

Adopting a Mustang through an Anthropological Lens: Exploring Cultural Concepts across Species

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Abstract

We sometimes look to our closest primate relatives when exploring culture, while excluding other species. Rather than expect animals to conform to the definition of culture constructed by humans, what if we use other anthropological concepts to explain another species? Horses are very social animals with hierarchies and gendered behaviors. The mustang bridges the divide between domestication and the wild. With holding facilities needing to adopt more horses, perceptions that these horses cannot adapt to domestic settings must be overcome. Because these horses can live without human care, the traditional training approaches are often met with resistance by mustangs and they are deemed resistant or unadoptable by humans. As an anthropologist, I began to wonder if a mustang could adapt more easily to a domestic setting if one approached the situation from a culturally relative position. This stance requires an understanding of mustang behaviors, organization, and body language within their special context. This paper will explore the transition from a free-ranging mustang in Colorado to his introduction to a domestic herd. The “acculturation” process of my adopted mustang will assist in building ontology of features, which may apply to species beyond horses.

Keywords: Culture, mustangs, anthropology, acquiescence, horses, social learning, behavior, interspecies communication, human-animal, acculturation.

Introduction

Researching the mustang and its symbolic meaning to American culture began as a dissertation project in 1999. At that point, I did not know anything about horses and my only riding included prestigious events, such as the pony ride at the local fair during my childhood. My first roundup, a term for systematically removing excess horses from the public lands, was in the Little Bookcliffs of Colorado. It is a range I have visited many times. This paper discusses the adoption and acculturation of Cortez, a yearling colt captured in the Bookcliffs. Within three days, Cortez was trapped, transported to a government processing center, vaccinated, and transported to my farm in northeastern Wisconsin.

When I began my research on mustangs, the first question upon my arrival to most roundups was, “What is an anthropologist doing here?” or “What does anthropology have to do with horses?” These questions were often followed with a statement highlighting the importance of wildlife management, biology and genetics in determining

what was best for “these horses.”

Anthropology is a holistic discipline that studies similarities and differences over time. It seeks, often through ethnography, to understand and compare cultural phenomena. Anthropology is the study of culture, but it is still difficult to define this term (Williams 1983). Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952) review of the culture concept shows that exclusively human is either stated or implied. These definitions also point out that culture is shared, taken for granted, and learned. However, as McGrew (1992) points out, perhaps “most of the quoted authors never considered the possibility of non-human culture, presumably because no convincing evidence then existed of natural populations of other species showing behavior resembling culture”(73).

In the United States, anthropology has moved to focusing on the use of symbols. Perry (2009) argues that primatologists use a definition that focuses on social learning and ignores the cognitive complexity of human culture. She adds that determining whether a particular species possesses culture depends on the definition used. The underlying assumption of this paper echoes the perspective of McFarland and Hediger (2009) in *Animals and Agency*: “other animals can be thinking subjects, knowing subjects, self-conscious subjects, subjects with complex and substantial subjectivity that we call agency”(16).

Anthropology cannot escape its roots in colonialism. There is still an issue of inherent power between the observer and the observed. Over time, as a discipline, we have recognized some of our errors in our relationship with the Other (Peacock 2001). Research over the last ten years suggests a re-examination of our relationship with other species often referred to as the species turn:

If we take otherness to be the privileged vantage from which we defamiliarize our “nature,” we risk making our forays into the nonhuman a search for ever-stranger positions from which to carry out this project. Nature begins to function like an “exotic” culture. The goal in multi-species ethnography should not just be to give voice, agency or subjectivity to the nonhuman—to recognize them as others, visible in their difference—but to force us to radically rethink these categories of our analysis as they pertain to all beings [personal communication, March 29, 2010]” (Eduardo Kohn, quoted in Kirksey and Helmreich 2010).

In this case study, I wanted to re-examine the basic elements of acculturation and the likelihood of interspecies understanding. I must disclose that I do not typically organize species into some hierarchical structure and my focus was not on training, but understanding how to relate to a different culture. As with any ethnography, there is a holistic presentation including history, context, specific examples and interpretation. This paper will utilize this approach to tell the story of Cortez’s acculturation into a domestic setting supported by current research in animal cognition and social learning.

Going into the Field

“Going into the field” is central to anthropology. The field could be anywhere, but for me it was literal. I have travelled to the Little Bookcliffs of Colorado several times over the past 13 years for my ethnographic research on the mustang controversy. Understanding the context where Cortez began his life would aid in creating a relationship with him. When studying human culture, behaviors may seem strange, but understanding the original context reveals new understandings.

The Little Bookcliffs Wild Horse Range was established in 1974 when “27,065 acres were set aside ‘for continuous, exclusive use by wild horses,’ and 28,822 acres were reserved for seasonal use by cattle and sheep.” (Wheeler 1998,45). The Little Bookcliffs Wild Horse Area, near Grand Junction, Colorado, was established by the Secretary of the Interior to protect the mustangs and settle disputes over grazing rights. This range, along with the Nellis Air Force Base and Pryor Mountain Range, are the only three ranges that are exclusively horses. Like all other ranges, they must be maintained for multiple uses, including wildlife, habitat, and the mustangs. Because mustangs have relatively no real predators except for mountain lions on some ranges, herd populations can increase about 20 per cent every few years. It is for this reason, that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conducts census data on a rotating basis every three to four years and determines whether excess animals must be removed from the range and offered for adoption.

With a decline in the United States economy, there was much concern regarding the ability to find adoptive homes for mustangs at the 2007 Little Bookcliffs Roundup. Participants at roundups and Friends of the Mustangs volunteers helped me identify other places and people in the West who were valuable for my research on the mustang issue. In an effort to repay the kindness shown to me by participants in these roundups, I adopted two yearling mustangs. I am only reporting on one of the mustangs adopted at that time: Cortez.

Cortez was given his name by Friends of the Mustangs. Friends of the Mustangs is a non-profit volunteer group formed in 1982. This group works with the BLM in maintaining trails, conducting foal counts, creating lineages, checking water sources and promoting adoptions of mustangs (personal communication). Cortez was the “grandson” of my favorite horse on the range called Barron. His sire was Silver (blue roan) and his dame was a nine-year-old dun mare called Sundance. No one is sure of the origins of Sundance. One account said she may have been dropped off on the range as a foal, but another account states she has been having foals since she was a two-year-old.

The part of the range that Cortez lived on is known as Indian Park. The range has mainly canyons and ridges covered in sagebrush, pinyon, and juniper. There is a creek that flows most of the year through Main Canyon, but man-made pools and natural springs along with snow melt or thunderstorms provide water. Canyon walls amplify noise, but can also provide shelter. Vegetation including perennial grasses, Mormon tea, shade scale and salt brush provide forage. Numerous birds, black bears, coyotes and an occasional mountain lion are other wildlife found on the range. Since this is a public land

that can be used by anyone for recreation, mustangs are exposed to a variety of vehicles, hikers, and hunters (Wheeler1998). This landscape is dramatically different than northeastern Wisconsin.

My farm is only ten miles from Green Bay, Wisconsin. The most dramatic differences between Grand Junction, Colorado and Green Bay, Wisconsin are the precipitation, altitude and the number of sunny days. Winter can begin with snow in November and last until April. Average snowfall is near 50 inches and thunderstorms are common during the summer. The soil is quite fertile and by May the countryside is made of endless shades of green.

The Roundup

The primary responsibilities of the BLM, as dictated by law, are to preserve and protect wild horses while managing for healthy rangelands, as discussed in the previous chapter. Capturing and removing wild horses from public lands is a part of actively managing them. This process is called the Roundup, or the gather. This involves bringing together various participants, building temporary structures called traps into where the wild horse herds are collected, sorting the herd into various groups and making decisions as to which horses should go through the adoption program, be placed in private holding facilities, destroyed for health reasons, or returned to the range.

The wild horse roundups are not held on a regular schedule. Environmental data collected by the BLM determines when a gather will occur. Once it is determined that the herd size needs to be reduced to aid in the protection of the range, a roundup or series of roundups are scheduled. They usually last for a week or two between the months of July to February. Participants of the roundup include BLM employees, volunteer groups, animal advocates, and sometimes contracted employees. Roundups are an excellent time to learn and observe horse behavior in another context. Ethologists often speak of horse behavior as a uniform set of actions. However, humans exist in environments that constantly change and elicit different behavior in varying contexts. Having a historical understanding of a cultural context with an understanding of major life events would be beneficial in understanding the acculturation process for humans so why would it be any different for horses? For example, a "Judas horse" is either a domestically bred horse or gentled mustang that waits at the mouth of the trap with its handler and runs into the trap when the helicopter pilot requests it over the intercom. The term is a Biblical reference depicting betrayal. Because horses are herd animals, the mustangs will follow the Judas horse into the trap. Although they will follow this horse, once in the trap, the Judas horse must be removed immediately or will be kicked at by the recently trapped mustangs. Although the same species, there is a recognition of the Other.

The roundup in 2007 began on September 15th. Cortez was captured on the 19th and arrived at my home in north-eastern Wisconsin on September 23rd. During those few short days, he was captured, transported in a horse trailer with other yearlings to the local rodeo grounds in Grand Junction, Colorado and received his first immunizations. He was

held at the rodeo grounds where he was viewed by potential adopters. At that time, we adopted both Bandita and Cortez for \$500 each. We decided to adopt two mustangs, as these yearlings had never been without a herd and it was an attempt to minimize stress (Werhahn, Hessel and Van den Weghe 2011).

Culture is Taken for Granted

Mustang adoptions occur at different times and locations throughout the year. In 2007, the mustang adoption for the Little Bookcliffs Roundup occurred after the target level of horses was reached. After each day of the roundup, horses identified for adoption were sent to the rodeo grounds. Other horses not selected were released back to their specific range. Horses are separated by age and gender. Throughout the gather week local community members and tourists can see the mustangs up close. The horses have never been kept in confined areas or experienced humans in such close proximity. A heightened awareness exhibited by the mustangs erect ears, widened eyes and contracted muscles ready for flight mimic the “culture shock” of an anthropologist entering into a new field site.

On the day of the adoption, sheets of paper are placed outside each pen area. The horses wear a number around their neck and individuals place bids and counter offers for a designated time period. The person with the highest bid adopts the horse. The level of knowledge about horse behavior varies across potential adopters. The Friends of the Mustangs volunteers are available to answer questions and assist with loading horses after adoption. One wrangler felt that most Americans no longer use horses everyday and as a result lack the skill and knowledge to train a mustang that has not been raised in a domestic setting, saying, “Any horse can be tamed. Some are better at it, but it can be done” (personal communication). Concern regarding potential adopters exists and volunteers attempt to help by offering possible trainers to assist with the transition to captivity.

Since many potential adopters have never seen a mustang on the range, they approach the confined horses based on prior interactions with domestic horses. Yelling to a friend, “Come look at this one!” can startle the mustangs, sending them crashing into the gates that confine them. The behavior of the horses is understood differently by those observing them. The horses are acting like they would to any sudden movement. It is taken for granted by many observers that all horses are the same and they will understand the human gestures. As an anthropologist, I was not concerned with the “correct” interaction. It was obvious through these observations that the humans had little awareness that a different species may act differently. From both perspectives, animals are doing what is ordinary. Unexpected reactions by the mustangs, or agency as Jane Desmond (2002) would suggest, results in the creation of a myth that they are wild and not trainable. It is true that mustangs are adopted for the same reasons someone would want a domestic horse: trail riding, show, working cattle, etc. However, a foal raised by humans accepts a gentle pet on the neck. They have been acculturated to accept the

interspecies greeting. The reaction by a mustang to the same behavior is unpredictable. The “species-centric” belief that the mustang should, “just understand”(Fox 1990). These cultural moments, as I refer to them, result when normative reactions suddenly change. If the interaction is viewed through agency devoid of hierarchy, how might that inform interactions? Could interactions with Cortez from a culturally relative position result in acculturation to his new home? Rather than training an animal, could a relationship be formed through respectful recognition of difference?

An immediate issue of consent arises from this assumption, as the human is controlling the context. This issue will be discussed in the next section of this paper describing a specific greeting behavior between the two of us.



Figure 1: Culture is Shared

According to Ember and Ember (2012), “For a thought or action to be considered cultural, some social group must commonly share it” (16). Participant-observation is a

hallmark of anthropological fieldwork. It would be my observations of Bandita and Cortez that would reveal a shared behavior.

There are several requirements made of adopters, including a 400 square foot area with six foot high walls free from protrusions must be available per mustang. Releasing a mustang into an open pasture is not allowed nor is mesh or electric fencing until the mustang accepts human handling. The shelter must have at least two sides, cannot utilize a tarp, and must provide protection from inclement weather (Bureau of Land Management 2011). These specifications are required to reduce the likelihood of injury or escape by a newly adopted mustang.

A 1,600 square foot converted calf barn with sand footing and 6 foot concrete walls would be the new home for Cortez and Bandita. The north side of the calf barn had four foot windows the length of the barn to allow light and the ability to see the pasture and other horses. There are curtains on these windows that can be closed or opened based on the weather. It also has three large lights that can be turned on as the seasons change and days become shorter. The mustangs were transferred to this area by backing the trailer up to the service door and allowing them to leave the trailer when they felt ready. There was water in a heated tank and grass hay in a larger tractor tire.

For about a week, there was no attempt at interaction and the focus was on just feeding the horses and cleaning their area. Like most field work, it begins with an emphasis on observation. Bandita and Cortez had come from different parts of the Little Bookcliffs Wild Horse Range. On several occasions during their first week, they would approach each other after being at opposite sides of the calf barn. It was a shared process, as either would initiate it. The mustangs would approach each other on a curve facing each other. They would sniff as they moved their heads closer together. Once this “greeting” had been completed they might allow grooming or simply stand near each other. This all grooming serves as a practical means of shedding and insect control, but also relieves stress and enhances social bonding (McDonnell 2003,72). Observations of these encounters suggested some sort of mediation. Since it is impossible to determine the horses’ intentions, it appeared as though there was agreement to participate in grooming. ‘Acquiescence,’ that is, a situation in which individuals are selected to conform to social norms and regulations” became a useful concept on my future interactions with Cortez (Wenseleers, Hart, and Ratnieks 2004, 156). Although there is no way to know what he wants to do, I could simply offer him the option to not participate with me. Ultimately, we do not know if an animal wants to create a relationship with us. However, that discussion is better suited to a philosophical discussion beyond the parameters of this paper.

Although both were said to be 1 year of age, Bandita accepted human contact quite easily and would shield Cortez by placing her body between any human and him. After a while, we began to separate the two horses by a sliding door where they could still see each other, but would interact individually with humans. Within a couple of months, Bandita could be haltered and led, but Cortez would still move away. Bandita was placed in a box stall about 200 square feet in size with a barred window allowing her to interact

and observe the domestic horses. Cortez remained in the calf barn able to see the other horses in the adjacent barn and a radio was turned on with music and talking throughout the day. It was obvious that Bandita was adjusting, but visitors to the farm would remark how Cortez was wild and “I needed to show him who was boss!” (personal communication).

Several months with little adjustment did cause concern. Instead of listening to the visitors to the farm, I reflected on my observations and interactions with Cortez. Stone (2010) has shown that human facial discrimination exists in domestic horses. She states that this may not be the case in mustangs that are not reliant on humans for care. However, mustangs are the same species so they should have the ability to adapt, once adopted by humans who become their caretakers (59). In addition, Krueger and Heinze (2008) found that horses were likely to copy behaviors of more dominant horses (439).

Initially when interacting with Cortez, I would offer him food in an effort to lure him near me. Humans use food for all sorts of rewards or mediating strange situations. I was overlooking a very important element: Cortez was not a human. If dominance is based on priority access to food, it must have been confusing why I was offering food to him. I was acting from a human perspective and not recognizing that the greeting ritual is not associated with food. You do not find one mustang offering food to another upon greeting each other for the first time. I was approaching him like I would my domestic horses that had been trained to come into the barn using a food reward, specifically a peanut butter cookie. Once I crudely attempted to mimic the greeting displayed between the two mustangs, advancements with Cortez seemed to occur more rapidly and by the end of a year he and Bandita were transitioned into the pasture with our domestic horses without incident, greeting their new companions in the same way.



Figure 2

Anyone who has had horses for a while will recognize this greeting as typical horse behavior, but my domestic horses rarely exhibit it. What is fascinating about the situation with Cortez was his acknowledgement of my crude interpretation. As two separate species, unlike in many ways, I could not imitate him. However, much like the anthropologist learning a new language there was a brief moment of acquiescence. I needed to recognize the unique elements and differences between greeting and feeding behavior. After a two week absence from Cortez, I will still employ this greeting if I want to halter him. However, he has also learned to respond to food rewards.

Both mustangs can now be haltered, led and ridden with a bridle and saddle. Unlike my domestic horses there is little reaction when riding to new items like garbage cans, loud noises, or situations where large farm equipment passes them in close proximity. However, Cortez will often stand still and turn looking at me on his back when encountering something out of place. Could this looking back mimic what horses do in the wild seeking guidance from the stallion found in the back of the herd for protection? Thinking back to the place where Cortez was born this makes sense. The canyon walls amplify noise and his lessened startle response may be the result of environmental conditioning absent in my domestic horses. This suggests different adaptive behaviors based on environmental context like we would expect in human cultures. This social learning suggests that there are differences of behaviors based on context. These behaviors seem to support Stone's contention that horses "are, instead, 'intelligent' creatures with the ability to solve problems using classical, operant, and cognitive processes (2010,60). The inclusion of these once free-roaming mustangs have also impacted and changed the behavior of their domestic counterparts.

Culture is Learned

Participant-observation allows for intimate understanding of a culture. It allows the anthropologist to make comparisons. Subtle changes can go unnoticed to the outsider. Having had other horses for about seven years prior to the adoption of these mustangs, a routine had emerged. My horses have always had a 40x60 shed attached to a mud lot and about four acres. They determine whether they want to be in the shed or out on pasture. There is always dry grass hay and water available in the building. Two learned behaviors emerged after contact with Cortez and Bandita.

Many times what we learn in the field as anthropologists happens by accident. The recognition that my domestic gelding had learned something new happened accidentally. Mister, my Paint gelding had come to our house when he was four years old. He had been bought as a two-year-old for a 4-H project. The original breeder felt that he was not being cared for in an appropriate manner and bought him back. He lived with other young horses on a pasture with small outbuildings that provided shelter. When Mister arrived at my farm, he was placed in a box stall adjacent to the other horses. Since he appeared timid, we did not want to immediately introduce him into the herd that had an established territory and hierarchy. In addition, he needed immunizations and other

veterinary care. Unlike my other horses, he would defecate anywhere, including his hay and occasionally in the small water tank in his box stall. Since he was my primary riding horse, this simply seemed to be a burden to tolerate.

Because of an injury to another horse, we kept Mister and Cortez together in the converted calf barn, which was familiar to both horses. This area was cleaned daily when the two were turned back out on pasture. Once my other horse recovered, Mister returned to his box stall. After only a week with Cortez, Mister began to defecate in the same area, much like stud piles that are seen on the mustang ranges. After a few days of being separated, Mister reverted to his typical behavior. On several occasions I would house Cortez and Mister together and the same behavioral change would occur. Currently, after several interactions, Mister usually defecates in one area of his box stall or at the outer edges away from his hay and water. It is a close approximation of a stud pile, but not identical. Copying behavior has been confirmed in the academic literature but, behaviors of dominant horses are usually copied (Kreuger and Heinze 2008, 431). In this particular scenario Mister had a higher status level than Cortez in the herd. There was no overt confrontation to suggest a reestablishment of dominance between the two of them or it was so subtle that I did not detect it. After observing this change, I wondered if there were other examples of social learning between the mustangs and my domestic horses.

The horses have the ability to move from pasture, mud lot and the shed most of the year. If the snow is over two feet or the pasture becomes too muddy, potentially impacting the spring growth, then the horses are restricted to the mud lot and shed. Adjacent to their mud lot and path to a larger grazing area, there is a relatively steep incline to a fence that encloses the outdoor arena. Vegetation usually grew high and needed to be mowed so not to grow into the arena. There is a flat area at the top of this relatively steep embankment, but the horses would use the flat path to the pasture area.

Last year was the first time that Cortez utilized this area. I began to notice, when using the outdoor arena, that the vegetation did not need to be cut. On several occasions, I would observe Cortez eating the vegetation on the top of this embankment where other horses had showed no interest.

The terrain between the Little Bookcliffs Wild Horse Range and our farm are quite different. None of our domestic horses have been exposed to mountains, cliffs or steep inclines. Why Cortez began to eat the grass on this incline is not known, but spatial memory may hold a clue. In the Bookcliffs it was not uncommon to graze on sharp inclines. In other words, he had learned to do this behavior since birth. It suggests, that although the same species, he conceptualized the spatial environment differently (Hothersall et al. 2010, 72). Soon Bandita, Cortez and our burro, Juanita, could be found grazing in that area. In addition, Cortez would use this area to avoid mud that may result from pooling due to a heavy thunderstorm. On the range, washouts could cause a potential hazard and his behavior reflected his prior learning. On several occasions this spring when the usual path became muddy, other horses were observed using the top of the embankment to avoid the mud. In addition, Cortez will now use the typical path used

by the herd. This area, which has been available to our other horses for nearly a decade, began to be used in a new way once Cortez joined the herd.

Conclusion

The most fascinating element of field work is the constant surprises. It is never clear when studying a new culture what will become important. Studying a culture from an etic perspective gives us information, but living among those studied provides a greater appreciation and a richer understanding of those taken for granted behaviors that seem so normal. Culture is a shared process and knowing how to function in it is learned. It often requires us to question our strongly held beliefs, which we view as the correct way to live. This case study shows that social learning can occur between species.

Anthropology has had many definitions of culture seeking to emphasize the uniqueness of humans. Perhaps culture exists less in some static definition, but is revealed in relationships (Haraway 2008). Understanding culture cannot occur without interactions with the Other. After interacting with Cortez, there were times when each of us took our behavior for granted, shared an understanding, and discovered that learning can happen anywhere.

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