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The Horse's Tale: Narratives of Caring for/about Horses

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Abstract

In this paper, we report on a study of people who keep horses for leisure riding; the study was based on a qualitative (discourse) analysis of written comments made by people keeping horses, focusing on how they care for them and how they describe horse behavior. These commentaries followed participation in an online survey investigating management practices. The responses clustered around two significant themes: the first centered around people's methods of caring for their animal and the dependence of such care upon external influences like human social contexts. The second theme centers on the "life stories" people constructed for their horse, usually to explain aspects of the animal's behavior; in particular, many spoke in terms of a rescue narrative and saw their horses' lives as being much better now than in the animal's (imagined) previous life situation. We argue that decisions about equine well-being are made within specific social communities, which create consensus around particular ideas of what is good for horses (or other animals). To ensure the well-being of animals means taking these communities and their knowledges into account.

Keywords

animal care, horse-human relationship, horse well-being, rescue

Introduction

Human use of horses has changed dramatically. Where once horses were the main form of transport and agricultural labor, now large numbers in Europe and North America are kept for "leisure" riding. Concomitantly, their relationship to humans has changed; a great many leisure horse owners¹ today did not grow up in rural communities where horses were commonplace. Indeed, horse-keeping is a new pursuit for growing numbers of people (Leckie, 2001). The role of horses in the West has thus largely changed from that of work animals, to their being equivalent in many ways to other domestic pets, and the social world of horse-keeping has shifted.

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The world of horses and their humans is often a highly fragmented one (for horses in the UK see British Horse Industry Confederation, 2005; Leckie, 2001), in which horses are kept in a variety of different situations, and to widely varying standards of welfare and knowledge. Keeping horses is not like keeping household pets, however. Horses are large herbivores: they need space, and often intensive management—exercise, food, grooming, perhaps the use of rugs, and so on. Providing optimum conditions to ensure that the animals' needs are met depends on many factors, such as the work the horse is required to do and the keeper's budget, personal circumstances, and experience of riding and dealing with horses.

How people look after animals in their care is a crucial facet of human-animal relationships—but one that depends in part on attitudes and social context. Although attitudes toward animals are often the focus in human-animal studies, there has been much less analysis of what people think about providing *care for* animals, and what they consider to be important for animals and their welfare. In this paper, we explore some of the ways that people with “leisure” horses (that is, horses kept primarily for pleasure riding, rather than professional competition) talk about their animals—and particularly about their well-being. How horse owners understand and talk about equine needs matters, not only for the sake of the animals, but also for understanding social changes within equestrian worlds.

Providing good care for horses is difficult when land and human labor time are limited. For many novice horse owners in the UK, it is simply not possible to keep a horse at home; horses are expensive and require specialized buildings and paraphernalia, access to land, and considerable human labor time. As a result, many owners pay to keep their animals on livery yards, where a number of other horses are housed. Conditions on livery yards, however, are variable, and such establishments may range from purpose-built blocks of stables, to farms, to motley collections of run-down buildings. People may pay for full board or part keep, or for facilities on a do-it-yourself basis; they may pay for access to grass or for full-time stabling.

Changes in agricultural practices in the UK have resulted in pressure for farms to diversify, and increasing numbers of farms now offer small-scale horse livery (Crossman & Walsh, 2008). There is not yet, however, a national system of licensing for livery yards (although that is likely to change; the British Horse Society has maintained a list of registered premises for some time).² Consequently, facilities and standards of care on livery yards vary greatly, especially on do-it-yourself yards,³ where there may be no experienced staff present. In such contexts, inexperienced owners may seek advice from others on the yard, or perhaps from Web sites or horse magazines; care for their

horse thus depends upon the individual owner's understanding and interpretation of equine needs, as well as the social context of the yard where the horse is kept.

Although there have been some studies of professional horse people (e.g., in the racing industry: Cassidy, 2004), there have been few of amateur, "average horse owners," who keep their horses in small private yards. Here, we report on a study of how owners of leisure horses describe caring for their horses. It draws on a survey of management practices of horse owners in a UK sample—that is, how owners reported what they did when dealing daily with the horse. The survey included, however, a section in which respondents could write other comments freely, about the topics covered by the survey, or more generally about their horse. These commentaries form the basis of our analysis here. We address two significant themes: first, we explore how owners think about their horses and how to provide care for them within their local context, such as specific yards. Individual yards are small social worlds, in which consensus about horse well-being may or may not be achieved. Second, we consider how these owners talk about their horses' well-being. In part, this talk reflects efforts to understand the animal's behavior; but it is also about wanting to tell a story, to create a narrative about the place of that horse in their lives. It is that "telling the horse's tale" that is a focus of this paper.

Methods

This study drew on a self-administered questionnaire, accessed and completed online. Its aim was to examine self-reported practices of management among a group of leisure horse owners. We chose to post the questionnaire online precisely because horse owners are a particularly widely scattered and disparate group. Respondents were asked to participate in a study of "human-horse interaction," and data were generated from a convenience sample (Czaja & Blair, 2005) of people who either owned or looked after a leisure horse in the UK. Participants were recruited from a variety of sources, including equestrian Web sites, discussion forums, e-mails via riding clubs, mailshots to livery yards, and announcements in local and national equestrian print media. Most participants were recruited via the Internet (61%).

The sample used is thus self-selecting and will inevitably consist of those owners with an interest in horse care. The demographic data in this study were in agreement, however, with other studies using datasets from UK horses (see Hotchkiss, Reid, & Christley, 2007 and Mellor, Love, Gettinby, & Reid,

1999) as well as with data available through the National Equestrian Database (2008), so they would seem to be representative of the wider British equestrian community. The questionnaire was designed to ask questions about how people took care of their horse; it consisted of 32 questions regarding daily management routine (such as access to grazing, type of stabling and bedding, amount of daily handling, incidence of behavioral problems related to stabling—chewing wood, for example), as well as demographic information. The quantitative part of this survey is presented elsewhere (see Hockenhull, 2010). The survey did, however, allow for free commentary at the end, thus forming a separate part of the study, which is analyzed qualitatively here. We present textual analysis of themes arising from detailed examination of these texts, supported by our own experience of the horse industry.⁴

The disadvantage to using such additional comments is that respondents may pick up on questions set for other purposes, but it is not possible to follow up on these responses (as it would be in interviews, for example). The advantages, however, are that these responses were unprompted and open-ended, as well as anonymous—respondents could say whatever they wished. Indeed, the anonymity of Internet surveys arguably facilitates disclosure of information (Taylor, 2000). The free response box thus acted as a “get-out clause,” enabling respondents to qualify previous answers or to talk about something that did not arise in the questionnaire.

The narratives were initially read through several times to assess patterns of response. We sought to address the following questions in this analysis: How do people describe how they care for their horse? How do they make decisions about what is good for horses, and what do they consider important for the animal’s well-being? How do they talk about their relationship with the horse and the animal’s place in their lives?

This preliminary, broad analysis fell into six categories: comments on the questionnaire itself; personal details; practicalities; explanations of the animal’s behavior; horses’ needs, and “telling the horse’s tale.” After this initial categorization, respondents’ answers were analyzed in detail, coded, and cross-checked, using discourse analysis to identify consistently recurring themes (Potter & Wetherall, 1987). We present the two major themes to emerge from this analysis. Respondents were identifiable only as numbers in the survey database, so all quotations given as examples of specific themes are identified by entry number.

Sample Characteristics

The questionnaire was completed by 1,850 people; of the 1630 respondents who answered questions about themselves, 35% identified themselves as lei-

sure riders, 51% identified as “committed amateurs” (this would include those who regularly took part in equestrian competitions), and 14% were employed in the horse industry. Their length of experience with horses ranged from less than 3 months to 60 years, with a mean of 16 years of horse-keeping experience. The median age of respondents was 33 years, and 97% were women, reflecting the considerable preponderance of women among leisure horse owners.⁵ Of their horses, 59% were mares, 40% geldings, and 1% were stallions.

Questionnaire respondents were asked to identify themselves by the kinds of training approach they use; 61% said they used “traditional” methods primarily—that is, methods learned in riding schools or through formal equestrian training programs. Sixteen percent identified themselves as “often” using methods of “natural horsemanship.” This is a term loosely applied to a set of approaches that advocate “gentleness” and what users refer to as “natural” ways of horse training and management. These could include not using winter rugs, metal shoes or bits, and not using coercion in training. Although the term covers a somewhat eclectic mix of methods, natural horsemanship advocates generally see themselves as doing things fundamentally differently from those whom they see as “traditional” (see Latimer & Birke, 2009). There is, in the UK, at least, some overlap in these social groups, and many people report mixing and matching, drawing from different methods at different times (in this survey, 40% said that they occasionally used natural horsemanship methods, for example; also see Birke, 2007).

The free-response box, inviting comments, was filled in by 499 respondents. Of these, 199 used the box for comments not related directly to the horse (for example, comments on the questionnaire as a whole), leaving 380 comments relating to the horse. The most common use of the free box was to provide clarification on the amount of access to grazing the horse had (34% of the commentaries did so). Some comments about the horse were quite brief—a sentence or two—while some respondents went into considerable detail, providing extended narratives about their specific animal.

Themes

Many respondents used the space to talk not so much about management practices as such but about the likes and dislikes of their particular horse. The open box seemed to give respondents free rein to express what they considered important, sometimes generating relatively unstructured stories. In this section, we examine the two most significant themes to emerge from the detailed analysis. Although we discuss these separately, there is some overlap, in that, for example, one narration might bring up several different issues. The first

theme is how respondents presented caring for their horses, especially around how the animals spend their time and whether they get access to grass; this emerges from the focus of the survey but expands upon how and why people make decisions, especially in the context of specific “yard culture.” The second major theme is how they “told their horses’ stories”; here, respondents used the opportunity to move beyond the survey questions and expand on how they relate to their horses and try to understand them.

1. *People and Horses: Conditions on the Yard*

Respondents’ narratives indicated their concern for their horses’ needs. These accounts are, of course, from self-reports; as such, they are not statements of how things are, but about what people choose to tell through the medium of an online questionnaire. They are, moreover, responses to a survey focusing on management, which is likely to elicit such concerns. The written answers, however, expanded on the context for many owners (notably the place where the horse is kept), which provides our first theme. Providing care, and reporting on that care, takes place within human social networks, as, for example, on a livery yard. That context in turn affects not only how people interact with their animals, but also what they consider to be important—and important enough to be the subject of comment here. Human experience of relationships and caring will be subject to peer pressure and consensus, shaping in turn how people construct ideas of animal well-being.

Although some respondents kept their horses at their own home and were able to control how the animal was cared for, that is not always possible. If horses are kept on a yard elsewhere, the overall conditions are likely to be determined by the owner/manager of the premises and influenced by different groups of people using the yard. Individual horse owners, therefore, may or may not have much say in how the yard is managed. Yard conditions were mentioned by many of those who kept horses away from home—typically to report problems or to suggest that their horses preferred smaller places. Several spoke of their horse’s preferences for particular places, and some ($N = 15$) reported that they had moved their horses from one livery yard because it was too big for the horse’s comfort (although one reported that her horse preferred bigger, busier yards).

Respondents sometimes commented on conflict with yard managers—for example, about whether or not individual horses could access fields or use particular kinds of bedding; one wanted to use wood shavings as bedding but was told she could not do so, as the land owner insisted on organic materials (which the shavings were not). But by far the most frequent response had to

do with the availability of grazing. One respondent, herself a stable manager, commented on the dearth of grazing for many horses, saying, “[T]ry working in a livery yard where you’re working with the horse, knowing he should be out in the field, and the owner [of the horse] tells you that the horse is not to go out under any circumstances” [352]. Here, her concern is with providing the horse with access to grass, in the face of owners with different priorities. (Other owners might restrict access, for instance, because they fear their horse being injured in the field.)

Restrictions on grazing were reported by many respondents. One-third of the commentaries expressed the belief that horses should have at least some daily grazing, for the sake of their well-being, but acknowledged that there were sometimes difficulties in ensuring this. At yards with many horses, for example, grazing for each individual might be limited, requiring owners to spend considerable time taking horses out and bringing them back in. But even that may not be enough if fields are water-logged in winter. One owner commented: “I will be changing my yard soon because I am not happy with some elements of the routine/stable design at my current yard. Of paramount importance is daily turnout [access to grazing], sufficient haylage at night to keep the horse eating as long as possible” [292]. Such facilities, she implied, were lacking in her current location.

Persistent problems or lack of facilities could thus be dealt with simply by moving yards—or even by moving house, in one case. The reason given for such drastic action was usually to do with the horse’s immediate needs, but in some cases what was expressed reflected social pressures among people around the yard. For example, one owner bemoaned restrictive policies and yard culture: “I do try to keep my horse out as long as possible,” she explained, “but there seems to be this culture that it ‘suffers’ if left in the field past 6:00 p.m.” [158]. Here, she acknowledges the difficulties of keeping her horse outside in the evenings, because of social approbation.

Another respondent noted how stabling might contribute to horses’ problems, also commenting on disagreements when she chose alternative approaches: “In the five years I was [on the big yard]... I witnessed a whole range of behavioural problems with the horses that were mainly stabled... the owners were turning more towards feed supplements and calmers [to manage the behaviour problems]... I went down the ‘natural horsemanship’ route... and just ended up being labelled a freak!... I’ve now left the yard and rented myself ten acres... [I]t’s an interesting learning curve to watch how their behaviour has changed” [19].

This commentary reflects how social processes of inclusion and exclusion play out in yard culture. The respondent noted how some owners conformed

to particular practices (stabling, and giving the horse supplements to calm down); she herself dealt with being “labelled a freak” by leaving. The social milieu of a yard creates conditions in which horses’ needs may, or may not, be met, as people respond to social expectations. Similarly, another study of advocates of natural horsemanship, described how owners sometimes felt ostracized on the yard because they espoused methods deemed inappropriate by others (Birke, 2007).⁶

The social dynamics of yards are an important part of the context in which owners keeping horses at livery provide care for their animals. Owners must make decisions how best to look after their animal within that social context, which may not always be supportive. One owner with academic training in equine science noted that she keeps her animals on a yard “where all the horses but mine are kept in [stables] at least half of the day... and [other owners] look at me like I’m the stupid one but then are amazed at my horses’ behaviour when [theirs] are ‘highly strung’” [189]. Here, she refers to social pressures on her to conform to the way others keep their animals stabled, while noting that her horses seem to be better behaved.

Conditions on British livery yards are variable. In a survey carried out by World Horse Welfare in 2008-2009 (World Horse Welfare, 2009), 25% of owners mentioned horse welfare problems at their livery yard (lack of food; presence of toxic plants, for example). But difficult social dynamics are also a problem, as posts to horse advice Web sites sometimes indicate, with reports of bullying. Thus, for example, one post read, “I’m being bullied at my livery yard. The staff hate my horse and call him really awful names. I’ve overheard the yard manager brag about how she takes his feed off him if he ‘pulls a face.’ I’ve also seen her hit another horse with a shavings fork—and my horse has developed a fear of brooms.”⁷

Similar views were expressed in a livery yard survey run by a popular equestrian magazine in the UK. While most people were relatively happy with their yard, 34% of those who were not, left because of “yard politics—all the bitching, bullying and bizarre rules” (Spicer, 2010). This sometimes took the form of horses sometimes being left without food or water when the owner was not there. In such cases, care for horses is subordinated to the social dynamics and hostilities between people on the yard, and horses may be denied food or moved about as pawns in a game.

Looking after animals usually entails caring *about* them, in the sense of affectional bonds; it also requires caring *for*—in the sense of ensuring that physical and behavioral needs are met. Most of our respondents used the box to provide extra details of how they sought to achieve this—to provide for

the horse's needs. But while they expressed this as personal choice, it is, however, also a *public* business, especially on livery yards, where what owners do and how they do it is constantly under potential scrutiny. The yard becomes a space in which human relationships with each other, as well as in relation to horses, are constantly negotiated—for good or ill—as are dog-human encounters in public parks (Laurier, Maze, & Lundin, 2006). But even for those who keep horses at home and are able to make their own decisions easily, taking the animals out for a ride or to a competition puts them on public view. Keeping horses is an activity occurring in a wider context, in which people become part of wider horsey communities, which have differing values about horses.

In a study comparing horsey communities based around natural horsemanship and “traditional” methods, for example, Latimer and Birke (2009) explored how different beliefs about horses and people are produced in these two groupings. In some ways, they suggest, equestrian knowledge can be said to be demonstrated through the figure of the horse and how that is read within specific social networks. In traditional British horse communities, for example, “People... read the relations between horse and human, and judge that relation on... the ‘condition’ of the horse: they will judge someone’s knowledge, expertise and understanding of animals as a moral matter by the condition of their animals” (ibid., 13). The elite competition horse is judged by others in public spaces according to how healthy it looks, how well it performs and behaves, and whether it is adequately provided with, say, rugs.

Similarly, in professional racing yards, horses’ physical appearance matters greatly to people around them. Cassidy (2004), in her study of a racing yard in Newmarket, England, notes how exercising racehorses must appear to be spotlessly clean: “Do you want me to be the laughing stock of the village?” asked the racing trainer when Cassidy had not noticed straw in the animal’s tail (ibid., 26). The horse, she suggests, becomes an extension of both the rider and the trainer, and its status reflected in the clothing it wears—rugs, saddlecloths, and so on.

Such emphasis on presentation is much less characteristic of people espousing methods of natural horsemanship; rather, the focus here is on methods of training and keeping animals (without rugs or shoes). Social consensus in these communities seems to center more on people making efforts to learn to “read” horses’ behavior and treating the animals in ways that they understand, and less on the horse’s type or traits (for further discussion, see Latimer & Birke, 2009).

These authors point out that such different horsey communities would agree on some things (that horses enjoy being out in a field, for example),

even though they clearly differ in their priorities, stressing quite different aspects of horse management. This underlines how ideas about well-being and care for horses depend on the consensus of specific communities—not only in terms of sets of ideas about training, but also in terms of what might be called yard culture.

A significant part of human-animal relationships is the way that we build specific communities and ideologies around companion animals, such as those based around particular types of animals (thoroughbred racehorses: Cassidy, 2004; purebred dogs: Greenebaum, 2009; stigmatized dog breeds, such as pit bulls: Twining, Arluke, & Patronek, 2000). Such communities generate particular values and ways of being that must be negotiated, involving emotional work. Thus, Ellis and Irvine (2010), for example, explore how children in a youth livestock program learn particular values and ways of being with animals (accepting that livestock go to slaughter, for instance). To take part in these activities requires that they learn not only to handle the animals but also learn how to handle themselves.

Being in horsey worlds, similarly, requires learning to negotiate not only the larger social worlds of equestrianism, with their different specialities and values, but also the microcosm of the specific yard. Owners must continually make judgments about how best to care for their animal within that specific social milieu, judgments that may or may not be in accord with the individual's beliefs. Yard culture can endorse—or limit—how individuals care for their horse, and how they feel about their relationship with the animal. When owners comment that they believe their horse is happy, perhaps they are also saying something about where they keep their animal and the social context in which their particular horse-human relationship is enacted.

2. *Understanding Horses: Telling the Horse's Story*

The strongest theme of our respondents, however, was that of “telling the horse's story.” In part, this was concerned with owners' efforts to provide for the animal's needs; 29% of respondents made some reference to interpreting horses' requirements or behavior. For some, this entailed ensuring that the horse was kept “happy”—thus, for example, “He lives with his pair bond in the same stable! Hence why he is happy with life!” [33], or because “I listen to my horse's needs, make sure he's happy” [125]. One of the people who moved the horse to a different yard suggested that the horse previously “could see many horses from his internal stable. He was not happy in such an environment, so we now keep him on a private yard... he is much happier and [more] relaxed” [39].

The respondents' providing narratives about their horses, however, entailed their making claims about the animals' past histories. Usually, this was in

relation to behavior that might be considered “bad” behavior—biting or kicking, for example. Approximately a fifth of respondents provided such narratives, in two ways. One was to make attributions, to try to provide proximate causes (such as inherent traits) for “bad” behavior; the other was to construct a narrative of what had happened to the horse in the past, particularly around issues of “rehoming.”

Contributors sometimes referred to their perceptions of the animal’s personality to provide explanations, using phrases that took the form of: “very emotional”/“lacks confidence”/“has separation anxiety” . . . “so does not always do as s/he is asked.” Or, the horse might be described as “chilled”/“is usually happy” . . . “so does not usually give me problems.” Here, the phrasing typically linked a statement about the owner’s perception of the horse’s personality and whether the animal behaved in ways the person thought acceptable.

A small number of respondents (4%) used the free box to give more explicit reasons why their horse did certain things; for some, the reasons had to do with the biological development of the animal: “genetic traits, especially temperament and physiology . . . are the greatest cause of bad behaviour (90%)” [334], or “biting is . . . some sort of learned behaviour” [346]. More common, however, were causal explanations to do with that horse’s experience in the past—or, more specifically, with the owner’s claims about that past. Thus, one described how her horse was often “pulling faces when tacking up and grooming are as a result of rough handling prior to me getting her” [25], while another attributed occasional aggression to her horse being “kicked by a new gelding in field so the . . . aggression . . . [is] linked to this otherwise she is a star” [29].

Others made similar causal attributions, but tried to explain them away. That is, their responses took the form, “he/she does X, but this is only because . . . or only at certain times.” For example:

My horse seems to be territorial about people being in his space, but it is mostly threat. He has bitten me when girthing up, it seems a reaction as if he is expecting it to hurt, but it is not really aggressive behaviour. [308]

[M]y horse will only do [box walking or weaving—moving from side to side] at feed time or going out time, never otherwise. [355]

Another described her mare as fidgeting and having “a problem with standing still . . . but this is not grumpy behaviour” [386].

Here, then, respondents make reference to the horse’s “bad behaviour” but seek to minimize the problem, putting their horse in a different light or recounting how the animal had improved. What these accounts indicate is owners’ willingness to associate good behavior with present conditions, while

bad behavior is attributed to specific conditions of husbandry or past history. This pattern of attribution contrasts with that shown by dog owners, who are more likely to attribute good behavior to internal disposition (becoming a “good dog”) and bad behavior to external situations (Rajecki, Rasmussen, Clinton, Modlin, & Holder, 1999).

(Re)telling the horse’s past, however, was particularly prominent in accounts involving rescue. Rescue of animals as strays, or from possible abandonment or neglect, is a familiar (and powerful) story; canine rescue organizations seem, for example, to have multiplied considerably in recent years (Markovits & Queen, 2009), as societal concern for animals has grown. In this study, horses were described as having been rescued from previous lives in such activities as riding schools or the racing industry, both perceived as being tedious and treating horses as machines.

These accounts typically argued that, once horses have escaped these previous conditions, they behave better. For example:

E. was at a riding school for six years before I bought her because she was biting the customers—and the yard owner was going to sell her to a dealer or put her down. Even before she came to the riding school she was aggressive. She has since calmed down loads. [134]

R. is a rescue horse and arrived with many stereotypical behaviours—it’s now down to weaving for attention/feed occasionally. [101]

My horse is an ex-racer and I’m sure his bad stable habits go back to his racing career. [144]

This horse came from a raceyard out of training as a two-year-old. She has been very difficult to handle due to aggression. She is now confident with me and therefore not so nasty but still no one else can handle her without serious risk of being bitten. [419]

Thus, some respondents used the free box to try to explain particular aspects of their horse’s behavior (especially behavior that might be defined as problematic) or to qualify it (“it only happens when...”). But for others, the explanatory framework is a detailed narrative about the animal’s rescue and recovery from alleged suffering in the past.

In this study, causes for “bad behavior” were sought in histories within establishments that typically house larger numbers of horses—riding schools or racing yards. Perhaps the sheer size of some of these places does make it difficult to attend fully to individual animals’ needs (though no doubt managers of many large yards would disagree); what we want to emphasize here, however, is the way that respondents present a story of an animal moving from being a cog in a machine to a loved and cared-for individual whose idiosyncrasies will be tolerated.⁸

That transition from an institution to being a companion animal mirrors rehoming for smaller animals like dogs and cats. In her study of workers at animal shelters in the United States, Harbolt (2003) discusses how they construct personalities and histories for animals entering shelters. In part, this can facilitate the rehoming process, not least because it serves to create a narrative of an individual history. Harbolt points out, however, that animals can sometimes lose their identities in a specific narrative. An example she explores is that of animals who become mascots—for instance, for specific animal organizations. “Workers retell stories of abuse, recovery, and triumph, and in the process some of the special characteristics of the animal are lost,” she suggests (ibid., 112). In the stories of rescue recounted in this study, by contrast, recovery from a previously anonymous life is a significant theme.

Retelling the animal’s story in such ways is a kind of redemption narrative. McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001) describe people’s use of redemption stories in telling their own life histories, arguing that redemption is an important narrative strategy in the creation of personal identity and well-being. They also point out that life stories are authored not only by individuals, but also by the culture in which those individuals live. For our respondents, redemption helps to construct both human and animal identities in these narratives. That is, the horse’s personality is understood as emerging from a particular history and subsequent salvation. In human interactions with companions, animals become (among other things) resources for self-construction; indeed, those interactions with animal selves help to make us who we are (Irvine, 2004). Redemption also recreates the animal’s past through a story of being cared for in the present, combined with a narrative of rescue.

What runs through the stories horse owners tell is also importantly a *moral* discourse. If the animal exhibits behavioral problems, then this could reflect badly on the owners, and on their moral worth; similarly, debates about “natural horsemanship” versus traditional training hinge on moral judgments, on evaluations of “what is right for the horse” (see Latimer & Birke, 2009). Human practices around animals inevitably carry moral implications. For people to carry out practices that cause suffering to the animal, particularly, they must find moral justification to exonerate those practices, even in the face of moral disapproval from others (such as carrying out declawing in veterinary clinics: Atwood-Harvey, 2005; shooting ducks: McLeod, 2007; or raising animals for slaughter: Ellis & Irvine, 2010). Similarly, rehoming an animal is widely seen to be a moral good, with the consequence that people who return animals to shelters because the relationship did not work out feel a sense of personal failure (Shore, 2005).⁹ But if animals are successfully

rehomed, then the owner/guardian can tell stories of their own moral worth, as a “good” caretaker of animals.

Discussion

Interpreting well-being and “keeping the horse happy” are part of establishing *relationships*. Learning to read and predict the behavior of the other in a human-companion animal relationship is crucial to such relations, and to the well-being of both participants. Over time, both human and nonhuman can learn to understand each other and to produce meaning within the relationship, as Irvine (2004) has described in human-dog encounters. Horse owners, too, put emphasis on their relationship with the animal, and the meaning that interaction brings to their lives (Birke, 2008). One respondent explained it thus: “A partnership is required when owning a horse. All habits—good and bad—are as if owning a dog. Look after them—they look after you!” [304].

If a relationship develops well, the meanings and predictability of both partners are likely to increase; they will indeed look after each other. But if it does not thrive, if things go wrong, then the animal might become resistant, while the human might seek reasons or go on to relinquish the animal—with possible consequences for the well-being of both. But if owners feel that they are doing their best despite behaviors that they find problematic, then they may seek reasons in the animal’s past. This is a kind of blame-management strategy, analogous to those employed by workers at pet animal shelters (Frommer & Arluke, 1999) regarding failed adoptions.

Respondents’ comments indicate a concern to provide good care for their animals, to think about the horse’s needs. Doing so in turn contributes to the rhetoric of rescue and redemption, and to the underlying self-judgment of moral worth. In creating these narratives, owners acknowledge the importance of understanding how horses behave and recognize that horses may suffer in certain situations, but they imply that the animals can be rescued and have a better life.

What these responses underline, however, is the significance of human social networks, within which consensus are—or are not—created about how best to care for animals. Social networks matter in terms of human (and horse) experiences of yard culture; they matter, too, in terms of how people try to make sense of their horse’s history and behavior. But horses are not only recipients of care; they are also agents in these networks, even if sometimes unwitting ones. Human social processes play out on yards through the body of the horse, whose welfare may be compromised through difficult

dynamics. Indeed, we might ask, speculatively, whether the behavioral improvements many owners described when they moved yards were the result of changed physical conditions (as several suggested) or whether the horses were reacting partly to changes in the human social world surrounding them. A happy human-horse relationship takes more than just two to build.

How owners recount experiences with their horses, on yards or elsewhere, is part of telling a story about relationships with horses. But, as we noted at the beginning, relationships with horses in developed countries like the UK have changed; horses have shifted from being used as work animals to primarily being used for leisure, and people increasingly see them in companionate, rather than utilitarian, ways. In part, this reflects trends in land use in Europe, but it also reflects changing attitudes toward animals in general. Just as dogs are increasingly seen as members of the family, with their own agency and point of view (Markovits & Queen, 2009; Irvine, 2004), so, too, are horses. Indeed, it is just this concern to understand the animal's point of view that motivates many enthusiasts for natural horsemanship methods, which, they believe, offer better means of "learning to speak horse" (Birke, 2007).

Caring for/about animals occurs in a social context, not only of/between people, but also in relation to those animals. While attitudes toward nonhuman animals have been a focus of much work in human-animal studies, there is arguably less attention paid to attitudes concerning how best to *care* for animals, and how care emerges from particular sociocultural processes.¹⁰ It is crucial to pay attention to how (human) social processes work to create support or resistance to change in relation to caring for/about animals. How people learn to "tell the horse's tale," and how they come to understand what is good for animals, matters.

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Notes

1. While many prefer the term *guardian* to describe human relationships with companion animals, we retain the more conventional term "owner" here, simply because that reflects the legal status of person and animal. Horses, moreover, often have considerable financial value (such that they may be relinquished for economic reasons), so the latter term seems more accurate.

2. Though in one magazine survey, only 14.7% of people using livery yards were using BHS-approved ones. See Spicer, 2010.
3. More than half the UK's estimated 1.2 million horses are not kept on the owner's land. See World Horse Welfare, 2009.
4. That is, we have all grown up around horses, learned to ride in riding schools, and have experienced keeping our own leisure horses over many years, in various settings. One of us has many years experience of competing with horses (eventing, driving, and show jumping) at national and international levels.
5. Although men still outnumber women in professional areas of equestrianism (as jockeys, for example), women massively outnumber men in amateur professional and leisure riding. How gender impacts/is constructed by the horse-human relationship is explored in Birke and Brandt (2009).
6. Birke notes how some interviewees in her study spoke of mistrust and suspicion between those who followed traditional practices (taught in Pony Club, for instance) and those who preferred newer methods of "natural horsemanship"; this mutual mistrust in turn generates an oppositional discourse, even though many people also reported borrowing from both traditions (Birke, 2007; 2008).
7. Comment posted on <http://www.yourhorse.co.uk/>: "Horse Answers," August 29, 2008. Many similar comments are made on other Web sites; see, for example, www.newrider.com.
8. There is, in the UK, a growing interest in rehabilitating ex-racehorses. See, for example, the Retraining of Racehorses Web site at <http://www.ror.org.uk>.
9. Similarly, there is considerable shame among dog owners if their animal is aggressive toward other dogs (N. Charles, personal communication).
10. See also Donovan (2007) for discussion of care in relation to feminist ethics.

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