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Weighing a Horse with a Likert Scale: Problems Around Assessment in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Much as Malinowski's "imponderabilia" teaches us that ordinary "stuff" matters, so to does doing the work of ethnography teach us that "assessment is not an extra-ordinary task" (Varenne 2011). The link between anthropological field methods and assessment is fundamental: in generating an ethnographic account, anthropologists constantly ask themselves "what do I write down?" How do I decide that this happened in this way; because surely, if I were someone else, I would have seen something else happen. Rather than a moment of indecision, I view such ruminations as a strength. In asking these questions, anthropologists become sensitive to the fact that the people with whom we work also struggle to make sense out of their experience. Working in the tradition of ethnomethodology, we know that people constantly and continuously assess what is happening; and with this paper, I suggest we look to Varenne, and how he approaches the problems associated with assessment (Varenne 2011). Rather than attempting to determine whether or not X thing that happens in the field produces Y results, Varenne encourages us to look at how we determine what counts as happening. I also wonder, what else do we have to "fix" in order to measure what "happens?" Drawing on my fieldwork in equine-assisted psychotherapy, this paper will attempt to piece out some of the implications of generating margins around human experience. I suggest that anthropologists, drawing on doing the work of ethnography, in the context of schools of education, can offer perspectives on generating information and consequently, on generating assessments.

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