The Animal Other: Horse Training in Early Modernity

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Abstract
This historical sociological analysis of the training of horses for competition in early modernity draws from the sociology of the body to suggest that animals as we know them are constructed through human social processes. Contemporary horse-care publications are used to demonstrate how equine bodies were shaped through an application of humoral physiological theory. That is, they were made suitable for the human requirements of the time through preparatory procedures informed by models of somatic functioning used widely to understand humans and animals alike. The broader issue canvassed here is that ‘embodiment’ should include animal as well as human bodies. Through selective breeding, raising and care, animals have bodies that are shaped to human requirements – they embody human social processes.
Both Shilling (1993) and Turner (1996) note that bodies are both biologically and socially constructed. In this paper, I extend this observation to animals by examining how humans have constructed horses. Animals are organisms, but they are also socially constructed. Horses, and other domesticated animals are as we know them because of millennia of selective breeding for human purposes, considerably removed from the animal taken from ‘nature’. But the ‘facts’ of living creatures, be they human or otherwise, are given meaning through social processes. How we ‘know’ animals, just as how we ‘know’ ourselves, is socially constructed. Animals and their bodies are understood by humans through the same emic and etic models as people use to understand themselves. Animals constitute non-human Others, but ones that are constructed in terms set by human social processes. Turner (1996, p.82) writes, “I both have and am a body”. Animals ‘have’ bodies but for them the ‘am’ is imposed by humans. Animals are what they are because of the way that humans think about, classify, and use them. Here I shift the focus of ‘corporeal studies’ from humans to animals.

I focus on horses as products of culture, as human creations. Breeding programs, care, feed and training have combined to produce a range of equine types each suited to designated human purposes. As Lawrence (1988, p.227) notes, horses have become obedient “to the human will ... and conditioning and human mastery are superimposed upon the animals”. What follows is a historical sociological investigation focusing on the preparation of horses for the competition of horses in the late 16th and 17th centuries. I demonstrate that people have molded horses in the shape of their social processes so that they embody human social processes.

Horses and humoral physiology

Markham (1615, p.65), a leading writer of the period, in stating that horses provided pleasure for “our owne particular service, and also for the strength, defence, and tillage of the kingdome” drew attention to their significance in economic, social and military life during early modernity. Such importance ensured that considerable knowledge surrounded their breeding, care and training. Horse physiology, which informed their preparation for everyday work and competition, was understood under the paradigmatic humoral theory. This theory, originating in Greco-Roman medicine, was taken as the ‘fact’ about how bodies worked for long before and beyond early modernity. Horses – and other animals for that matter – were conceptualised as obeying the same physiological rules as humans, although the precise implementation of these rules was species dependent. Farriers were responsible for horses’ care and training and their skills lay in their interpretation and application of these rules. Farriers were not necessarily learned in humoral theory: it was more a case of the application of known procedures to animals according to a formulaic knowledge embedded in humoral physiology. Following the invention of the printing press, early modernity witnessed a significant growth of publications providing ‘how-to’ information on horse care for the gentry who, it seems, could pass-on this advice to their farriers by overseeing their work. It is testament to the importance of horses that entire books were produced advising about their care in English, rather than in the Latin or Greek of medical works (Beier 1987; Curth 2000). It is these books that provide the data used in this paper.
The increasing use of the horse for leisure purposes was witnessed in the start of formal horse-racing in the early 17th century, setting the scene for the later development of the Thoroughbred (Hyland 1999, pp.36, 153). The same period saw a widespread use of horses by the gentry following the hounds for hunting as leisure – rather than as an aristocratic food-acquisition activity, foxes were not eaten as were deer (Hyland 1999, pp.84, 153). A feature of this period was that equine contests usually between two horses, were a spin-off from hunting. Moreover, the distinction between horse-racing and hunting was mirrored in the designation of competitive horses as ‘runners’ or ‘hunters’: the former a swift horse that lacked the stamina and staying power of the hunter.

If the number of books and editions are a measure, then the publications of Gervase Markham (for example, 1607; 1615) marked him as the leading equine writer of the period. But the presence of other writers giving similar advice suggests the existence of generalised practices of horse care. That horse-races involving either hunters or runners frequently involved large wagers underlined the necessity to optimise performance and seek the cutting-edge published advice of people such as Markham. Preparing horses for competition involved going beyond the care required for the general health, welfare and capabilities of the everyday working and riding animal. This meant paying careful attention to the animal’s humoral balance.

Humors were conceptualised as the active agents within all bodies responsible for producing their specific characteristics, whether of a person or of an animal. Humors were spread throughout the body, though each had a primary location where it “aboundeth in one part more than in another” (Blundeville 1560, Book 3, p.3). Each of the four humors served its purpose in the overall well-being of the body: blood was seen as the carrier of nutrients, phlegm as the lubricator of joints, choler as the expeller of excrements and melancholy as the appetite stimulant.

Humoral theory underpinned the care and treatment of horses, as it did also for humans and other animals. Improperly functioning bodies were attributed to an underlying humoral imbalance, which was addressed by controlling exposure to air, food and drink, movement, sleep, satiety and mental state. The skill of the farrier for horses or the doctor for humans lay in restoring the correct balance. Stabling, when and where to take the horse for exercise, how much and what type of water given the horse, its feed and its movement through exercise, work and currying were all important (Blundeville 1560, Book 3, pp.6-15). Humoral theory provided explanations and remedies for common disorders.

The horse was conceptualised as a “creature sensible”, guided by its senses whereas the human was a “creature reasonable”, guided by reason (Astley 1584, p.3). Baret (1618, Book 1, pp.18-9) continued that in contrast to human rationality, horses’ souls were “composed of the temperature of the body” and inseparable from their bodies. These animals’ innate, natural limitations imposed the parameters determining how horses could be brought into the service of people. The “art” of training lay in balancing the humors within these parameters to influence the horse’s speed, endurance, courage,
liveliness and so forth “for the body is moved according to the appetite or the lust of the horse” (Baret 1618, Book 1, p.64). In short, the inseparability of soul and body means that the horse’s disposition was controlled by its appetite or desire, on which was predicated the training of this non-rational, sensitive creature (Baret 1618, Book 1, p.97).

Training

The art of horse training was to use one’s knowledge, “to proportionate all your proceedings according as you shall finde your Horses appetite or desire, for else you shall be sure to come short of your expectation” (Baret 1618, Book 1, p.99). Actions that affect the horse’s desire also influenced its behaviour – an easy moving, willing and nimble horse provided evidence that the art had been conducted to good effect, that the diet and care of the animal had been matched to its disposition (Book 1, p.103). In adapting the horse to human uses its feed was significantly changed from that of nature. Stables were constructed to moderate temperatures, facilitating digestion and protecting them from the ravages of the night air. Clearly, controlling a horse’s exercise, drink, feed, stabling and outdoor exposure was far removed from how the animal would live in the wild. The horse was adapted and acculturated to human requirements in terms of the prevailing ideas about how their bodies were constituted and functioned. People have made horses a part of their social life and, in so doing, have embodied human social processes in equine form.

Allowing for the species difference, good equine care was predicated on similar bases to good human care. This required that excremental matter and excess humors were removed from the horse by purging, sweating and, if necessary, more drastic measures such as bleeding or ‘raking the fundament’. Moreover, it also required that the horse’s dietary regime was configured to maximise the animal’s health. In this period ideas about the enhancement of performance were very different from those now employed in sports training; rather, the emphasis was on achieving optimum health which promoted the best possible performance (Mewett 2002).

The texts providing advice for the preparation of hunting and racing horses first emerged in the early years of the 17th century, at a time when horses were increasingly being used for recreation. The 16th century advice on horse care (Blundeville 1560; Clifford 1585) set out the practices thought necessary for good equine husbandry. But early modern forms of hunting and racing required more. When horses become the subjects of competitive practice, advice on horse care had to be recast so that it embraced the issue of preparation for contest. The shift from advice on the good care of horses to recommendations for their training for competition was subtle, no radical epistemological change occurred, but nevertheless it was profound in that it was evidence of a new way in which some horses were being acculturated into human social activities. The practices of equine care advised by the likes of Blundeville and Clifford established a platform from which to develop the techniques used in the training of horses for competition set-out by Markham, Baret and others. Humoral theory remained in place, though, providing the way for conceptualising the achievement of maximum performance.
Two distinctive forms of horse-based competitions were evident by the early 17th century; one centred on match-races between two horses based on a hunting format, the other was multi-entrant competitions involving ‘runners’ on rudimentary race-courses (Lawrence 1809). Whether hunter or runner, a horse required training for competition. When mastered, the “art” of training could make the horse “fit for any wager” (Markham 1615, p.74). Horse’s diets were strictly regulated as soon as they were brought in from pasture, the moisture in grasses thought fattening (Gladitz 1997, p.185). Reducing fat – anathema to the healthy body then as now – involved managing the moisture in the horses’ diets and expelling it from their bodies through other means. Fat was thought to remain in the body unless it was dissolved and excreted along with other wastes. Accordingly, appropriate evacuation measures, especially purging, was applied.

Purging – believed to clean the inner gut – involved using ‘loosening’ foodstuffs. Mild purging was done after a gallop, to assist the removal of that which “nature is willing to expell” and rid the horse of the “molten grease and loose humors” produced by the increased exercise regime (Markham 1607, Book 3, p.39). Progressively more powerful purges could be used as required, both for the animal’s general health and to scour away infestations. Exercise was considered essential to optimise performance but, unlike today, it was understood as a way of ridding the horse’s body of foul humors. The well-conditioned horse was one in which humors were in balance and excessive ones were driven out by heating the body through exercise and sweating and by appropriate purging.

Diet was carefully calculated to provide good nutrition while promoting humoral balance. “[O]rdinarie hunting brede” became the horse’s dietary staple (Markham 1607, Book 3, p.30). The ‘bread’ – made from a leavened mixture of beans, wheat and rye – was understood in humoral terms: the beans provided a strong and natural food; wheat was easy to digest, converting quickly into “good blood”; rye provided an evacuating food, balancing the dry and binding nature of beans and wheat. Horses in training for a match had to reach “uttermost perfection” (p.36), so the bread was modified by the inclusion of oats, ale and egg whites.

Although humors were controlled through exercise and the careful construction of the horse’s diet, feed, while essential, was a two-edged sword, because it also could cause “grosse humors” (Baret 1618, Book 3, p.92)). Despite carefully balancing diets humors were formed by the “decoction” of food and had to be removed by heating the body through exercise, clothing, artificially warmed stables and purging. Exercise dissolved and removed humors from the body from the “heat stirred up by the percution of motion” (Baret 1618, Book 4, p.6). Diet, exercise, sweating and purging were carefully balanced to achieve optimum health and competitive ability. Progress in training was monitored by examining the horse’s morning dung, which indicated whether changes to its feeding and exercise were necessary. In the latter phase of training the horse should have become thinner with harder flesh so that it was “in as good winde, strength, and cleanness, as is eyther fit or necessarie for a hunting Horse” (Markham 1607, Book 3, p.49). Maintaining this feeding, purging and exercise regime was said to keep the horse in the condition required for it to take part in matches (pp.50, 56).
In contrast to hunters, runners underwent sudden, violent exertion rather than long, steady work (Markham 1607, Book 6, p.3). Training for runners was based on that for hunters, with Baret (1618, Book 3, p.66) noting just small differences between their preparations. Runners were taken from the grass in the same manner as a hunting horse, fed on the best bread, each batch of which contained the whites of at least 100 eggs, followed by oats soaked in egg whites. The bread was reckoned to be particularly efficacious, “not lying long either in the Horses stomacke or bellye is no impediment to the violence and furie of his labour” (Markham 1607, Book 6, p.15). The runner was regularly galloped over smooth ground, gradually increasing its speed until it could run a full three to four miles course, at which point it was ready for competition (Markham 1615, p.81). Runners were purged and sweated in ways similar to hunters; but if the runner sweated little from its gallops it meant that the “inwarde grosse humors” were not dissolved (Markham 1607, Book 6, p.18), requiring it to be sweated under cloths. Despite the possibly weakening effects of sweats they were considered essential to rid horses of internal humors, also kept in check by restricting the horse’s water.

The feeding and exercise regimes were designed to keep the animals in good health, but when this failed and horses fell sick, recipes for medicines and guidance on more invasive procedures were provided. These dealt with horses in terms of humoral theory, because the maintenance or regaining of good health depended on keeping, by proper diet and exercise, or restoring humoral balance through medical intervention (Curth 2000, p.5), with the recommended cast in terms of humoral properties of the disorder (Beier 1987, p.36). Markham (for example, 1607), Baret (1618) and others included lists of ‘cures’ for many ailments with their training advice. ‘Recipe books’ of treatments for horses’ ailments and advice on their general care also were published (for example, Clifford 1585; L.W.C. 1610).

**Embodying the human**

The shaping and surveillance of equine bodies for competitive racing was taking place about 150 years before the same practices were transferred to human bodies. With the emergence of the horse as a major feature of leisure and especially of the competitive performances embedded in early modern sport, the question of how the equine body could best be adapted to maximise its ‘natural’ ability was one of considerable significance. So, while horses were being cared for and treated in terms of humoral principles, these principles were also being adapted to embody in the horse the changed forms of human social activity for which it was being used. The embodiment of social processes, first reported by Mauss (1973 [1934]) and since widely recognised by sociologists, should not be restricted to human bodies, however. Animals have bodies that are the creation of human social processes.

Certain practices were expected to be followed to produce best standards of equine care. Horses performing poorly, becoming sick or whatever suggested to others that the appropriate standards of care were not being achieved. Equine bodies were under surveillance by those who managed them, but likewise, their carers were also being assessed by others under whose gaze the horses fell. This was understood in terms of the
prevailing paradigm of humoral theory, which was used both to inform practices and standards of horse care and also to assess a farrier’s competence. Much hinged on ‘getting it right’ for horses used in competition, hence a reason for the books published on the topic and the utility of my using this advice to understand the leading practices of the period: practices that were to figure significantly as early modernity blended into modernity and the training methods developed for equine competition were transferred to 18th century pugilists and pedestrians (Mewett 2002). Large stakes often were wagered on horses and considerable employment centred on them, which meant that the risk involved in stepping outside the paradigm was impossibly great and perhaps just impossible given the absence, at least in the western world, of alternative paradigms of human and animal physiology. More than that, humoral theory provided a nicely closed, logical system which explained not just how bodies functioned but also how they were positioned relative to the earth, the planets and the heavens. It is no surprise that the ‘Othering’ of horses in the shape of human social processes was done through practices informed by humoral theory.

References:


