Beating a Dead Horse: Reply to Levy’s Comments

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Levy’s comments (American Anthropologist 86: 985-991) concerning my paper “Ecological Aspects of Equestrian Adaptations in Aboriginal North America” (American Anthropologist 85: 562-591, 1983) are disillusioning. Levy (1961) has previously discussed the general determinant relationships between winter weather, aridity, and forage conditions and human and horse populations in the 1800s throughout the plains. It is disappointing, therefore, to find that Levy has become so disgruntled with the ecological approach in anthropology in general and with my efforts in particular.

He argues that it is futile for me to develop an ecological explanation of variability in aboriginal horse herd size(s). In addition, he deems my attempts to utilize the ethnohistorical records concerning aboriginal horse use as “not worth the effort.” Levy declares that the “technological” horse occupies a “superorganic” niche in western North America and is unaffected by winter climate and forage conditions, which serve as the causal variables in my model(s). In effect, Levy seems to be arguing that I am “beating a dead horse”!

Levy states that these conclusions about my paper derive from three procedural errors, which include (1) use of an inappropriate measure of horse wealth, (2) failure to test alternate “hypotheses,” and (3) elimination of contradictory evidence through recourse to the use of “idiosyncratic explanations.” I would like to take issue with Levy on all of his assertions. First, I was not attempting to explain differential “horse wealth” among aboriginal North Americans. The primary purpose of my paper is to explain the distribution and abundance of aboriginal horses in the trans-Mississippi west. This is basically an ecological problem (cf. Krebs 1978: 9). Levy, on the other hand, makes use of the measure of “horse wealth” or the ratio of horses to people provided by Ewers (1955) for various tribal groups. Levy then goes on to make inappropriate use of this ratio and my winter severity index in his counteranalyses. Why does Levy assume that human populations should vary as a function of the winter severity index? I developed this index to reflect the winter availability of forage for horses. All of Levy’s results, then, will apply only if aboriginal peoples ate horses and/or grass. Given these erroneous results, Levy can claim that my generalizations are fallacious. In turn, he may then argue, for example, that aboriginal groups in the Great Basin and the Columbia Plateau who are the “wealthiest” in horses experience some of the most severe winters.

Second, Levy argues that I have failed to evaluate the causal roles of alternate variables, for example, abuse of pregnant mares and the gelding of stallions, in assessing horse distribution and abundance. If he seriously questions the ethnohistorical data on horse herd size(s), does he believe that
the literature contains more reliable cross-cultural information on aboriginal equine care practices? If they were available, how might these accounts be used to adjust existing horse population figures? I would suggest that such population regulation practices as abuse of mares and gelding of stallions might have varied as a function of winter severity and were ultimately used to lower the labor costs for herds in more harsh environments.

Third, Levy states that “idiosyncratic explanations” are used to account for a number of anomalous ethnographic cases, for example, Nez Perce, Pawnee, and the Plains villagers. Once again Levy misunderstands the manner in which explanatory models are utilized. Explanatory models are oversimplifications of reality; they serve not only to subsume or explain a majority of specific empirical cases but also to isolate anomalies for further investigation. Models, then, cannot include all possible variables nor can they account for all of the observed variation. Ethnohistorical cases are distributed about the regression lines (cf. Osborn 1983, Figures 2-4) as a result of numerous “idiosyncratic explanations” that cause each observation to deviate slightly from the ideal or expected value. Robust explanatory models remain viable despite the existence of specific anomalies. Further investigation of anomalies may bring them into conformity with our expectations (e.g., the Nez Perce and the Pawnee cases) or may require the development of additional, yet related, models.

Levy also takes issue with my analysis of subsistence patterns and horse herd size. Subsistence data were taken directly from Murdock (1967: 46-47), and certain groups were combined and subsistence values were averaged in order to replicate the groups presented by Ewers (1955: Table 3).

Twenty-two of the 32 cases in Table IV (Osborn 1983:582) were used in the subsistence analysis. Groups mentioned by Levy such as the Miami and the Winnebago are not included in Ewers (1955: Table 3) and were not used in my analysis.

Levy counters my generalizations regarding diet, mobility, and horse herd size by pointing out that the Nez Perce possessed very large herds, but they relied little on hunting (particularly bison). Yet, we know that once the horse was available to the Nez Perce they too became highly mobile bison hunters on the northern plains (cf. Chalfant 1974: 96-97).

In addition, Levy believes that domesticated horses are “technological,” “super-organic” organisms that exist free from environmental constraints. What must be emphasized, however, is that such buffers from the environment are extremely costly in terms of human labor investment. Given environments in which growing seasons are short and winters are severe, both horse feeding behavior and human labor organization are subject to intense selective pressures, and herd size must be adjusted accordingly.

I might point out that my basic forage availability model is supported by substantial independent studies in ecology and range management. These studies involve both wild and domesticated herbivores and they demonstrate that cold temperatures and snow/ice accumulations limit population size (e.g., United States Senate 1936; Morrison 1957; Pruitt 1959; Moen 1966, 1968, 1976; Vibe 1967; Kelsall and Prescott 1971; Mattfeld 1974; Wilkinson 1974; Dyne, Brockington, Szocs, Duek, Ribic 1980; Mierau and Schmidt 1981; Berger 1983).

In conclusion, Levy’s response reiterates those described by Roe (1955: 1), who states that “one is struck by the attitude of virtual
despair that has always prevailed among scholars at the hopelessness of our ever attaining any really precise knowledge of the relationships of the Indian and the horse.” Perhaps Levy and I share in the realization that a better understanding of equestrian adaptations cannot be obtained solely through recourse to a finite, biased body of ethnohistorical literature. Yet, I fail to see in what direction Levy is suggesting that we proceed with this anthropological research problem. One of the primary purposes of my paper is to demonstrate that such biases can be recognized and such self-imposed constraints on our understanding of traditional problems can be escaped. Levy appears committed to a strategy of eclecticism (cf. Harris 1979) in which sometimes the environment limits horse herds (e.g., water in arid lands) and sometimes the sociocultural system imposes its own arbitrary constraints (e.g., abuse of mares and gelding of stallions). Anthropologists can no longer ignore the “causal arrows” and determinant relationships that have been demonstrated to exist by other scientific disciplines, in this case, including wildlife ecology, physiological ecology, meteorology, and nutrition.

References Cited