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Interest in humans: comparisons between riding school lesson equids and assisted-intervention equids

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Abstract

Animal-assisted interventions, and especially equine interventions, are more and more widespread. Whereas it is generally admitted that these practices have positive effects on the human side, very little is known about how animals perceive these activities. In particular, how horses perceive humans and associate them with emotional valences may depend on associations built during interactions. Thus, studies have shown that different factors can influence the human-horse relationship such as horse's individual characteristics, the repeated interactions with the caretaker, the riding techniques and the conditions of life.

In this study, 172 horses (from 12 riding centers) were submitted to a standardized human-horse relationship test, the motionless person test. They had all been involved in the same working practices for at least one year. Seventeen horses worked in assisted activities (EAI), 95 in "classical" riding school activities (RS) and 60 in both activities (EAI-RS). During the test, the experimenter entered the stall and stood with her back against the closed door, without interacting with the horse, during five minutes. All behaviours directed toward the experimenter were recorded. For each horse, the age, the sex, the type (horse or pony), the housing conditions and feeding practices (hay quantity/number of concentrate meals per day) were collected.

Important individual variations were observed in the number of behaviours directed toward the experimenter (0 to 51; mean±SE=8.3±0.8). A negative binomial model was used to test which factors influence this number. Activity, quantity of hay per day, type of equids, age and sex all seem to have an impact. The type of activity appeared as a major factor of influence: RS horses performed more interactive behaviours than both EAI (p=0.039) and EAI-RS (p=1.98e-05) horses. The feeding practices seemed to be the second most important factor (equids with more than 3kg of hay per day interacted more than equids with less than 3kg per day, p=0.013). Some individual characteristics also influenced horses' behaviours: the type (horses proved more interactive than ponies p=0.009), sex (geldings were more interactive than mares p=0.032) and age (3-15 year-old horses performed more behaviours than over 15 year-old horses p=0.032).

Horses working in animal-assisted interventions clearly proved less interactive with an unknown person. Reasons for these results remain to be further investigated, hypotheses can be a selected temperament characteristic, a result of a training or apathy due to the type of work. In any case, these results open new questions on the equine assisted practices.

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