Effect of density and relative aggressiveness on agonistic and affiliative interactions in a newly formed group of horses

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Abstract

Group housing provides horses with social contact, a lack of which is associated with health and behavior problems. Despite the benefits of group housing for horses, horse owners are concerned about aggression and resulting injuries. This study focused on agonistic and affiliative interactions in a focal group of (originally) 12 horses with short and longer term changes in composition, variation in available area and presence of peri-parturient mares. Age and density had no significant effect on agonistic or affiliative behavior. However, when agonistic behavior was considered within three subcategories, density did have a significant positive effect on contact and threat aggression, but not on passive aggression (avoid and displace). When analyzing only the days without the most aggressive horse, age and density had a positive effect on agonistic interactions, and density had a negative effect on affiliative interactions. Days with and without the most aggressive horse showed no significant overall differences in either category of social interactions. Agonistic and affiliative interactions were not significantly correlated, but agonistic interactions had a significant linear and quadratic effect on affiliative interactions. Relative level of aggressiveness was used instead of a formal measure of dominance rank as aggression level is the main issue for horse owners. Comparing interactions with more and less aggressive horses, there was no overall effect for affiliative interactions. However, overall, horses in the focal group were on average 3.7 times more aggressive towards less aggressive horses, compared to more aggressive horses. Relationships between agonistic and affiliative interactions, density, age and the role of relative aggressiveness are complicated and more research is needed to clarify the most relevant factors under particular sets of circumstances and their contribution to intraspecific aggression in various contexts.

Keywords: Horse; group housing; social behavior; agonistic interactions; affiliative interactions

Introduction
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