humans cannot “speak” horse, and horses do not use verbal language as a means of communication. This means that together the human and horse must create a system of communication, using a medium they both can understand. For both species, the body is a tool through which they can communicate a wide range of emotions and desires. Both horses and humans can learn a complicated system of body language different from the elements of spoken language, thus enabling each to express a subjective presence to the other and work together in a goal-oriented fashion. In the discussion that follows, I use excerpts from interviews and field observations to illustrate how the body can be a site for symbolic interaction and, more broadly, for exploring the possibility of symbolic interaction on a non-discursive basis.

Tessa, a young woman in her early 20s, grew up riding horses and works as a large animal veterinarian technician, allowing her to spend most of her

days with horses. She explained the role body language plays in her communication with horses and theirs with her:

. . . when I'm sitting with another person and I'm using body language and they are using body language and that kind of conversation with body language is always going on, but it's always very much more unconscious than it is when I'm working with horses, and with horses I'm always . . . hyper-aware of what I'm doing with my body and what it's saying and the impact, the way that I move and the way that I feel, is having on the horse and how to communicate what I want to happen in a way that's effective to have it happen to the horse, it's just a level of kind of physical awareness that I don't have in the rest of my life and that I don't usually find in interactions with people. Where it's kind of okay we're having this physical conversation thing going on. With horses it's always like that . . . I just didn't really realize it was a thing, it was just what I'd figured out worked for the two of us.

Tessa explained the need to be "hyperaware" of her body, knowing that her physical movements and expressions always are translating an idea or feeling to the horse. Smiley (2004) writes, "if humans have smarter brains, then horses have smarter bodies" (p. 198).

Horses, in general, have highly sensitive bodies because their bodies are their vehicle for communication. Because horses rely on their bodies to transmit and receive information, they are highly skilled at reading (and using) body language.

Jane, a horse trainer and riding instructor for more than 30 years said, "I'd say probably their most acute sense is their tactile sense." With the understanding that horses send and collect ideas through their bodies, Tessa explained developing a greater "physical awareness" in order to become a more effective communicator with horses. Without this awareness, it would make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand why horses respond to a person the way they do.

Whenever I tell people about my research, inevitably they tell me a story of when they "rode a horse one time." Almost always, the stories are the same: They rode a friend's horse or were on a family vacation and rode at a dude

ranch where horses rent by the hour. They tell me how the horse “just knew” they had no experience with horses and thus “took advantage” of them either by refusing to move or by moving too fast and bucking them off their backs. This familiar story speaks to the tremendous bodily sensitivity of horses who always are keenly aware of others’ body language. Humans, whether aware of it, always are communicating ideas and feelings by way of their bodies. Horse trainer and author Hearne (1982) writes, “every muscle twitch of the rider will be a loud symphony to the horse” (p. 108). Indeed, humans engaged in verbal conversation with one another often are mindful about the words they are picking and choosing to convey various ideas.

Humans who work with horses develop a similar heightened awareness about their body language, rather than spoken words, and are careful to think about the messages they are conveying, or intend to convey, to the horse by way of their bodies. As humans develop a more acute tactile sense, they become more effective with their bodies and better able to “tune in” to the horse’s body to understand what is being communicated to them. Doing both simultaneously enables the horse and the human to engage in a two-way conversation.

Another woman, Missy, for whom horses have been a central focus since she was a child, explained communication between horse and rider like this:

[it is] like a stillness. . . . Yeah, because you’re not talking . . . I want to be quiet for that first few minutes that I’m on that horse, because I, I wanna tune in and pay attention, I’m watching his ears, seeing what he’s looking at, watching his head, seeing what he’s interested in . . . some horses when, as soon as you get on them, you can feel a nervousness up through their back . . . Through your body. But . . . when you’re using your hands you know, you’re thinking well, hand to mouth, and it’s also your fingers, it’s very subtle . . . if you want your horse to drop it’s head a little you just wiggle a finger . . . through their mouths you’re picking up all . . . all this energy from their head and their neck and . . . you can feel their head raise a little, you can feel it drop a little and you can feel the most subtle, you know, turn. It’s just uh they don’t even have to turn their head but you can feel them maybe moving their mouth . . . and that’s all through your hands and you know that’s like I said, . . . you can feel, you can feel all those little things, and their communicating through all that but you’re also communicating.

Both Tessa and Missy expressed the need to develop a heightened sensitivity of their bodies so that they can refine their communication skills with horses. Moreover, Missy explained how her bodily awareness allows her to feel what the horse is communicating to her. Learning this new language and understanding this form of communication require both time and experience with horses. As Missy explained, it involves subtle, sometimes micro movements, that both human and horse use to communicate intentions or emotions. Many hours of my field observations were spent sitting on the rail of an arena watching trainers teach various horse and rider combinations.

Most of the women I interviewed and observed used the help of a professional horse trainer to help them refine their riding and horsemanship skills. In a sense, professional trainers are interpreters. They teach riders how to achieve proper bodily form and how to use their “aids” (legs, seat, and hands) to communicate their intentions to the horse. Conversely, the trainer helps the rider understand what the horse is communicating so that ultimately, when working together, the horse-rider combination can be united. Communication between horse and rider truly is a body-to-body process and will not be effective “until you learn not only to read what your skin tells you, but also to be, as it were, kinesthetically legible yourself” (Hearne, 1982, p. 110).

#### *Co-Creative Language Building Process*

It is important to acknowledge that what I am describing is not just a one-way relationship of humans merely imitating “horse language.” Horses, too, are thinking, emotional, decision-making beings who, like humans, develop ways to communicate their subjectivity to their human partners. In this way, communication between the two is a cyclical and dynamic process, and both species are full participants in the process.

Sara, who has spent most of her life working with horses, is a well-known teacher of horsemanship clinics who travels around the world teaching humans how better to communicate with and understand their equine companions. Sara explained that it is necessary for humans to learn and refine ways of communicating with horses and, concurrently, it is important to think about the horse as an active member in the communication process:

There will not be the kind of blending and the kind of naturalness about your interactions with an animal that you might desire . . . until you adapt your capacity to think and understand through feel what the horse's experience of your decisions and actions are . . . See, horses are intelligent, decision-making beings that can think and they can decide. They can decide what they want to do and when they want to do with their bodies and at what speeds . . . and in what fashion . . . if they are given credit for having a mind.

In his research on shared human and dog relationships , Arluke and Sanders (1993) argue, "dogs are skilled intentional communicators . . . dogs are adept users of body language . . . through body postures, and movement of their eyes, ears, tails, and mouths" (p. 133). Like dogs, horses use various parts of their bodies with a wide range of movements to communicate a feeling or desire. The ears of a horse are very expressive, and different positions can tell a human whether the horse is relaxed, curious, scared, angry, or listening. When I asked Jane how she could tell the difference between a horse who bucks out of a sense of playfulness from a horse who bucks out of anger, she answered, "I mean, the ears will be different. You know, one good little squeal and a buck, that's exuberance. Ears back and rooting you out of the saddle and bucking, that's pissed off." Tenseness in a horse's body can signal fear and anxiety; a constant swishing or wringing of the tail can indicate emotional agitation or physical discomfort. To assess a horse's emotional state, humans who work with horses need to be acutely aware of these—and many other—signals.

For humans, learning how horses communicate with other horses is an important part of this language-building process. Learning how horses communicate with each other is the basis for the development of a communication style that horses will understand. It comes from watching horses interact with each other and from learning the meanings of certain body gestures and signals given off by the horse. Tessa articulated the creative nature of human-horse communication:

I thought about it as a set of cues and now I'm starting to think about it more as a language, a constructive process . . . I mean because I'm never going to ever actually learn "horse" the language, and horses aren't ever

going to learn what my language is, so we have to kind of build some sort of mutual completely new thing, like a completely new language of understanding . . . I can't move like a horse, I'll never be able to move like a horse . . . And be in a field . . . or anything like that, but in turn they can never really learn the human language but together your creating this mutual language that you'll both decide . . .

This co-creative process, resulting in a shared language system between humans and horses, is important for several reasons. First, effective communication between horses and humans helps ensure safe and humane interactions for both species. The average horse weighs about 1200 pounds. The average human's weight is a mere 10 to 15 % of the horse's weight. Humans need to communicate effectively to the horse and also understand what the horse communicates to them so that no misunderstandings cause one or the other to react in a manner that may be harmful to both. Second, when the horse and human are effectively communicating with each other they can work together in a goal-oriented fashion. Without the establishment of a shared language system, humans and horses would experience constant conflict at the expense—more often than not—of the horse's well-being. Finally, and more important, creating a system of communication helps horses and humans develop a deeper understanding of each other.

It can be tempting to take an anthropocentric approach to studying this language, but it must be acknowledged that horses are active participants in this communication process. To suggest that humans are entirely responsible would misconstrue the dynamic nature of this form of communication. Developing a successful human-horse partnership, involves "a complex set of negotiations . . . a give-and-take between horse and rider rather than either dictating the other" (Wipper, 2000, p. 66).

#### *The Grammar of Human-Horse Language*

Through this multidimensional system of a shared body language, horses and humans can develop an intersubjective understanding of one another. Undoubtedly, the elements and rules of a body language are different from those of a verbal language. Although body language traditionally is not considered a complicated form of communication, for horses and humans it

clearly is a form that enables complex human-horse working and emotional relationships.

Initially, both humans and horses must learn a basic system of communication. This system is taught to almost all young or “green” horses and beginning riders. When horses first begin working with humans, they are taught a basic vocabulary of bodily cues. In general, the cues work within a system of pressure and release.<sup>4</sup> The horse learns that pressure on the right side of the body from a rider’s leg or from a person’s hand when the person is standing on the ground means, “move left.” When the horse moves, pressure is released to communicate to the horse that was the desired outcome. The same basic cues (or signifiers) are taught to a person learning how to work with a horse from the ground or learning how to ride. Putting pressure on the left side of the horse’s body tells the horse, “move right.” When the horse moves right, the pressure should be released.

Beginner riders usually are instructed by an experienced or professional horseperson who pairs up the rider with a well-schooled, often older, horse. Similarly, in general, young or “green” horses learn from knowledgeable and more experienced horsepersons. Because of a horse’s large size, it can be a dangerous endeavor for even the most experienced horseperson to work with a horse who has not learned the basics of human-horse grammar. People who “start” young horses generally have a wealth of knowledge about the human-horse communication process. Similarly, novice horsepeople who do not understand the elements and rules of human-horse communication run the risk of putting their wellbeing in jeopardy: That is why they often are paired with an older horse. Wellesley, who owns a large horse farm and teaches horsemanship classes, described what can happen when humans, because of lack of experience or knowledge of horses, do not understand the way horses communicate:

... [when] you don’t read their body, that’s when people say, “my horse kicked me and I had no idea it was coming.” He’s been telling you probably for weeks before he kicks that something’s coming. And some people are just unaware because of lack of time and being with the horse.

The basic cues of pressure and release become the alphabet of body language, the foundation from which a more sophisticated use of the language system

can grow. The language becomes more complex and nuanced as the vocabularies of both horse and human expand. Gradually, horse and rider can synchronize various cues at once. The more humans and horses engage with one another, the more refined, clear, and subtle becomes their ability to communicate. Missy described the process of humans learning how to ride horses:

It's all the subtlety . . . you know, when you start out and you're a beginner . . . you're unsteady . . . I mean you have to develop all that. And a lot of that is . . . your body discipline, too. I mean you have to be disciplined in your body to ride well . . . you need to have a balance . . . you need to maintain a balance on your horse. You know, you can't be flying around and your legs need to be still and your hands need to be still and steady and . . . that's not easy and that takes a lot of years to develop all that and it's very subtle . . . that stuff, that sounds simple and . . . when people wanna ride it's like, "Oh, how hard can this be." People don't understand how difficult riding is and they think, "Oh, there's nothing to it," but you know it's all, what separates all the good riders [from the bad] is all these little tiny nuances.

For the human partners, it takes a great deal of effort and time to learn to use their body in new and different ways. Jane spoke of the trouble one of her students had with communicating clearly and effectively with her horse because of difficulty she had with her bodily control:

. . . she's just putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable. You know? I worked with her the other day, and I tied her stirrups in place where her leg has to stay. And we got her so that she could land without falling, flopping, to one side or the other. . . there's a tremendous amount of noise up there.

The exercise of tying the woman's stirrups in place<sup>5</sup> showed her how to make her body more effective in the communication process with her horse. As in learning a verbal language, using or speaking the words at first is awkward and crude. However, the more you refine your ability to speak words and string them together in a meaningful way, the more subtle and smooth your speaking becomes. To be sure, part of the process of learning to verbalize words is training your mouth, your lips, and your tongue to move in

particular ways to produce certain sounds. For both horses and humans, as their understanding of body language in the human-horse communication process becomes less crude, the more subtle and refined their expressions become.

Horsepeople often say the best riders and horses are the ones who can go around the ring and make it look effortless, as if there are no visual signs of communication taking place. Missy, in the quote above, explained the subtle nature of human-horse communication that takes years for both horse and human to develop. Well-developed riders and horses learn how to communicate and understand each other on such subtle levels that it can look as though no discussion is taking place between the two, just two united bodies moving together seemingly effortlessly and silent. As Missy explained, this takes body discipline and a well-developed understanding of one's body as a vehicle for receiving and communicating different signals.

The embodied experience of human-horse communication, in part, relies on what Shapiro (1990) calls "kinesthetic empathy." He writes, "empathic experience involves appropriating a second body that then becomes my auxiliary focus. Through my lived body, I accompany yours as it intends an object" (p. 192). When horse and rider are moving together, the rider must use his/her own body to make the horse's body the focal point, as literally both accompany the other in a shared embodied experience. Without this empathic basis, horse and rider would be disjointed and in conflict, unable to have a shared experience of other.

For humans, it takes tremendous bodily sensitivity to feel the subtle ways that ideas and emotions are expressed through the horse's body. Wendy lives on a farm and is the caretaker (owner) of approximately 20 horses and ponies. She has ridden horses since she was a child and as an adult has dedicated most of her time to learning and teaching human and horse communication. She explains:

Most people miss the subtle communications. [Experienced horsepeople] see stuff and feel stuff so much more quickly, just nuances. You can sit there and go, "I didn't see anything happen." And a lot happened. But it can be as subtle as just either going back or just the movement of the eye, or a shift of the weight.

As Wendy suggests, although it may look physically silent watching a horse and rider working together in arena, there always is an enormous amount of communication happening between both bodies. When clear communication is accomplished between the two, they are able to have a shared, embodied experience that is achieved when both horse and human have a well developed understanding of the language and the communication process. Without this refined communication system, horses and humans often experience conflict or difficulty in achieving a shared embodied experience because they do not understand what is being expressed by the other.

Clearly, it takes a great deal of time and experience for humans to develop their body language skills and, in return, to understand horses' body language. This learning is part of the co-creative process of the human-horse language system that makes communication and emotional relationships between the two species possible. As the two work to develop a deeper understanding of each other and refine the communication process, so too grows the possibility of a shared, embodied subjectivity between horse and rider moving together, body to body, united.

## Conclusion

I have tried to explain the process of embodied non-verbal communication between humans and horses, but it must be acknowledged that verbal language always will be limited in its capacity to explain an embodied non-verbal language system. I have argued that humans can understand the meaning of bodily gestures in horses, and horses can understand the meaning of bodily gestures in humans. Together, they co-create a system of language—a language of their own—through the medium of the body. This is not merely a conversation of gestures and, as Mead (1934) would have argued, animals are not simply impulsive beings. It is a mutually created language, a third language that enables the two to create a world of shared meaning and foster a deeper understanding of each other. This research is an effort to continue the challenge to the Cartesian divide begun by new human-animal research. It posits horses as sentient beings who live valuable lives of their own and brings to the center the deep and dynamic relationships women share with horses, not as a replacement of the human form, but as an equally valuable relationship with its own unique qualities, benefits, and complexities.

A de-privileging of Mead's (1934) emphasis on spoken language, as new human-animal research has shown, opens the door for investigation of the ways in which animals and humans alike use a variety of modes of communication to convey subjectivity. In particular, it allows for a deeper investigation into the body as a basis for symbolic interaction. As Shapiro (1990) writes, "We are out there in the world through our bodies. Our bodies do not encase us; rather, we are our bodies" (p. 192).

Research must begin to grapple with questions of how we understand communication with other species or with humans who do not have the capacity for verbal language. Exploration of these questions could generate new possibilities for understanding the subjective and intersubjective lives of those who cannot speak—humans and non-humans alike. The actual constructive process of a non-verbal language between horses and humans, as well as other human and animal pairings also begs for empirical study. In sum, this paper has shown that the study of human-horse communication can offer insights extending far beyond the exclusive world of horses and riders.

With an expansion of language beyond the verbal, there are distinctive advantages to the application of a symbolic interactionist approach to human and animal relationships. Specifically, this approach promises to further our understanding of non-verbal communication, meaning making, and subjectivity.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Keri Brandt, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, CO 80398-0327. The author thanks Leslie Irvine and Clint Sanders for their valuable input and encouragement in writing this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> I use the term language here to include bodily gesture. I am not restricting it to only mean spoken language
- <sup>3</sup> Natural horsemanship is a style of working with horses that is based on the premise that humans must understand the horse's thought process and way of being in the world and structure their interactions with horses based on this premise. As a training philosophy it endorses humane, non-forceful, and compassionate interactions between humans and horses.
- <sup>4</sup> Many people understand human-horse communication through a system of pres-

sure and release. However, there are different approaches to the human-horse communication process. See, Dorrance and Desmond (1999).

- <sup>5</sup> Stirrups hang off the saddle and are what the rider places her foot into to help balance her position. In this example, the woman's feet were free to move and she herself was not tied to the horse as that would be a dangerous practice.

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