MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING:
IV. SOME PARALLELS WITH HORSE WHISPERING

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Abstract. Motivational interviewing is a client-centered, directive therapeutic style for initiating and facilitating change. Introduced through this journal two decades ago, it has been supported in a series of clinical trials as effective in enhancing behavior change through relatively brief intervention. The author explores parallels between this therapeutic style and the nonviolent “join-up” method of Monty Roberts for training and rehabilitating horses. Both methods emphasize a collaborative rather than adversarial working relationship, seek to enhance intrinsic motivation, and produce positive change in a briefer period of time than traditionally thought to be possible. Both respect the other’s autonomy and choice, and move with rather than against resistance. Both seem to enhance the speed and amount of change that follow from behavioral methods.

Keywords: Motivational interviewing, confrontation, ambivalence, therapeutic relationship, motivation, punishment.

Introduction

Monty Roberts has devoted his life to promoting humane, nonviolent treatment as an alternative to traditional methods for “breaking” horses. Although his unique work now spans five decades, it has come to worldwide attention through three relatively recent events. The first of these was his recognition by HRM Queen Elizabeth II, and her adoption of his methods for the training and care of royal horses. The second was publication of his autobiography, The man who listens to horses (Roberts, 1997), which quickly became an international best-seller. The third, somewhat ironic event was the release of the Hollywood film The horse whisperer, based on the novel by Nicholas Evans (1995). The irony lies in the fact that the film culminates in the subjugation of a horse through violent restraint, precisely the kind of cruel treatment that Mr Roberts has spent his life opposing.

My own first exposure to his work was through the BBC documentary Monty Roberts: A real horse whisperer, which dramatically illustrates the efficacy of his work through the taming of a wild mustang in its natural unrestrained environment. The method is called “join-up”, and makes use of the silent body language of horses, a language that he calls

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“Equus”. Through artful conversation in Equus, he is usually able to persuade a horse to accept its first saddle, bit and rider within 30 minutes, a process that requires 4–6 weeks with traditional approaches that rely upon domination through pain and restraint.

As I watched his work on videotape, I was impressed by its similarities, both in spirit and technique, to motivational interviewing, an approach introduced through this journal two decades ago (Miller, 1983). In July 1999 it was my privilege to visit the Roberts ranch—Flag Is Up Farms at Solvang, California—and witness first-hand his remarkable ability to start (by taming, and not breaking) horses that have never known a rider, as well as highly dangerous and “unmanageable” horses made aggressive by physical abuse at the hands of humans.

Join-up

His foundational method, join-up, is a readily replicable way of persuading horses—naturally a flight animal that will avoid any predator, including humans—to voluntarily approach and seek the company of a human trainer. It is an extraordinary process to witness. The untamed horse enters a 50-foot round pen in a high-adrenalin state of panic. Standing at the center, the trainer locks eyes on eyes and keeps shoulders square to the horse, both nonverbal horse-to-horse cues that signal “Go away.” The horse runs the perimeter of the pen, keeping as much distance as possible from the trainer at the center of the ring. Then nothing bad happens; there is no pain, not even a raised voice. Gradually and predictably, usually within a few minutes, the horse begins to signal in Equus a desire for help and companionship: locking the inside ear on the trainer as a sign of attention and respect, licking and chewing, dropping the head, moving away from the perimeter wall and closer to the trainer, and generally looking more relaxed and calm.

At this moment, the trainer dramatically shifts posture. Eye contact is broken; shoulders are rounded and turned away from the horse at a 45-degree angle. Immediately, the horse stops short, as if confused or pondering, and looks intently at the trainer’s back. Then in slow, hesitant steps, the horse approaches the trainer, touching nose to shoulder. It is the moment of join-up. From that moment onward, it is usually a matter of minutes until the horse accepts the first blanket and saddle, bit, and rider of his or her life. I have watched Mr Roberts achieve this moment of join-up with fresh, untamed horses within a few minutes.

I was also privileged to witness his join-up with an unridden horse so extremely aggressive and dangerous that the Roberts ranch was the last stop before the slaughter house. From the horse’s wild outbursts at any sudden movement toward his left side, it became apparent that he had been severely whipped by a right-handed trainer. Indeed, his left flank bore scars that preserved the link marks of a heavy chain. This animal had good reason to hate humans. I saw only sessions 5–7, but even within this span of 3 days I could hardly believe it was the same animal. In session 5, as he reached slowly around the horse’s left side to pick up a cinch, the horse exploded into wild bucking and kicking that persisted for 5 minutes. From a seemingly quiescent standing state, suddenly and without warning all four feet were in the air, kicking wildly to heights of 2–3 meters. Two days later, the same horse was following Mr Roberts around like a puppy, wearing saddle, bit, and a mannequin rider. The desensitization process was so complete that even a abrupt bodily charge against the
horse’s left flank yielded only a muscle twitch, rather than the violent outburst of 2 days before.

Creating an environment for change

Many of the specific techniques that Mr Roberts teaches are straightforward applications of principles of positive and negative reinforcement. His work with the severely traumatized animal just described was a fine example of systematic desensitization. After join-up, much of the training process involves the shaping through reinforcement of successive approximations to the desired behavior. There are no surprises there for behavior therapists, though one must admire the skill with which he applies principles of learning.

What is striking is that Monty Roberts is able to apply these principles so quickly with wild and even severely traumatized animals. For thousands of years, the principal method to prepare horses for training was breaking them, coercing them into a kind of learned helplessness that enforced submission by inflicting pain and using ropes to restrain limbs and movement. Whips, spurs, and harsh bits are still widely accepted training tools in many nations where the use of such instruments on humans or even on other domesticated animals would warrant police intervention. Using communication instead of pain, Mr Roberts prepares an animal within a matter of minutes to begin working with the trainer as a partner rather than as a predatory adversary. He wants the horse to want to change and perform new behaviors, to choose willingly rather than by coercion.

Parallels to motivational interviewing

There are some striking similarities of Mr Roberts’ methods to the spirit and style of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991; Rollnick & Miller, 1995). He developed his approach by careful observation (“listening”); horses were his teachers. Motivational interviewing emerged from listening carefully to human beings with alcohol dependence; alcoholics were my teachers. Unlike Roberts, I was a newcomer with a beginner’s mind, inexperienced with and mostly unaware of traditional methods for “breaking down alcoholic denial”.

The word “breaking” is, in fact, the very term used for decades in America to describe how professionals should respond to resistance when treating substance use disorders. As a society, Americans have reserved subjugation-focused treatment for certain classes of people. Allegedly, these are groups who “need” or “require” or even “deserve” harsh treatment. The view is: “Nothing else works. It is the only way you can get through to them.” For which medical diagnoses would the same public even allow, let alone sanction, such bizarre treatments as “therapeutic” boot camps, head shaving, group attack therapy, “Scared Straight,” and Synanon? For what other disorder would the Wall Street Journal (Greenberger, 1983) have lauded on its front page, as model treatment, a medical doctor screaming into a patient’s face, “Shut up and listen. Alcoholics are liars, and we don’t want to hear what you have to say!”? Americans have reserved such treatment for those who “really need (deserve?) to be broken down”—alcoholics, drug addicts, and criminal offenders. Such groups, like horses, are allegedly unable to learn and change in any other way. Happily, this view has not dominated addictions treatment in most other nations. I am
delighted, in fact, that even with U.S. audiences I sometimes now encounter disbelief that such methods were ever in common practice.

Commonalities of spirit

Given this social context, it caught my attention that one can induce large changes in wild horses by behaving in a collaborative rather than adversarial manner, and can do so in a much briefer period of time than was previously thought possible. If nothing else, it peaked my curiosity because I have been trying to understand how and why motivational interviewing works (Miller, 1996, 1998). If this is something more than a metaphor, if similar methods can trigger rapid change even across intelligent species, it may focus the search on processes that are common to those species.

How far can (or should) one press the parallelism of these two approaches? Table 1 traces some similarities in the background and basic philosophy or spirit of these methods (Rollnick & Miller, 1995). One obvious parallel is their common emphasis on increasing intrinsic motivation for change. Neither insists on a particular form of change; instead both emphasize choice and autonomy. Both conceptualize ambivalence as a normal phenomenon, and seek first to enhance and then resolve ambivalence in the direction of change. A collaborative moving-with partnership is assumed, rather than an adversarial relationship. The change agent (trainer or therapist) does not take responsibility for the other’s choices, or claim personal credit for positive changes that occur. There is a strong primary commitment to the other’s welfare, and changes are negotiated within the willing bounds of what the other finds to be of value (reinforcers).

An important common point here is that it is the relationship that provides the atmosphere within which rapid change is possible. Principles of learning are potentiated by the relational context, a respectful working partnership. It is as though the join-up process removes obstacles to learning and change. There are obvious parallels to Carl Rogers’ (1957) views of personality and change. Within behavior therapy, however, much less attention has been given to the role of the therapeutic relationship in facilitating change.

Commonalities of method

There are also parallels in technique, in the specific methods that are used to work within each overall approach (see Table 2). Both methods are highly individualized, constantly adapting the approach to subtle aspects of what the other is doing (Rollnick, 1998). The methods are directive, yet highly supportive and attuned to the moment-to-moment concerns of the other. There is a relaxed, unhurried quality to the interaction, and when done well, the therapist or trainer is doing only a minority of the in-session work. Conscious attention is given to positive reinforcement of actions that represent motion in the desired direction.

Particularly telling is the way in which one responds to movements away from the desired direction of change in both methods. Rather than entering into an argument or confrontation, one simply moves with the “resistance” rather than opposing it, allows it to subside, and then nudges the change process forward again. One watches for characteristic signs of readiness for change, and then shifts strategies in response to this communication to test the other’s willingness to take a step in a new direction. In both
Table 1. Some parallels in background and basic philosophy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monty Roberts</th>
<th>Motivational Interviewing</th>
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<tr>
<td>The method was initially developed in contrast to the traditional approach of breaking horses into submissiveness by inflicting pain. Emphasizes eliciting intrinsic motivation, causing the horse to want to do new things. Initial positive change is seen in a relatively short period of time, often after a single session of 30–60 minutes. Respects the horse’s right to choose and decide; allows the horse the chance to “fail” in order to have a chance to “succeed.” ‘‘Ambivalence can be perceived as resistance but should not be. The horse is in need of more conversation. The horse is not sure.’’ “I don’t believe there was a bad horse born, just like I don’t believe there was a bad child born.” “A horse trainer must keep in mind the idea that the horse can do no wrong; that any action taken by the horse, especially the young unstarted horse, was most likely influenced by you.” The work is collaborative, a 50–50 partnership of trainer and horse. Join-up involves the horse’s decision to trust, which opens the door for change. Join-up is the opposite of an adversarial relationship. There are literally dance steps that one takes to draw the horse to you. “‘There is no such thing as teaching, only learning’.” Long and consistent record of success in starting and remediating horses within a relatively short period of time.</td>
<td>The method was initially developed in contrast to the traditional approach of breaking down denial by aggressive confrontation. Emphasizes intrinsic motivation, eliciting the person’s own reasons for change. Initial positive change is seen in a relatively short period of time, often after a single session of 30–60 minutes. Respects the individual’s personal autonomy, choice, and responsibility for change. Ambivalence is regarded not as a sign of denial or resistance, but as normal. The therapist’s job is to help the person resolve the ambivalence. The view of the person is a profoundly positive one; that given the proper atmosphere, the person will inherently grow in a positive direction. “Denial is not a client problem; it is a therapist skill problem.” What is often called “resistance” is in fact the product not of a personality, but of interpersonal communication patterns. The work is a collaborative partnership of person and therapist. Motivational interviewing quickly establishes a working alliance, which opens the door for change. Motivational interviewing has been likened to dancing rather than wrestling, a gentle moving with and leading, rather than struggling. There is no such thing as a healer, only healing. Clinical research provides strong support for effectiveness in modifying a range of notoriously intransigent behaviors within a relatively short period of time.</td>
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approaches, the first phase (“enhancing motivation” or “join-up”) builds a working alliance and prepares the way for behavior change. The second phase (“consolidating commitment” or “follow-up”) focuses on negotiation of behavior change (Miller & Rollnick, 1991; Roberts, 1997).


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<td>When the process is going well, the horse is doing most of the work.</td>
<td>When the process is going well, the client is doing most of the talking.</td>
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<td>Highly individualized: “A good trainer can hear a horse speak. A great trainer can hear the horse whisper.”</td>
<td>Highly individualized: the therapist attends to subtle cues, both verbal and nonverbal, about what is happening with the person.</td>
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<td>“If a horse wants to go away, don’t send him away a little, send him away a lot.”</td>
<td>Amplified reflection (reflecting back with increased intensity the person’s own statement) and siding with the negative are ways to respond to counter-motivational statements.</td>
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<td>When the horse is uncooperative, the trainer moves with the horse rather than opposing the horse’s movement.</td>
<td>When the person resists change, the therapist rolls with the resistance rather than opposing it.</td>
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<td>Involves the flexible alternation of applying pressure and releasing pressure, advancing and retreating.</td>
<td>Has been called gentle confrontation; is both directive and reflective.</td>
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<td>The trainer does not directly oppose the horse’s actions or decisions. “When you move forward the horse retreats. You move back and the horse advances.”</td>
<td>The therapist avoids getting into arguments with the person, especially those in which the therapist takes the “good” side arguing for change.</td>
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<td>Requires that the trainer closely watch or “read” or “listen to” the horse and respond to what is happening moment to moment.</td>
<td>Requires a high level of therapist skillfulness in reflective listening, and the flexible use of a variety of moment-to-moment strategies.</td>
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<td>During the first phase, the trainer watches for signs of the horse’s readiness to join up: locking of the ear, licking and chewing, dropping of the head, looking toward the trainer, and bodily relaxation and calmness.</td>
<td>During the first phase, the therapist watches for signs of the person’s readiness to change: decreased resistance, asking questions about change, envisioning, self-motivational statements, and a sense of peacefulness.</td>
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<td>The trainer avoids picking on habitual, repetitive behavior or “making a big deal out of it”, and instead addresses the horse’s concerns.</td>
<td>The therapist avoids premature focus on what the therapist may perceive to be problems (e.g. addictions), and instead starts with the person’s own concerns.</td>
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<td>The trainer consciously uses positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and extinction to shape the horse’s behavior.</td>
<td>The therapist consciously reinforces self-motivational statements and seeks to defuse counter-motivational statements.</td>
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<td>Avoids pushing, coercing, punishing.</td>
<td>Avoids confronting, criticism and judgment.</td>
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<td>Gives the horse room to choose, and allows for individual variation in how to respond.</td>
<td>Provides a menu of options from which to choose.</td>
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<td>Seeks to persuade the horse that a new course of action is advantageous.</td>
<td>Seeks to develop discrepancy that will trigger a change of behavior.</td>
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<td>Replicable: new trainers can learn to use the method effectively, and have done so in many countries.</td>
<td>Replicable: new therapists can learn to use the method effectively, and have done so in many countries.</td>
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Reflections

The most obvious parallel of these two approaches is philosophical: a commitment to non-violence and a rejection of reliance upon coercive power (intimidation, subjugation, etc.). This view is based not only on the foreswearing of violence and coercion, but on the committed belief that there is a better way, a way that is not only more humane, but also more effective and efficient. When I visited Monty Roberts, I remarked on the number of educators, health professionals, administrators, and corporate executives who come to the ranch to learn his methods, even though they may have little interest in or involvement with horses. “They tell me it’s a powerful metaphor for human relations”, he said. Then he added, “but it’s not a metaphor.” I found it one of the most thought provoking things he told me, and it gave rise to this article.

To be sure, the symmetry is not complete. The dance of join-up with humans happens primarily on the field of language, although nonverbal behavior remains an important component. Roberts asserts the necessity, in order to achieve join-up, of first driving the horse away for a period of time (advance) and then opening the door for conversation (retreat). I can find no parallel for this in motivational interviewing, as it is currently taught and practiced, unless it is the fact that clients often start off the first session running around in ambivalent circles. Rather, from the beginning of the first session, the therapist seeks to welcome the client in and establish rapport, avoiding hierarchical uses of power. Many of the clients we see have already been thoroughly driven away from the human herd, and rather than repeating that experience we move directly to join up with them. Perhaps there are new therapeutic methods to be discovered from Mr Roberts’ insights about advance and retreat in the process of join-up.

Nevertheless, the similarities are striking, and are, I believe, more than metaphoric. It is a reminder, for behavior therapists, of the impact of therapist style on the process and outcomes of psychotherapy (Patterson & Forgatch, 1985). There is clear evidence that the quality of a therapeutic relationship can influence the outcomes of behavior change interventions, enhancing or hindering them, speeding up or slowing down the process of change (e.g., Miller, Benefield, & Tonigan, 1993; Miller, Taylor, & West, 1980; Valle, 1981). As in the breaking of horses, societies may place almost all bets on extrinsic motivation to induce change in certain human behavior problems. This may be done in the mistaken belief that there is no other way, that “those people” can only learn through confinement and the infliction of a sufficient level of suffering. The U.S. addiction field abounds with moralistic language (e.g., clean and dirty, slip and relapse, temptation), and with concepts such as “breaking down”, “hitting bottom”, and “enough suffering”. Roberts’ descriptions of the “self-perpetuating cycle of crime and punishment” with horses is also an indictment of correctional systems that perpetuate such destructive cycles in humankind.

Perhaps the takeaway message here is the same one that has always guided proponents of nonviolence: to question any belief that the best or only way to bring about change is through aggressive, violent, or coercive means. Our technologies of violence are vastly more well-developed than our tools of gentility. Whatever other contributions may emerge through the development of motivational interviewing, I am pleased if it has in some measure displaced the harsh treatments that once dominated the American addiction field. I sense in the international network of motivational interviewing trainers a more general passion to
promote humane and collaborative routes to change. It is the same calm passion that I witnessed in a lone cowboy standing with a frightened wild horse inside a 50 foot circular pen.

References