

A Critical Comment on the Monty Roberts Interpretation of Equine Behavior

Paweł Muller, Anna Chrzanowska, Wojciech Pisula

Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Science, Warsaw, Poland
Email: wojciech.pisula@wp.pl

Received 25 February 2016; accepted 10 April 2016; published 13 April 2016

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to conduct a critical analysis of the equine behavior interpretations present in Monty Roberts' publications. To begin with, a selection of examples from historical sources is presented displaying the prevalent treatment of horses in European culture. In the light of these examples, the natural training methods of horses appear not to introduce any revolutionary new qualities. Next, an attempt was made to question the existence of the language Equus in a piece written by Monty Roberts. Monty Roberts' centaurism (i.e., the assumption that horses recognize people who send certain signals as members of their own species) was challenged using scientific research results, with the conclusion that it was a dangerous over-interpretation of horse behavior. The idea of non-violence in Monty Roberts' writings can be misleading to the reader due to conceptual confusion. As a consequence, the issue of partnership and dominance in handling horses is unclear. Research and historical data show that antiauthoritarian treatment of horses lacks sense. Working with a horse in a round pen without a line, in comparison to traditional lunging, does reduce stress, but maybe the real cause of that is not using the whip. Applying a relevant dose of stimuli depending on the horse's temperament or character is more important than working with a line or lunge line. The final part describes a join-up, but in the round pen the human trainer is substituted by an integrating horse. The pilot experiment revealed that the trainer-horse did not chase the other horse for "misbehaving", but instead mostly bucked and squealed. The entire join-up was stationary. Monty Roberts' prescriptions were not followed by the horses. Certain contents in Monty Roberts' publications can imperil both those who lack experience in working with horses and the animals themselves.

Keywords

Round-Pen, Equus Language, Negative Reinforcement, Join-Up, Horse, Non-Violence

1. Introduction

For the purpose of writing this article, the first author conducted a pilot experiment with a young Arabian stallion in a “round pen”, yet an experienced gelding from a primitive race, a so-called integrating horse, replaced the human trainer (a detailed description of this experiment is included in Section 8). This test made it possible to record a real join-up between two horses unfamiliar with each other. It was a successful joining, yet it was realized according to a different scheme than that practiced in Monty Roberts’ training method, where it was the man who played the role of an integrating horse.

Monty Roberts’ methods developed in opposition to the procedures of breaking in horses in North America. However, the backing of horses is not called “breaking” in every culture. There were and still are many methods that help humans to communicate with horses. Moreover, as the history of hippology shows, in many cultures the horse is treated with great respect.

The division proposed by Monty Roberts into new methods (good) and traditional ones (bad) is a historical inaccuracy, and an injustice towards people who for centuries have been maintaining good relationships with horses. An excellent example of this kind of relations was described by [Meysztowicz \(1973\)](#). His description dates back to the Bolshevik Revolution in the year 1917, and pictures the determination of the stablemen in defending a herd of Arabian horses. The situation was even more dramatic, as the stablemen were protecting baronial property despite their own social class interest. Using rifles provided by Meysztowicz, they defended the herd, thus fighting against the Revolution which was supposed to bring them freedom. The practical aspect of people’s resolution to save horses in spite of the risk to their own lives throughout consecutive wars in Europe meant that many valuable breeding lines were preserved.

The respectful treatment of horses in European culture has a centuries-old tradition. On the vast area of the Great European Plain there were no natural borders (mountain ranges, oceans etc.). A country’s defense relied on battling on fields (in open space). For many centuries, the fate of people and whole nations depended on cavalry. Therefore, the most important test of horses’ bravery was war ([Czapski, 1874](#)). For example, in the 16th and 17th centuries the price of a war horse vastly exceeded a soldier’s (here hussar’s) annual pay, because human life depended on the horse’s abilities. Indeed, because of their value, such horses were treated better than humans in those times. The price of a hussar horse could be 1000 red zloty coins, whereas a hussar’s annual pay was 72 red zlotys. It is hard to believe that anyone could mistreat or break such a horse; indeed, it would be unpragmatic to do so, and against prevailing contemporary culture. An old Polish saying goes, “A horse, a maiden, and wine need special ministrations”. As an example of such symbiosis stands, the right of refusal to ride granted to the hussars if the terrain or other conditions represented a risk to the health of the horse, and by extension to the rider. History shows that such refusals took place. The dictum quoted by [Czapski \(1874\)](#), “Never beat a horse, never insult your servitor, never irritate your wife, if you want to benefit from them” is a summary of principles observed for centuries in east-central Europe. [Meysztowicz \(1973\)](#) confirms this in his description regarding the 19th century. In Lithuania, children taught how to ride a horse were not allowed to beat the horse; they were only permitted to kick them with their heels. Similar principles were in force during the interwar period in the Cavalry Officers’ School in Grudziadz. Riders had to ride an entire season without stirrups in order to earn their spurs ([Zagor, 2008](#)). Before World War II began, a delegation of Polish activists attended a congress of the International Federation for Equestrian Sports with a proposal to expunge dressage from the Olympic games. They argued that this discipline was artificial, unnecessary, and even harmful. Also during the interwar period, a Polish presidential decree introduced humanitarian animal protection into Polish legislation ([Smaga, 2012](#)). For example, the decree from 1931 imposed a ban on horses pulling vehicles with heavy goods at a trot in Warsaw. For each ton overload per pulling horse, a 1000 zloty fine was levied, or culprits faced 6 weeks’ imprisonment. Such a fine exceeded the value of the horse. Because of these humanitarian principles in Polish legislation, the first International Congress of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty Towards Animals, which took place in Vienna in 1929, decided to recommend this legal act as the exemplary model for all governments represented thereat.

Questioning long-standing human accomplishments in the careful usage and treatment of horses over centuries in the name of “new” methods can speak to a lack of knowledge of hippology. The radical suggestions of the supporters of new methods, including Monty Roberts, that horses have always been abused seem to be unfair and risk a disproportionate, extreme reaction. According to statistical data ([Grabowski, 1982](#)), in 1939 there were about 100 million horses in the world, whereas in 1974 the number of horses was 60 million. Alarming conclusions can be drawn from this data. A general radicalization in approach could lead to introducing a ban on

horse riding so that horses live a more comfortable life, or to prohibit pulling sledges uphill, which could lead to their liquidation, because of the high costs of maintenance involved. Social pressure applied by people with superficial knowledge of equine issues could result in limiting the existence of horses only to sanctuaries and zoos. This justifies the need for this article, which criticizes certain risky interpretations of equine behavior.

2. Language

The usage of the term language by Monty Roberts with regards to the equidae (horse family) is an inaccuracy. We can only speak of communication by visual signals. So called body-language does not exhaust all the means of communication by equidae between each other. Horses e.g. whinny, squeal, snort, have a rich facial expression, what is more, they sniff, listen but also kick and bite. In this context the “language of horses” formulated by Monty Roberts is just a fragment extracted from communication, omitting several elements. Noticeably horses’ visual signs apply to communication between horses and not between humans and horses. These differences are illustrated in the experiment conducted for the purpose of writing this article (Section 8) where the human trainer was replaced by another horse. The human-horse relations varied from horse-horse relations in the round-pen. The “trainer-horse”—the dominant did not chase the young horse, just stood in one place, letting out occasional cautionary squeals and bucked a few times. In addition human capacities are poor in comparison to the whole spectrum of horse’s interactions. Consequently we could speak of Monty Roberts’ methods and not Equus language. There is another crucial fact that should be borne in mind here, namely that horses usually know the person approaching them, meaning a hierarchy has already been determined. Of course, at times the horse can rebel and test our position. Yet gestures, facial expression, and eye contact are secondary, so the horse’s behavior can be ignored. In the case of an established hierarchy with one’s own horse it would be absurd to use Monty Roberts’ Equus language and not to be able to look into its eyes (driving away) or to hold any position of one’s body while grooming.

3. Awareness

The horse’s awareness is an interesting issue in Monty Roberts’ methods, and one which has provoked the authors to adopt their current stance. Monty Roberts’ method implies that the trainer is treated by the horse as a dominant horse. According to Roberts (1997), a person driving away a horse behaves like a dominant mare, so the horse likewise treats that person as a dominant horse. However, there is no scientific proof that animals, including horses, treat people as members of their own species. Hence the statement that the horse sends to human beings signals analogous to those addressed at horses with a high position in the hierarchy is without merit. Indeed, certain facts can be derived from historical data which appear to contradict this theory. For example, the method of approaching horses with other horses, where the rider hides on the side of the horse in order that the other horses do not recognize him or her (Gizycki, 1929), demonstrates that horses react differently to humans than they do to other horses. Moreover, during warfare cavalry horses would adopt a different strategy of attack depending on whether they were charging at other cavalry or infantry, and research on biological interactions conducted by Schäfer (2000) concluded that horses dominate mules, donkeys, and cattle. Thus it seems evident that horses are aware that they are being approached by a predator or a horse, or a man or a cow. In this sense, horses see that Monty Roberts is a man and not a horse, so they identify him as a non-horse.

Independently from Schäfer’s (2000) conclusions, people dwelling next to herds of horses observed different reactions when a horse is joined with another horse than when a horse is approached by a man or a dog. In the course of phylogenesis, the ability to recognize was crucial, which helped determine whether a species survived. If a horse allowed itself to be approached a predator, just as Monty Roberts’ method propagates, it would “automatically condemn itself to death” and would not be able to pass over this “blindness” to the next generation.

According to the analyses presented in a collective work by Rozempolska-Rucinska, Trojan, Kosik, Próchniak, & Górecka-Bruzda (2013), in Natural Horsemanship Training (NHT) methods the horse simply follows the human as a result of eliminating aversive stimuli. This is followed by the effect of terminating aversive stimuli at the right moment. The horse’s submissiveness cannot be rationalized by it feeling safe because it accepts the human as the herd leader. This can have a detrimental effect on the horse’s psychic (Rozempolska-Rucinska, Trojan, Kosik, Próchniak, & Górecka-Bruzda, 2013). The affiliation signals sent by the horse that shorten the distance should be interpreted as an effect of negative reinforcement rather than social strategy (Goodwin, 1999). The incorrect interpretation of such behavior creates the illusion of non-violent

treatment of horses in the round pen.

4. Non-Violence

Zeitler-Feicht has researched the issue of non-violence (Zeitler-Feicht, 2008). There is a common consensus that training which adopts good body language practice is exceptionally humanitarian because it is not based on violence. Yet a more accurate analysis displays that apart from the clicker method, all other methods of training do in fact employ psychical or physical punishment to a certain degree. This includes the methods of Monty Roberts, Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling, Pat Parelli, Linda Tellington-Jones, and many others (Zeitler-Feicht, 2008).

As regards the issue of violence, which in Monty Robert's publications is not precisely defined, there can be many misunderstandings. Roberts (1997) describes his first observations of the herd behavior of mustangs, and on the basis of this constructs his method. The description includes a brutal scene in which a mare knocks down a young stallion, then repeats this physical act, and finally expels the stallion from the herd for the night. The brutal force of this pedagogic lesson resulted from the fact that the maturing stallion would bite other horses, so he was dangerous for the herd. After this lesson and with the dominant mare's consent, he returned to the herd and was warmly welcomed by the same mare. Yet the memory of the punishment and severe beating did not inhibit the horse from approaching the dominant mare. There were no negative consequences of the beating; on the contrary, as regards its behavior, the results were only positive. Monty Roberts does not deliver a full interpretation of this incident. In Monty Roberts' model, violence does not exist and the brutal treatment of a biting horse element is omitted. The idea of sheer gentleness is noble, but it does not derive from equine herd behavior. Such an omission creates an illusion of harmony with the horse, excluding the ugly brutal phase (physical violence), and that is what renders it so tempting. However, without administering such a tough beating, in fact given twice, the mare would not have been able to expel the young biting stallion from the herd. In due course the stallion would probably attempt to bite her. The hierarchy in a herd is an effect of constant acts of pressure and friction in order to keep one's position. Zeitler-Feicht (2008) claims that horses living in box stalls cannot establish a hierarchy because of the lack of physical contact between them, even though the horses know each other from the stable. Fights between stallions (or geldings, since they also bite) are serious acts of aggression based on physical strength. Even ordinary physical domination like one horse pushing away another horse is a natural practice when establishing hierarchy. Monty Roberts' writings lack substantive reference to these facts. In reality, they advocate the idea of non-violence based on the natural herd behavior of horses in spite of the fact that this is not how horses establish hierarchical relationships among themselves.

5. Domination or Partnership

Based on gathered historic documents, Kossak (2001) describes a technique of catching horses used by Yotvingians from the area of Białowieża Forest. They would set a trap using a mare as the lure. The trap was first entered by horses standing higher in the hierarchy, and these were followed by the rest of the herd. It can be assumed that this mechanism was known and successfully practiced to catch horses at least seven centuries ago. The history of wars shows that a horse which holds a higher social ranking proves better in battle. Such a horse was more sought after in the army because it dominated the enemy's horses. Hence, stallions were more often exploited than others. The history of hippology demonstrates that dominance was always taken into consideration. For centuries it was a well-known fact that among horses, respect flows through a hierarchy established through contact. The last description of the behavior of authentic wild Przewalski's horses in the steppes of Manchuria (China) dates back to 1905 (Skorupski, 2006). Those observations acknowledge the role of the dominating stallion, without which the herd of Przewalski's horses would disperse. Even today, behavior whereby one horse would dominate other horses 'purely through affection' has never been observed among horses living in a herd. On the contrary, the dominating horse inflicts punishment by biting and kicking, whereas the prize in the form of victory has to be fought for (i.e., access to water or feed). Hierarchy is always established through physical or psychic pressure. Behavior modification occurs under the influence of domination. Monty Roberts' advocacy of a type of partnership with the horse in the name of reducing violence can be understood by non-professionals as an attempt to reduce domination. According to Zeitler-Feicht (2008) though, antiauthoritarian treatment in horse training lacks sense. Even an exceptionally efficient clicker training method demands the handler winning a dominating position over the horse before using the "carrot". However, this might lead to undesirable side effects, e.g. administering the prize by hand might lead to biting; the clicking is heard by other horses.

Neither Monty Roberts' practice in which negative reinforcement is applied, nor the clicker method which functions as positive reinforcement, is likely to succeed without first establishing a hierarchy (i.e., dominance). Monty Roberts, in advocating "non-violence", consequently promotes partnership with the horse and therefore risks creating a dangerous misunderstanding. Reducing violence is one thing, but partnership is another thing and dominance yet another. In natural horse behavior, the horse follows the dominating one and not the other way round, and in such a case behavior modification is justifiable. That is why partnership, which limits dominance, is nonsense and also poses a high risk in horse training.

6. Round Pen

The round pen (16 m in diameter) is a round cage analogous to a round lunging enclosure. In Spanish tradition we can encounter a similar structure, called a picadero, but the shape is square (11 m × 11 m). These enclosures are used to exercise the horse in order to establish hierarchy by controlling the horse's movements, either by urging it forward or halting it. A natural mechanism is employed during training, the so-called body-check, by obstructing the way of the horse which is being subordinated by the dominant figure in order to make it stop or turn back. This effect is obtained by working with or without a lunge line in the picadero or round pen (Zeitler-Feicht, 2008). Urging is also practiced, i.e., applying pressure, forcing the horse to run away around the fenced area. Halting and standing still are important exercises that teach obedience. This type of work with a horse has a century-long tradition in Europe. Actually, Monty Roberts' use of a round pen does not introduce anything new. Lunging halls, both round and rectangular, serve the same purpose as a place to subordinate horses. Monty Roberts principally works without a tether or a lunge, yet not always e.g. to teach the horse how to halt at command he uses a line (see footage from a demonstration in Balingen, Germany, 2009). Such an approach creates an illusion of so-called join-up without a line. The illusion created by this situation would be shattered the moment the enclosing fences are taken away, since the horse, barely acquainted with the handler, would then roll with the saddle on its back or simply run away. Keeping the horse on a lunge line or lead secures a better join-up than without the line.

The question of why not increase the likelihood of a join-up by using a line leads, in the first place, to the answer: these are the rules of show business. Monty Roberts gives another answer, however: using this technique, the horse has the freedom to choose (Roberts, 2002). A study comparing two groups of horses, one of which was lunged conventionally but the other was trained without a line, proved the level of stress was higher in the first group. What is worth noting is that the handlers of the lunged group of horses used a whip, whereas in the second they did not. Of course, in practice it is easier to take the horse on a lead than to build a round pen in order to train it without a line. That is why the difference in stress levels is not taken into consideration. Moreover, Monty Roberts' personal talent and extensive hands-on experience of working with horses enable him to achieve positive results, but for some horse handlers this method can be highly dangerous. A horse urged with a line or lasso (and not a whip) starts to run away. Certain hasty urging movements are connected with the trainer's posture. The horse observes them and quickly recognizes them as threatening. Because of this, after a short time the horse can be urged without a line, but with only a glare. The implication that the horse recognizes its language in the trainer's gestures and look, is as was mentioned earlier, a risky misinterpretation.

7. Join-Up

Monty Roberts has frequently stated that a chased away horse always wants to come back to the herd. Indeed, but there is no definite explanation why. Is it because it knows the herd, or is it because it finds safety there? The analogy presented by Monty Roberts is not adequate for the situation found in the round pen. Why would the trainer provide such a feeling of safety if he or she is a stranger? Perhaps the horse comes close because the trainer removes the pressure (stops chasing and retreats). An unfamiliar horse might approach in order to dominate or run away (it attempts to explore the new situation). If the human is weak, e.g. he or she exhibits fear or makes a mistake, following will not take place. Following could also appear to be an attempt to investigate a new object if the trainer walks away from the horse. According to Zeitler-Feicht, the horse stands still in front of the object in order to get to know it better (horses' vision is worse when they are in motion). The exploration ends with a precise olfactory examination, e.g. investigatory responses are employed (Pisula, 1998, 2009; Zeitler-Feicht, 2008). Maybe this is why the horse touches the handler. There are many reasons for the horse to follow the human, e.g. the human carries a bucket with oats, or is riding another horse, or the group of horses fol-

lows the human because they are directed to the stable to be fed.

8. Initial Case Study

In order to verify initially the correctness of Monty Roberts' words concerning equine behavior during join-up, an experiment with a young Arabian stallion was conducted. Yet the trainer was replaced by a so-called integrating horse, here an experienced gelding of Hucul breed. The experiment was recorded on camera and described in detail.

A nine-year-old gelding of Hucul breed with an equable temperament and a high standing within a herd's hierarchy was transported to the area inhabited by a two-and-a-half-year-old Arabian stallion.

In the first stage, which consisted of 5 minutes' muzzle-to-muzzle contact, but over a fence which limited potential kicking, the Hucul horse was calm. The Arab exerted high activity (pawing, kicking, squealing, trying to bite).

In the second stage of circa 5 minutes, the enclosing fence was removed, yet in order to control the horses' behavior they were kept on a lead held by people. The Hucul was still stable, but assertive. It bucked, but not offensively. The Arab was then submissive to pressure only.

In the third stage of circa 10 minutes, the horses were left loose in the round pen. The hierarchy was established without chasing, remaining in one place around the Hucul horse (i.e., the Hucul did not chase the Arab around the round pen, but only stood in one spot). In response to the Arab's attempts to bite it, the Hucul squealed and bucked. Ultimately, the cautionary squeal negated the need for extensive kicking? The Arab stood alongside the Hucul, keeping a distance of a one third of the horse's length. The join-up occurred without injury, so hay was served. The Hucul horse, ignoring the Arab, approached the hay. The Arab, keeping an appropriate distance, followed the Hucul to taste the feed. They both ate without aggression or chasing one another away.

The first, and perhaps surprising, impression is that the dominant horse did not chase the other around the round pen, contrary to Monty Roberts' descriptions, and only repelled the young stallion's picking by standing in one place without activating the Arab by running. Stationary pushing, at times pressing with its hindquarters and sporadic kicking, had a calming effect on the Arab, which yielded to the Hucul very quickly. This need not always be the case: if both horses stand high in the herd hierarchy, then the join-up might be prolonged and more intensive.

Another element that was astonishing in this join-up was the sounds. Roberts (2002) basically ignores the role of acoustic effects produced by horses. He delivers two examples of work in a round pen with a blind horse and a deaf horse (Roberts, 2002) as proof that communication between horses is mute. He also writes that domestic horse neighing causes mustangs to panic because they are used to mute communication. However, the squealing of the Hucul reduced the need for aggression, and was ultimately used as a substitute for kicking and biting. The sounds disciplined the Arab, informing him that he was crowding the other horse's space, and therefore were particularly relevant.

Also worthy of note was the fact that in a real joining of two horses unfamiliar to each other, usage of great force by kicking with hind legs is extremely efficient and instant. In Monty Roberts' model, the force element (positive punishment) is concealed and omitted.

Needless to say, the join-up occurred using substantial examples of the whole spectrum of horse interactions, hence apart from physical and sound contact there was sniffing, head tossing, pawing, appropriate positioning of ears and facial expressions. Due to the suitable selection of the integrating horse, these signals had no trace of aggression of the kind which could be threatening to the security of the join-up. Subsequent to the successful joining, the horses will be integrated with the herd which the Hucul belongs to.

9. Conclusion

The philosophy of join-up is an over-interpretation of the horse's behavior in the round pen and a product of Roberts' (1997) wishful thinking, which is not justified through behavioral research. Humans are not treated by horses as a member of their species. That is the reason why pretending to be a horse or acting the role of a horse is a peculiar centaurism that carries with a potentially serious risk.

Monty Roberts' methods feature a number of undesirable characteristics.

1) Partnership. The interpretation proposed by Roberts (2002), namely that violence and therefore domination in the hierarchical horse world can be reduced, can lead to antiauthoritarian treatment of horses by people, which

lacks sense and safety (Zeitler-Feicht, 2008).

2) Freedom of choice, but within a cage. The horse has freedom of choice, but only within the conditions selected by Roberts (2002). Basically the absence of the whip is not synonymous with freedom of choice, only with a reduction of stress.

3) Trust. After 20 minutes of applying (chasing) and releasing pressure, the horse's behavior does not result from a sense of security, but from the removal of pressure. Calmness and confidence in both the trainer and the horse are crucial in horse training (Rozempolska-Rucinska, Trojan, Kosik, Prochniak, & Gorecka-Bruzda, 2013). This is the appropriate meaning of trust. Roberts (2002) wrote that he earned trust in a mean time of circa 30 minutes in the case of six thousand horses ridden for the first time. Such a confession conveys the trainer's qualifications. Building trust in a horse-human relationship is time-consuming, and reducing this time is extremely risky and can result in permanent trauma. Daily work with a young horse is basic for developing trust.

4) Non-violence. Violence is never the answer, says Roberts (2002). This primal message of him is not based on natural horse behavior, nor is it defined or applied by its author. Footage from a demonstration in Germany shows an Arab mare being made to stand still by sharply pulling the lead line, which definitely causes pain. This took place before a large audience. Maybe the level of pain was low, but such treatment could not be called nonviolent.

5) Inaccuracy. Roberts (2002) says he supports positive reinforcement, yet in the round pen he uses mostly positive punishment (he chases the horse, threatening it with visual signals) and negative reinforcement (releasing the pressure). Another example of this is his writings on horse language, which cannot be called a language of horses. Producing a negligent description of reality by omitting certain facts, or recognizing them as cruel if they do not fit one's method, hinders serious analysis of Monty Roberts' texts.

Due to the enormously hyped popularity of their author, Monty Roberts' books are read by many people who do not have the possibility of verifying the knowledge presented in them. Fascinated by the ideas within, readers who have just begun their adventure with horses endanger both themselves and the animals. In spite of his numerous incorrect interpretations of horse behavior, Monty Roberts transcribes his equine experience onto relations between humans. This article shall not devote attention to this additional occupation of Monty Roberts, but only signalizes the risk associated with this matter.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the research project of The National Science Centre #UMO-2015/17/B/HS6/04206.

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