

## **Paper EASA 31 of July to 3 of August**

Luna Castro Pavão

Post Graduate Program of Social Anthropology (PPGAS) of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), Brazil

[lunacpa@gmail.com](mailto:lunacpa@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *What happens to the anthropological concepts of human and nonhuman beings, when a horse is said to improve ‘social skills’ of riders with disabilities issues? Relationships between humans and horses in the context of the Equine Therapy point to a complex regimen of differences and resemblances in both inter and intraespecies interactions that should be discussed later on.*

### **“On the horseback”: an anthropological view of therapeutic riding sessions (with horses) for people with disability issues<sup>1</sup>**

This research aims to explore positions and relationships that humans and nonhumans embody in Equine Therapy. This kind of therapy is one of the many kinds of health treatments that have been consolidated, since the Nineties, at places such as hospitals, asylums, and some clinics (where physiotherapy and psychology services are taken). In a couple of accounts of professionals from the health sciences area, they propose that the contact with certain animals may improve the health of human beings (Oliva, 2010).

In what refers to Equine Therapy, the one focused on this research, horses are associated with certain therapists. I started this research by following the reasons for the very presence of horses in Therapeutic Riding Sessions. In order to explore “why” and “how” horses are addressed in this particular

<sup>1</sup> This research was made possible thanks to the support of Fapesp (São Paulo Research Foundation).

“healing context”, I conducted fieldwork in an Equine Center. The Center is part of a larger Park (“*Parque Eco-Esportivo Dahma*”) located along the highway that connects *São Carlos* to other cities of the state of *São Paulo* (*SP-318 road, Km 234*), southeast region of Brazil.

There, a professional team named “Growing up on horseback” (“*Crescendo a Cavallo*”, in portuguese) offers Therapeutic Horseback Riding lessons, whose goal is, mainly, to develop better health conditions to people defined with disability issues. The fieldwork visits led me to explore the horses' capacity of action along the broader field of relationships set by the therapist, rider, parents of the riders, horse, and auxiliary-guide (the one who conducts the horse by a holding a strap connected to the horse's mouth). I attend to around a hundred and sixty mountings on the years of 2013 and 2014 at an Equine Center twenty minutes away by car from *São Carlos*' Downtown Centre.

In one of my fieldwork visits, due to a rainy afternoon, instead of choosing a track in the open spaces where the sessions are mostly taken, the therapist R. conducted the session inside the Hangar. The Hangar is the stable where twenty individual stalls are provided for horses, each filled with a good amount of shaving, and a recipient containing fresh water. Inside each stall there is also a big window to the outside area, and in case the horse remains inside it, a piece of rectangular wood blocks the horse from the hall.

*Chocolate*, a big and dark-brown horse, was already prepared, saddled, ready to be ridden. It stilled close to the stable's front gate, from where riders and their parents enter the spot. *Chocolate* was one of the ten horses of the team at the time of my fieldwork visits. The long hair of it's mane and tail were

previously brushed by the auxiliary-guide, taking off the dust it got from staying at the paddock. A saddle was placed prior over the horse's back, and the clasps were fastened on its breast and belly. The horse stood against the wall, its head and mouth covered by a halter, in which the strap fixes and clings into a ring attached to the wall.

The rider V. arrives at the Hangar; she was taken from the car by her mother. V. was put on the ground, and her body leans into her mother's body. After greeting them, the therapist puts a helmet that stands tied in the platform over the rider's head. The girl stares at the therapist. R. said "Now let's say hello to Chocolate", and brought the girl closer to the horse. Chocolate stands still, tied, didn't move its body, until the auxiliary-guide untied the quick-release knot, and then, leaded it closer to the platform. In the meanwhile, the therapist and the rider went up to the platform's stairs. Now in a upper height, R. asked the auxiliary-guide to bring the horse one step forward, and then, with the horse closer, help the rider to mount the horse, passing one of V.'s legs along the horse's back. Simultaneously, the auxiliary-guide was playing with the horse's mouth; the latter was biting the strap held by the former, the former was moving the strap away and from side to side. R. ensured that V.'s pelvis and gluteus were correctly fit on the saddle, not falling to a side than to the other, and checked whether her foots were adjusted on the stirrups that fall alongside the horse's belly. V.'s mother, who was nearby, gave a little towel in the therapist's hand, and R. placed it over the saddle's handle. They finally started to move across the Hangar (and me, I'm following them: in the opposite side of the therapist, behind the auxiliary-guide, so beside the horse's belly).

R. is a physiotherapist, by the way, and she held, with her hands and arms, V's back and legs all along the mount. As we walked, I noticed the rider's head falling forward. I also saw that the girl had a kind of prosthesis placed on her foots. This is an orthopaedic apparatus that aims to support and stimulate parts of the body, said the therapist (and I saw many others riders displaying different kinds of orthosis). While we moved across the stable, R. said that V. is a "very problematic case". The girl is twelve years old, and attends to the therapy since seven years. Her body is hypotonic, a body whose muscular constitution is soft (*mole*), in opposition to a hypertonic body, this case a body which displays stiff muscles, said the therapist.

R. continued to speak, telling me the motor stimulation and other benefits provided to one's on the horseback draws from a three dimensional movement. This is the horse's characteristic gait, in which its body, moving in three different directions, from side to side, up and down, and in back and forth directions. In each step, the horse's body involuntarily transmits movements to rider's muscles and nervous system along the mounting, and people would receive around twenty thousand involuntary contractions all over their body.

This explanation is interrupted when one of the rider's arms moved and hit the therapist's body, who immediately asked the auxiliary-guide to stop the horse. The horse still, R. went closer to the rider and said: "You Cannot flap". Then, they continued the straight walking inside the Hangar. R. grabbed the towel that V's mother had give her before, and dried out the liquid flowing from V.'s mouth. In what follows, R. asked the auxiliary-guide to do the zigzag

motion, and said this is a way of walking that might improve the rider's capacity of corporeal self control.

I thought *Chocolate* was moving at a slow pace. His hooves, knocking the concrete ground, made a significant noise inside the Hangar. The auxiliary-guide said the horse is now quiet. After a while, the therapist started to sing a children' song, in an attempt of calm down the rider, she said. Repeatedly, the girl drove her arm towards the therapist. At some point of the mount, R. grabbed the rider's arm, and passed it back and forth, over the horse's mane, saying "Caress", and repeating "Don't flap" a few more times to V. After a while (as the girl kept throwing her arm), she, the therapist, grabbed a handmade strap inside her bag (which was given by V.'s mom) and tacked it around V.'s arm. After a couple of minutes, we came back to the stable. The therapist took off the girl from the horseback, and the auxiliary-guide clung the horse against the wall. The horse, in turn, moved its paws, and drunk water from a bucket, placed at the rectangular piece of wood that blocked the stall.

Now, I'd like to interrupt the description to reflect on the particular life conditions of V. She used to throw one of her arms, expel liquid from her mouth, and utter just a few "words". Her head fell forward many times and, in order to be straight up, she needed to rely on someone's else body. More abroad, as I've seen during my fieldwork visits, some riders, after a stroke, had their speech affected if not totally lost. Others may feel constantly sleepy, dizzy, sometimes faint, or else face convulsion in their daily life. And, most of the time, people with autism are said to have less rationality or logical reasoning than a "typical" person.

The way in which therapists and parents described transformations in the riders' lives, led me to think that it is at stake a process in which a particular human being, with an unstable body, the special ones (especiais), would, ideally, become less "problematic" or "typical" (típico), someone more centered, calm, and with a balanced posture.

It seems to me that having or not the capacity of acting in certain particular manners, or, put in another way, being or not considered someone able to act, move, talk, eat, and think by herself, it is at stake here. The body or the embodied dispositions that daily life might require, seems to be the diacritic sign of someone "special" (as therapists and parents referred to some riders I've seen) in relation to a "typical" one (as the therapist referred to someone whose life is out of "complicated conditions").

Horses, due to their particular way of walking, might have positive effects on one's "problematic" or "difficult" embodied conditions. As if the therapy with horses could bring a less complicated health and a more skillful body for riders. In this case, I ask what conditions allow a nonhuman being become a sort of mediator or an agent in the hypothetical positive transformation on the body, health, and person-hood of these particular human beings. Are horses, in this context, more apt to do something that riders and therapists might be unable to enact? If so, what kind of dispositions qualify a horse as a being that might be able to have positive effects on someone else's body?

At the Equine Center, horses are treated as powerful beings. Once, along a mount, the psychologist F. said the horse would concede potency, speed, and strength to riders. He also added that seated in a more elevated

height, riders have a “new worldview”. These attributes of horses would carry also an investment in the rider's self-esteem. A mother who was nearby in the Hangar, said that riders might receive a kind of energy from horses, but she didn't know how to explain it.

Others traits of horses were referred during my fieldwork visits. The horse *Vagalhão*, for instance, was ascribed as a *zen*, docile, and phenomenal horse, who “never gets frightened”. In the poster which is a tribute to *Vagalhão*, fixed in the wall of the reception, is written that this horse has an unconditional kindness, loyalty, and uniqueness. However, these attributes and the idea that horses are noble animals coexist with a series of circumstances that might have effect on the horses' attitudes. Once, during the mount, the horse stopped moving, and the therapist started to “talk” with him, saying: “This is nothing, man” (*Não é nada, cara*), for there was a group of cyclists passing through the venue, and the psychologist said *Dominó* was afraid of it. There's also contingent factors (such as hawks and cows that passes through the surrounding area of the mounts, but also the wind, employers painting the fence, or a black plastic bag moving) that might lead these horses fearful and scared. Therapists are aware that horse's gait may be disrupted by these circumstances, but they, the therapists, also consider that horses have their daily mood, that provide the horse's willingness or inclination on that particular day.

In addition, therapists assumed that, sometimes, horses might be just pretending. In a mount, when *Dominó* interrupted his pace, the psychologist F. said, “Did you stop your pace because you want to pee, or are you trying to fool

me?”. Instead of feeling their body sore, actually, horses just don't want to keep on “working”. Yet, horses are also treated as “workers” there. Vagalhão, for instance, is a horse nowadays “retired”, and Fantasia, during my fieldwork visits, was said to get her “maternity license”.

On another hand, we also have to consider some reports on how horses may turn out to be skilled horses in order to be “used” in the therapy. In the psychologist's view, the Equine Center constraints the horses' possibility of expressing their sensibility, he said “when they [horses] leave the stable, they want to run, skip and jump”. The training brings discipline to horses, said R. once, “so they respond to what we want them to do”. She said to a rider, during the mount, that the horse, besides understanding him, was even obeying to what it was asked to do”. In this sense, besides communicating, the horses would, ideally, obey to what people expect them to do. As R. said, “In the beginning, Tic-Tac was very aggressive, it didn't want to walk and shriveled his ears. But after the training [in the Center], he improved himself and turned out to be docile. The same happened with Nini; today he is a very calm and submissive horse”.

However, I tend to think that the training imputed to horses doesn't necessarily avoid the horse from not “cooperating”, as R. said once “the horse is unpredictable, even more when overwhelmed. It happened with Trovão [a horse I didn't see at my visits], I had to stop using it. The horse is like that, we can't affirm anything”. The horse might “invoke” with something (and that happens really fast, “in a fraction of second”, as R. said) and therefore increases its speed, spins, and even crams itself (acelerar, rodopiar, empinar),



with the rider on its back. In this case, perhaps the rider may fall out from the horse's back into the ground. I'm inclined to say that, instead of being the exception, horses' disruptive acts (but not of leaping or jumping) constitute the pattern of the mounting. Apparently, there is always an imminent risk of horses defy what therapist might expect of them. As long as the therapist R. has to take training sessions with horses, in an attempt to get a more submissive behavior of horses, we can think that horses attitudes are constantly being shaped, under a process of transformation in the Equine Center.

Nonetheless, I discussed above that parents of riders and therapists said that some riders may acquire a more "calm" and "centered" behavior along the therapy. Through the point of view of my informants, insofar as there is a certain process of changing going on to some riders, perhaps horses are also under a process of transformation, through the training and the mounting. This led me to think on a potentially double and simultaneous ongoing different processes. In one side, a process of designing a particular body and behavior to riders (calm, stable, stronger, with self control) and, in another side, a process of dressage to horses (obedient, submissive, calm, docile, stable).

The practice of mounting involves both a kind of collaborative experience of an assemblage of beings, but also includes tension among the beings in the ridings. When horses "leap" and "compete" with the therapist, or, in turn, when the rider gets "irritated" and "nervous" during the mount, the experience takes the shape of a colliding association. Nonetheless, considering ridings as moments of shared bodies, motions, and actions among therapist, rider, auxiliary-guide and horse, I tend to think on agentive capacity as activated or

emergent through relational positions of horses and humans at the Equine Center (what perhaps may point out to a sort of displacement and instability of anthropological categories of “human” and “nonhuman being”).