

Exploring Human and Horse Interactions during Equine Facilitated Learning By Roisin Brennan

Introduction

This thesis applied the social psychological theory of Symbolic Interaction (SI) to explore human and horse interactions during Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL) sessions. By studying these interactions we discover among other things, ‘how meaning is socially constructed through interaction; how we organize our social world; and how we see our connection (or lack of it) to other living things’ (Arluke & Sanders, 1996). SI concerns itself with the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction with an emphasis on language to aid in meaning making. This thesis however removes the emphasis on verbal language and replaces it with body language. The role of the body in this research is of particular importance as body language is an integral part of the interactions during an EFL session as horses use their bodies to convey and communicate their ‘subjective presence’ (Brandt, 2004).

Method

This study explored the interaction between 6 humans and 2 horses during individual EFL sessions using a combination of video analysis, observational methods and semi-structured interviews. These methods were utilised to answer the following research questions:

Do humans and horses engage in a form of symbolic interaction during an EFL Session?

- *Do humans attribute a sense of self to the horses?*
- *Is a shared meaning necessary for a successful interaction?*
- *What is the role of the body during these interactions?*

Results

The results supported previous SI studies (Sanders,1993, Alger & Alger,1997, Brandt,2004, Furst,2007,) which illustrated how participants ‘attributed a sense of self’ to the horse. What becomes most important here is *how* the participants interacted with the horses as if they had selves and how they treated them according to their assigned ‘personalities’. Other themes also emerged which included overcoming emotions, drawing on past knowledge, language making, role taking and ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion

This research allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the non-verbal subjective interactions between horse and human during EFL and highlights how we must not dismiss the capacity for the horse to influence the participant's sense of self.

