



Whinny friendships: Relationships to equids in Swiss equestrian leisure culture

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Summary

This study focuses on theorising owners' relationships to their horses in equestrian leisure culture in Switzerland and examines how horses are entangled symbolically in constructed perceptions. While environmental and economic implications of the evolving status of equids have been researched, the everyday practices by which relationships with equids are formed through equestrian leisure have received little scientific attention. This explorative study draws on 11 interviews with leisure horse owners in 2022 and on responses to a questionnaire distributed to 1,800 Swiss equid owners. The results highlight two ways in which humans build friendships with horses. By describing horses as herd animals, the participants discussed that the otherness of equids shapes their friendships with them. Some conceptualised friendship as a dominant–dominated relationship. Others recognised the individual agentivity of horses as necessary to create a friendship. The coexistence of these two concepts in Swiss equestrian leisure culture creates tensions and unstable contexts that may allow changes toward mutually empowering relations between humans and horses.

Key words: horse relation; care work; Switzerland; interspecies relation; friendship

Zusammenfassung

Freundschaften mit Equiden im Umfeld des Freizeitreitens in der Schweiz

Im Zentrum dieser Studie steht die Beziehung zwischen Pferdebesitzerinnen und -besitzern und ihren Pferden im Umfeld des Freizeitreitens in der Schweiz. Es wird untersucht, welche symbolhafte Rolle Pferde in der Wahrnehmung der Besitzer spielen. Während die Entwicklung der ökologischen und ökonomischen Aspekte von Equiden bereits verschiedentlich erforscht wurden, gibt es noch kaum wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Umgang im Alltag, der die Beziehungen zu Freizeitpferden prägt. Diese explorative Studie aus dem Jahr 2022 stützt sich auf 11 Interviews mit Personen, die Freizeitpferde besitzen, und auf die Antworten zu einem Fragebogen, der an 1800 Schweizer Equidenbesitzerinnen und -besitzer verschickt wurde. Die Ergebnisse zeigen zwei Wege auf, wie Menschen Freundschaften mit Pferden aufbauen. Ein Teil der Antwortenden betonte die Bedürfnisse von Pferden als Herdentiere und wie dieses Merkmal der Andersartigkeit ihre Freundschaften mit Pferden prägt. Einige thematisierten den Aspekt der dominanten Rolle des Halters und des dominierten Pferdes in diesen Beziehungen. Andere waren der Ansicht, dass der freie Wille der Pferde eine Freundschaft erst ermöglicht. Die Koexistenz dieser beiden Konzepte in der Kultur des Freizeitreitens in der Schweiz schafft Spannungen und instabile Kontexte, die einen Wandel hin zu sich gegenseitig stärkenden Beziehungen zwischen Mensch und Pferd ermöglichen können.

Résumé

Amitiés avec les équidés dans la culture suisse des loisirs équestres

Cette étude porte sur les relations des propriétaires de chevaux avec leurs animaux dans la culture des loisirs équestres en Suisse. Elle examine quel rôle symbolique jouent les chevaux dans la perception de leurs propriétaires. Alors que les implications environnementales et économiques de l'évolution du statut des équidés ont fait l'objet de nombreuses recherches, il n'y a encore que très peu d'études scientifiques sur les pratiques quotidiennes qui sont à la base des relations avec les équidés dans le cadre des loisirs équestres. Cette étude exploratoire s'appuie sur onze interviews avec des propriétaires de chevaux de loisirs réalisés en 2022 et sur les réponses à un questionnaire distribué à 1800 propriétaires d'équidés suisses. Les résultats mettent en évidence deux façons pour les humains de créer des amitiés avec les chevaux. Les participants décrivent les chevaux comme des animaux de troupeau et considèrent que leur amitié avec eux vient de leur altérité. Certains participants ont conceptualisé l'amitié qu'ils entretiennent avec l'animal comme une relation dominant-dominé. D'autres ont reconnu que le libre arbitre du cheval était nécessaire à la naissance d'une amitié. La coexistence de ces deux concepts dans la culture suisse des loisirs équestres crée des tensions et des contextes instables qui peuvent permettre d'aller vers des relations mutuellement enrichissantes entre les humains et les chevaux.

1 Introduction

Today, while the general equid population approaches 110,000 in Switzerland, only 17% are registered as sports animals in the register of the Swiss Equestrian Federation. Owning an equid – donkeys, ponies, or horses – and building a relationship with it does not necessarily imply performances or riding on its back. Furthermore, the evolution of riding activities from the Middle Ages to the present day shows a decrease in violence toward equids, as well as the relaxing of equestrian activities moving from war to sport to leisure time (Régnier & Deneux-Le Barh, 2020). The decrease in violence has been associated with an increasing focus on equine well-being. This focus has recently culminated in the concern of antispecists groups who criticise the capitalistic and competitive aspects of the human–horse relationship. This development constitutes a new moralisation of society by rethinking how we live with horses, requiring professionals to modify their practices and demonstrating a new dimension of the civilising process (Régnier & Deneux-Le Barh, 2020).

Every person who owns an equid assumes individual responsibility for its care. The owner of the animal will take care of the species-specific needs such as feeding, health, movement, social contact, enriched environment, sense of security, and rest (Poncet et al., 2022). Leisure horses and their human companions can sometimes share long hours in the woods, having integrated each other into their daily routines. Yet, there are moments when humans wonder why they decided to engage in such a special relationship with a horse to the point of becoming responsible for its well-being and its living space. Who is this beast integrated into everyday life? Moreover, ethical questions arise in some people's head. May we use horses for our own pleasure? If so, how may we do it? Through the passing of time, passion, long rides, care, and training (for both horse and human), tumultuous interspecies friendships can develop and bloom.

In this explorative study, we assessed the everyday practices and routines focused on care and activity with the horse that foster human–horse friendships. Based on the analysed testimonials, these friendships turn out to be fragile: they are created, negotiated, and sometimes broken based on the interactions between the human and the horse. Before presenting empirical material, we will clarify some key conceptual frameworks to allow a better understanding of interspecies interactions in human–equid relationships.

2 The friend and life companion

The growing body of scientific literature on equestrian leisure has explored questions of social class (Coulter, 2014; Dashper & Fletcher, 2013; Lenartowicz & Jankowski, 2014) and gender (Dashper, 2016) and offered a critique of the anthropocentric paradigm that sees horses as passive objects of human leisure (Dashper, 2017). In contrast to this paradigm, authors have argued that horses possess agencies and can cocreate communication systems with humans that allow intersubjective experiences to emerge (Brandt-Off, 2004; Dashper, 2017). Approaches to understanding animal bonding and leisure time that focus solely on human perspectives have been challenged by research on dogs and cats.

This research has shown that people often view their pets as full, active, and caring individuals (Fox, 2006) and not as subordinate or inferior animals compared with another human. Fox (2006) showed that people juggle notions of difference and similarity between themselves and the animal but also recognise a pet's individual subjectivity and its specific 'personality'. Haraway (2003) explored how humans and dogs are increasingly integrated and involved in each other's being, through love, work, reproduction, and other forms of close relationship. These studies invite us to pay attention to everyday embodied human–animal encounters. This article presents empirical findings about horse owners' lived experiences of meaningful relationships in the context of equestrian leisure.

3 Bonding and caring from an animal rights perspective

The shift from considering horses as an automaton or biological system with typical behaviour to seeing them as a subject with the right to participate in relationships or society has been fostered by the domain of human–animal studies (Bornemark et al., 2019). These studies draw on both post-humanist and animal rights literature: they challenge anthropocentrism and pay attention to interspecies relations. In considering human–horse relationships in equestrian leisure in this article, we draw mostly on post-humanist frameworks linked with the animal rights perspective. This new way of framing human–horse relationships calls into question a dualism – and indeed the hierarchy – that is often constructed between humans, who are regarded as subjects, and animals, who are understood as objects (Gillespie & Collard, 2015; Mukherjee, 2020). Building on these perspectives, we can interpret bonding in human–horse relationships in a way that recognises the intersections of animals and care (Coulter, 2019).

In human psychology, the bonding process implies the establishment of a close, interactive relationship between the individuals involved (Bowlby, 1969). Bonding is closely associated with the concepts of attachment and affiliation, which determine the interaction between two beings. According to psychology, bonding is the natural consequence of attachment, and it is strongly influenced by it. Bowlby (1969) formulated the ‘theory of attachment’, in which he focused on the infant–caregiver relationship and its association with the healthy growth process. In all mammal species, the developmental phase is based on the reliability of the caregivers, whose nurturing behaviour contributes to developing capacities in facing adversities in life (Yorke et al., 2008). Owners’ relationships with their pets can be described with the same mechanisms as the parent–child relationship (Gábor et al., 2021): the caregiver’s role fulfils the intrinsic desire to protect, and, on the other hand, pets depend on caregivers for care and protection. These interactions represent a strong component of the human–animal relationship, but the classification of different ways in which humans and animals interact is still debated. Russow (2002) identified reciprocity and persistence of the encounters as specific criteria that are necessary to have a fully developed human–animal bond. We also know that human psychological attributes such as personality traits, empathy towards animals and people, and human perception of pain in animals can influence the interaction and help in developing a relationship (Chariatte et al., 2022). Regarding horses, three factors have been identified as having an impact on these animals’ ability and willingness to interact with humans: 1) the nature, quality, and frequency of contact with people, 2) the timing and duration of contact, and 3) the social environment in which contact occurs (Hausberger et al., 2008). The interspecies bonding process presents different characteristics if compared with the intraspecies one; however, they both appear to be based on the same essential mechanisms: reciprocity and emotional involvement.

Horses living as a companion species with humans are sentient beings with feelings, perspectives, and experiences of their own (Mukherjee, 2020). Furthermore, many companion animals in the leisure field are not only beneficiaries of human care work, but they also perform ‘voluntary work’ (Coulter, 2016a) for humans in the form of informal care such as emotional support, interactions, and touch (Mukherjee, 2020). As horses are increasingly being used by humans for therapeutic purposes (e.g. equine-assisted therapies), the work that animals do in these contexts includes care work. According to Coulter (2016a, p. 204-205), this kind of care work that animals do for humans ‘is psychologically and emotionally challenging for animals, and they are required to suppress their personal feelings, reactions, and instincts in order to behave in the proper way regardless of what is going on around them’. Considering the care work that animals do for themselves, as well as for humans, offers a springboard into understanding that nonhuman animals are subjects in their own rights who contribute to human society. Coulter’s (2019) vocabulary adopted in this study is useful in elucidating the processes of caring that affect human–equid leisure relationships. Based on some elements presented above, we argue that leisure horse owners and their horses form social groups in which they perform care work for one another. This care component is hardly valued in Swiss society. Therefore, spaces shared by horses and humans create opportunities for us to assess lived experiences and reshape our current understanding of human–horse relationality. At the same time, these relationships implicate power relationships and cultural legacies which need to be considered in the results presented. Coulter (2019) wrote that our relationship to horses nowadays is not one of absolute equals. Paying attention to these structural dynamics, we next present and discuss the methods we used to create the empirical material for this study.

4 Methods and Data

The study is based on the narratives of 11 horse owners who voluntarily participated in the study. Their demographic characteristics are listed in Table 1. The data were collected in 2022 while all participants took part in a single biographical interview. Participants had been recruited via an advertisement in the social networks of Agroscope's Swiss National Stud Farm. Only women responded to the advertisements, so mostly women were interviewed as well as one man selected by us. The participants lived mostly in rural or semirural areas, where the majority of Swiss horse owners live. These people were selected to provide a perspective on how equids affect their lives, their surroundings, their economic expenses, and their leisure practices. The participants ranged from 21 to 60 years in age, and they were white. The social class was heterogeneous but with a high percentage of middle to lower social class, which was surprising to us because horses are bought as private property. However, young horses for leisure cost on average less than 5,000 Swiss francs¹, and amateur horse owners usually choose to not keep their horse with a specific trainer who will also cost money (as mentioned in the results section).

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences of first encountering horses, then wanting to spend time with horses, and finally purchasing a horse and developing a friendly relationship with it for leisure. People involved in practices of equestrian competitions or in connection with the equestrian industries were not selected because this study focused on leisure. Interviews are common techniques in this type of study as well as in studies of the relationship between humans and their pets (Fox, 2006) and are useful for us to explore everyday practices. With three participants, we also conducted field observations where the horse lives and took notes in the form of memos of these observations. This method is based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). We first performed a global analysis of the interviews. Then we did a theoretical coding on selected parts of individual interviews. The interview parts went through an axial coding according to Flick (2009) and were transferred into a table for an overview. This table allowed us to identify the main themes that particularly linked the owners to elements of their relationships to horses in leisure time.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the 11 interviewees

Participant	Gender	Residential area	Income
M	Woman	Countryside	Middle class
C	Woman	Countryside	Unemployed
L	Woman	Countryside	Lower middle class
L2	Woman	Countryside	Upper middle class
E	Woman	Countryside	Lower middle class
M2	Woman	Countryside	Unemployed
S	Woman	City	Unemployed
L3	Woman	Countryside	Middle class
S2	Woman	Countryside	Lower middle class
P	Woman	City	Student
D	Man	Countryside	Lower middle class

Because this study was based on a mixed method approach, we also used a quantitative questionnaire and descriptive statistics. We recruited 1,800 leisure equid owners thanks to the Agate database, which provided 5,000 addresses of owners in all Switzerland. The demographic characteristics of the survey respondents are summarised in Table 2. The questionnaire had been sent by e-mail and covered various dimensions of care practices and demographics.

¹ See Schneider, E., Novet, M., Ackermann C. (2023) How much does a horse cost in Switzerland? In Agroscope Transfer, available at www.harasnational.ch

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of leisure equid owners in Switzerland, based on 1,800 survey respondents

Demographic	Respondents
Age	Between 30 and more than 60 years old
Average income per household	Less than 7,000 Swiss francs per month
% of women	70%
% with university diploma	13%
% living in agglomerations with fewer than 10,000 residents	81%
% with equestrian diploma	68%
Number of owned equids	From 1 to 5
Equid group	86% Horse or pony 13% Donkey, Bardot, or mule

5 Results and Discussion

Table 3 shows details of the main activities and care practices that the surveyed owners of leisure equids do while developing relationships with horses. Regarding the description of the numerous equestrian activities – ranging from walking to traditional disciplines such as dressage or jumping to breeding –, we were able to quantify activities done for leisure. At least 30% of the survey respondents do walks and hikes as a principal activity with the equid. The rest pursues other activities, and 7% own horses that are only cared for (brushing, grazing, and veterinary care).

The opinions on the use of horseshoes were contrasting, and the survey results indicate that horseshoes are considered acceptable as long as they are used for therapeutic purposes. The responses suggest that almost half of the sampled population (45%) does not use horseshoes on the equid unless there is a specific need. Furthermore, 10% clearly questioned the use of horseshoes on leisure equids in all cases. In contrast to the use of horseshoes, the use of a bit was widely accepted. However, for 20% of the surveyed equid owners, the thought of using a bit was shocking.

Regarding the impact of equestrian leisure activities on free time, 58% declared spending more than two hours with their horse during their visits for care, riding, cuddling, playing, or other activities. Furthermore, 87% stated that they visit their horse every day, which indicates a very large investment in time. Analysing the acquisition of equestrian knowledge that people develop along their journey, we noticed that riding schools are of relatively minor importance. As far as the housing of equids is concerned, the majority of the surveyed equid owners prefer free stabling. However, 16% choose to keep the equid in a box with individual outdoor access.

Regarding the social aspects of riding for leisure, it is striking to note that 58% prefer to practice or see their animal alone, allowing them to focus on the relationship with the horse. Furthermore, 54% have entrusted their family members or friends with the care of their equid. Finally, the survey results suggest that few people in the leisure field call upon professionals to train their horse.

Table 3: Characteristics of 1,800 Swiss leisure equid owners' practices, and percentage of respondents using these practices

Category	Response	Percentage
Activities practised mostly with the equid	Walks and hikes	30.36 %
	Traditional disciplines (jumping, dressage, driving out of competition)	14.51 %
	Other disciplines (Horseathlon, Trek, Gymkhana, Western out of competition)	3.96 %
	Amateur competition (jumping, dressage, driving)	6.98 %
	Amateur competition in other disciplines (Horseathlon, Trek, Gymkhana, Western)	2.62 %
	Professional competition	0.95 %
	Groundwork	4.63 %
	Horse show	0.33 %
	Only care	6.98 %
	Equestrian driving	3.91 %
	Breeding	5.25 %
	Horse Assisted Therapy	0.22 %
	Other activities	18.69 %
	No response	0.61 %
Using horseshoes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes 	44.70 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only for therapeutic use 	45.15 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No, against horseshoes 	10.15 %
Using bits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not shocked about the use of bits 	80 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shocked about the use of bits 	20 %
Time with the equid	Number of hours per visit	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than two hours 	58.54 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than two hours 	41.46 %
	Frequency of visits	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every day 	87.15 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four to five times per week 	7.14 %
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three times per week 	3.29 %	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the weekend 	2.12 %	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never 	0.30 %	
Acquisition of equestrian knowledge	Recognised by an equestrian institution (<i>multiple choice question</i>):	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	38.23 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Base attestation 	22.77 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brevet, licence 	36.05 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation Equigarde 	5.58 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superior study in the equestrian field 	5.52 %
	Place of acquisition of the majority of individual knowledge of equids:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected one-time training 	33 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With friends or family members 	25 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a riding school 	18 %
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alone on the internet 	13 %	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In high school 	8 %	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an equestrian association 	3 %	
Equid housing	In what type of housing is the equid held most of the year?	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free stall in groups 	40.57 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Box with outdoor access in groups 	21.65 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pasture in groups 	19.48 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Box with individual outdoor access 	16.01 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pasture alone 	2.29 %
Social practices linked with equid	Participating in equestrian activities (<i>multiple choice question</i>):	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alone with the equid 	58.71 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With other people 	31.08 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an association 	11.10 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a riding school 	5.02 %
	Is someone else caring for the equid? (<i>multiple choice question</i>)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family member or friend 	54.85 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nobody 	30.75 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A part livery 	13.84 %
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionals 	6.36 %
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Riding school 	2.9 %	

	Living with equids:	
	• Family history from generation to generation	37.95 %
	• Discovered equid in childhood	34.82 %
	• Discovered equid in adulthood	25.28 %
	• Other	1.95 %

Note: In this sample of data, not everyone responded to all questions at the same rate.

6 Ways to embrace the relationship

In the interview, the majority of participants described their horse as a 'friend' and used a lot of emotional and love words to express how they love this animal. The term 'best friend' or 'confident' was used to describe the close nature of the bond that participants experience with their horse. Whereas dogs and cats are valued because they give unconditional love, horses are more a recipient of unconditional love (Holbrook et al., 2001). The interviewed leisure horse owners were mainly circumspect about describing reciprocal love from their horse. Some horses' reaction to owners' arrivals at the stable were described as rather negative or indifferent. The participants often mentioned their frustration with the way in which the living space for horses is set up – especially when these spaces are managed by farmers, who do not always have specific or detailed knowledge of horses. In Switzerland, access to a stable that meets people's expectations in terms of care, structure, and access to large grassy areas seems to be an important issue that can affect human–horse relationships. These limitations emphasise the central role of the horse's housing as a place where the human–horse friendship will have varying degrees of freedom to develop and to define routine practices.

Unlike animals such as dogs or cats, the horse was not considered a child in the interviews. The parent–child type of relationship does not seem to be present. Unlike dogs who spend a lot of their time with humans or in a human household, horses spend their time with other horses especially in leisure settings. One participant said: *'I think I can say that horses are part of my family, but they are not a child or an escape. They are sweet, and a horse's nose is magic, we agree, but within certain limits. It's still a 600 kg beast that can kill us.'* An important part of a horse's training is a carefully organised process of habituation to the human environment. The difference between a pet dog and a leisure horse is not simply due to the physical separation by keeping the horse out of the house and in a stable. Taken together, these underlying factors shape the human–horse relationship in ways that are unique to these two species and notably different from human relationships with household-animal companions. Consciousness of imminent danger when around horses, combined with the recognition that the horse thinks, perceives, and socialises differently, means that owners of horses are motivated by needs very different from the drivers for keeping a household-animal companion (Keaveney, 2008).

The following discussion focuses on exploring such differences in detail and is divided into four main sections. In the first, we focus on the two ways of creating a friendly relationship with the horse in leisure time we found in our sample. We especially reflect on how the horse is perceived either as an animal to be dominated or as an individual in its own right, and sometimes both at the same time in a paradoxical impulse. In the second section, we will revisit the failures of the friendly relationship with the horse and the different ways to maintain a bond despite the difficulties. In the third section, we address the flow that humans describe about their experience with horses. The fourth section will discuss social factors that can influence the development of a relationship with a leisure horse.

7 Creating a friendly relationship

7.1 Hierarchy, nature, and dominance relationship

Three participants described their friendly relationship with the horse as nature-like. Their descriptions reflect the participants' ideas of the hierarchical 'nature' of the horse and the importance of human leadership over the horse. This view often came from people's own horse training experiences. They said that they were very 'observant' of the horse in natural surroundings. This reflects a biological view of the horse and its behaviour. When these participants described their interactions with their horse, they described an animal that is sometimes violent with its peers, they talked about its strength and reinforced the idea that the horse has functions different from ours, humans. They conceptualised their relationship with the horse as if they had to make the effort to be part of a herd of horses by adopting dominant behaviours. They emphasised hierarchy and the need to impose their will on the horse if the relationship is to be successful. This type of relationship through dominance can be seen in certain activities when people explain that they put rules to the horse's movements. The horse must not approach a certain distance, must not move during care, and must 'obey'. The participants who advocated hierarchy and dominance also insisted on the need to behave 'like a horse', which sometimes included violent punishments. M explained that she has observed her horses in herds and has witnessed acts of violence between them such as kicking. She would then use this observation to legitimise her own violent actions toward a horse that did not comply with one of her requests.

Although this emphasis on dominance is in apparent contradiction to traditional notions of friendship, participants with this relationship pattern explained that dominance is part of the concept of friendship with horses because, as animals living in a hierarchical herd, they need to be clear about who the leader is in any relationship. Despite the apparent contradiction to a friendly relationship, taking on the role of the 'dominant' seems to affirm the participants' desire to go beyond their human affiliation. They sometimes consider themselves as trying to 'become a horse'. The participants described their friendship with the horse as a friendship within a herd and believed that they were particularly close to their horse because of their understanding of these dominance mechanisms. Normally functioning herds of equids would reflect a strong hierarchy.

However, we know that the dynamics of aggression between equids are in fact very rare in nature. Horses are a species rather recognised as very social and in very strong interspecies bonds of attachment.² Yet the ideas people form about the horse being naturally 'dominant' after having seen a few impressive kicks will determine how they interact with horses, how they set strict rules. In this type of relationship, participants emphasised the importance of rules and behavioural guidelines to ensure and maintain leadership and dominance within the human–horse relationship. Strict rules help the duo and stabilise the friendship, according to the participants. L3 has several hobby horses. She thinks that if the relationship was dominated by the horse, everything would be chaotic and even dangerous. She also assumes that some people are too much of a 'goody-goody' with the horse, are too nice, thus causing behavioural problems within the friendly relationship. These rules reflect the subordinate place of equids in leisure practice. However, several strategies can be used to develop leadership over horses, ranging from pure and hard submission to 'softer' methods. Which methods they use depends on the equestrian culture in which the participants evolve during their journey with horses. The participants see horse control methods as part of an effort to engage with the horse on its own terms. They emphasised the importance of acting with horses in the same way that horses act with each other. Thus, they believe they must make the effort to think like the horse. In doing so, they recognise a relationship but also want to engage in a nonhuman relationship of friendship. This desire allows them to explore different bonds of friendship.

The descriptions of horses as hierarchical herd animals were often based on an essentialist view of horse behaviour. The horse was presented as an animal that can be violent, aggressive, and not 'fragile'. At the same time, the individual choice and agentivity of the horse were rather minimised in the discussions. One question that arises is whether the relational type is stable over time. There is a very dynamic dimension to relationships, and this is why the friendly relationship based on the domination of the horse often has flaws and slippages that allow the horse and the human to assert their individual character in the relationship.

² See the work of Spanish ethologist Lucy Rees, who studied wild horses in Spain: <https://www.epona.tv/bonding-behaviour-is-overlooked>

7.2 The horse as an agent in itself

Other participants have destabilised the essential discussion of dominance relationships, in favour of more individual encounters. Riding, training, and educating the horse continued to matter, and hierarchy and dominance persisted, but these relationships developed from individual daily encounters. Encounters between humans and horses often went beyond the rules of behaviour imposed by the human. This was evident when the participants discussed their daily routines. S showed us during an observation how her horse interrupts an exercise and starts calling to a herd of horses. She did not initiate this behaviour in her horse, but it still occurs, and she has learnt to cope with it and has tried to engage newly with her horse calling friends. Here, she does not follow the rule that she learnt in riding lessons. She prefers to let the horse express and does not ask him to be silent. The two-way process in this owner–horse relationship is a reciprocal process. Brandt-Off (2004, p. 314) argued that *'deprivileging the human emphasis on spoken language opens the door for investigation of the ways in which animals and humans alike use a variety of modes of communication to convey subjectivity'*.

In a different context, a participant explained that she bought a second horse, her first horse's stepbrother. These horses are thoroughbreds that used to compete in races. When she bought them, she took them out of racing. Today they live on a small pasture. Often, they race in pairs, which can damage the land. Rather than separating them, L adapted to her two companions by changing all the fences on her farm to manage the grassy areas. The two thoroughbreds left their 'imprint' on routines of care to an organisation that had existed before their presence. As the horses became part of the daily life in that organisation, they developed their own routine in the environment, in activities and in spaces, and they have increasingly been recognised as individual beings.

In the development of more interactive and dynamic relationships, the type of housing has become a significant factor. Whereas dominant-type relationships are established by exerting control – even in a very gentle and empathetic way –, individual-type relationships allow the horse to expand and free its movement in the stable. When riding, the horse can also decide when it wants to take breaks to graze in negotiation with the owner. Spending a lot of time with the horse or living close by allows the development of these relationships. These relationships involve a commitment between two active partners, human and horse, and at the same time shape the way equestrian leisure is practised in everyday life. Here equids are not just large beasts with hair to braid and having to adapt to the rider's routines, but instead, plans and activities are modified and expanded to incorporate the needs, preferences, and pleasures of the equids. Horses have begun to define their own role and have helped to set the rules in some ways. In our study, these relationships seemed rarely pre-planned but rather resulted from close interaction and daily contact for several hours a day.

8 When difficulties arise

Many interviewees also described 'problems' in developing a friendship with the animal caused by miscommunication, placing the blame on themselves rather than the equid. Several interviewees described using punitive measures against the animal that they had learnt during their riding career. They used these measures in conflict situations, including the use of a riding crop or negative reinforcement. Often this would occur after the horse had not wanted to participate in an activity or had been 'lazy' as one interviewee put it. In some cases, punitive responses to the horse's 'bad' behaviour followed the horse's refusal to participate in an activity and less frequently resulted in horse biting or kicking. Biting or kicking was rarely described.

In contrast, the majority of interviewees had been involved in sometimes serious fall accidents. The most common concern was being able to ride the horse safely. For participants who ride, the fall often challenged the relationship or friendship with the horse as a safe space. Falls are a source of much stress for leisure riders who question their technique or ability to bond with the horse. One interviewee stated that accidents occur because she lacks confidence. This statement demonstrates how human attitudes can be detrimental to forming a cooperative relationship with the equid – a fact that the participants generally seemed to be highly aware of and pointed out like here: *'It's funny because last Sunday I had a shitty session. I had been riding badly for a week or two, I got into bad habits, and so I didn't realise it, but my horse was telling me it wasn't right. He is very composed (...). I was very frustrated*

but that's part of the game and that's where people need patience ... you think you know how to ride, but you realise that in fact you don't. There was no vision of a romantic ideal of mutual understanding between human and animal but rather awareness that a lot of self-reflection is needed to achieve a better relationship with the equid. It is important to note that despite the problems of a demotivated horse or a fall, only a minority of relationships were threatened by 'bad' equid behaviours. One interviewee explained: *'One time I was very angry with my mare and told her I was going to take her to the butcher shop. I wanted her to stop doing half-turns on rides and to move forward. But of course, I would never do that.'* Thus, leisure riders may sometimes feel unprepared, or they are frustrated by these equid behaviours. These experiences show that there is an initial expectation that horses must adapt to humans. Strategies to manage or minimise negative relationships with horses varied. They were generally related to aspects of a horse's unwillingness to cooperate with human activities. The leisure logic differs from the attitude towards animals used for competitions or work, where equids are replaced if they are not performing well.

As the participants explained, they are aware that it takes time, a daily commitment, to manage 'difficult' horses. To overcome relationship problems, the participants did not hesitate to change the way they train the horse or to adopt methods to motivate the horse. Practices may change. Several participants have adopted walking beside the horse for a time to motivate it to go out without the pressure of riding. Others use food rewards to motivate their companion. Furthermore, specific riding exercises that can be problematic are stopped. Participants said they also try to avoid situations that might trigger fear or aggression in the horse. In the individual-type relationship we observed, some participants even went so far as to abandon constraints if the horse disagrees and simply reverted to care or games to stimulate the horse's curiosity. In this context, frontal domination practices are no longer justified. A woman explained to us how she deals with the behavioural problems of her horse, who did not want to be ridden at first: *'It was a horse that had learnt to take on a lot and then explode. As soon as there was too much, he would explode. I am quite convinced the reason is the way he had been trained (...). I think that maybe he had been trained with constraining material, like a bit with branches that contained him. A lot of work, a lot of time and questioning (...), but I believed in it, and it ended up working. One year was the minimum, and not everything has been achieved.'*

The participants of our study often recognised their role in the occurrence of problematic relationship issues, but they also mentioned past education of the horse or the multiple character traits of the horses as underlying causes. As Birke (2008) pointed out, this pattern of attribution is not the same as with dogs. Dogs owners are more likely to attribute a bad behaviour to external situations. In our study, horses were sometimes described as having been rescued from previous living conditions, and the bad behaviour was considered a result of past activities in riding schools or the racing industry, both perceived as treating horses as machines. The participants agreed that some horses can be considered more aggressive than others, or 'hotter' than others. These character traits often did not call into question the status of these horses as friends. In only one case did a person sell his first horse because of behavioural problems. This shows again an important commitment of leisure equid owners to understanding equids of all types of characters.

9 Going with the horse flow

Authors usually talk about a feeling of sheer happiness and utter contentment that can arise from total absorption in activities such as being with horses. This theme appeared in our survey responses as a feeling of total happiness during the time with the horse. Such feelings of contentment were described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as *'flow experiences'*. As participants described, when they saw the horse in the morning calling them for food, they were always amazed by beauty and contentment. Some said that the horse place is a relief from all the stress of work and life. In flow experiences, the individual feels a *'contraction of the perceptual field (...), a feeling of control leading to elation and finally to a loss of self-awareness that sometimes results in a feeling of transcendence (...)'* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 219).

Based on our interviews, we can summarise that horse owners feel focused and completely in the moment when they are with their horses. Sometimes this feeling of focus refers to a soft moment, a sense that the world slows down, everything else vanishes, and the individual is cognitively and emotionally absorbed in the relationship. The interviewees described the feeling as follows: *'With my mare, when I'm in trouble I go to her. I had cancer (...). During*

my illness, it was a joy to see them (the horses) out and to have this chance to have them in my life.' Or 'My horse is the love of my life. He is part of my whole life and it's something I need. It's an outlet, where I can take refuge.' The feeling might go even deeper: *'I suffered from depression and made a suicide attempt. I feel like my mare saved my life. I don't know. There was something between us.'*

Contributing to the flow experience can also involve a lot of active learning skills (Keaveney, 2008). Most interviewees have made big efforts to learn 'horse language', for example by attending natural horsemanship training courses, in order to avoid direct domination practices. Key components of such training include reading the horse's natural body language, studying scientific reports about horse behaviours, and learning new trainings skills. The self-directed learning is intrinsically rewarding for humans and contributes to a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This feeling seems to be fundamental for the owners of recreational equids who willingly abandon the ideals of sporting performance in favour of developing a different bond with the equine species.

10 Relationship takes more than two to bloom

When examining equestrian leisure culture, we recognise the influence of culture, gender, class, and race (Coulter, 2019). There are several perspectives from which the class politics of Swiss leisure horse owners can be analysed. An analysis of how class affects equestrian leisure culture is beyond the scope of the study. However, based on our survey and interview results, we will discuss hypotheses on how some class cultural traits of Swiss equestrian leisure culture shape relations to horses. Bourdieu (1984) employed the term '*distinction*' to describe the social meanings associated with class and to indicate how tastes, values, and preferences are created, constructed, and acted out in leisure. Equestrian leisure was once widely considered a bourgeois hobby. It is associated with the upper class in the popular imagination.

However, today in Switzerland, buying and keeping leisure horses requires less economic capital. Many participants spoke frankly without being asked about financial sacrifices they make to be the owner of a horse. Avoiding bill payments to veterinarians and trainers was mentioned as a strategy to maintain relationships with equids despite lack of capital. In this context, horses were not seen as a privilege. Some participants in our study were members of the bourgeois class. Those who could be called middle class – such as scientists, doctors, and teachers – were also represented. Farmers from low to middle class represented a minor part of our sample population. It is interesting to note that the agrarian culture is very different to the working class cultures in Switzerland. Historically, farmers' agrarian culture combines political and moral conservatism with professional and economic progressivism (Forney, 2011). Moral conservatism mainly influences the agricultural world through schools of agriculture and agronomy in the country (Forney, 2011). The reality of farmers is more complex than the ideological discourse. However, it is a distinct form of agriculture that has been supported – in fact massively – based on the yield of production and the mechanisation of the work to achieve more and more productivity. Within this agrarian culture, a dominant anthropocentric relationship to animals is deemed highly important, whereas the protection of animals from humans is considered less important. The valorisation of production is reflected by the pride in producing a lot and corresponds to the image of the '*father who feeds the country*' (Forney, 2011, p. 11) that historically has had a strong influence on the agrarian culture of Switzerland.

Examining past and present political images of agriculture and reflecting on their influence on today's relationships of farmers with horses leads us to reflect on the permanence of certain ideological elements of dominance in equestrian leisure culture. The realities and dynamics of class influence how people participate in leisure, how leisure is experienced, and how hierarchies are established and reproduced therein using horses (Coulter, 2019). For some owners, horses are an expression of a class identity and need to be disposable and dominated. These owners will attach great importance to other human relationships they create during their equestrian leisure activities. According to our observations, these people will be less likely to leave the traditional equestrian structures such as riding schools or amateur showgrounds. On the other hand, the owners wishing to immerse themselves in the relationship with the horse while abandoning humans during leisure time are more often private individuals (outside the existing equestrian structures) who develop a critical discourse towards the 'horse world'. According to them, horses are individuals

offering the opportunity to bond across species and discover new means of communication. Horses are given multiple and still contradictory meanings (Coulter, 2019).

Leisure horses in Switzerland are still torn between agrarian culture and the new sensibilities of people who have experienced an urban exodus. These people had to learn to handle horses but also to handle themselves. Being an owner of a leisure horse requires navigating the social world of equestrians and the microcosm of the horse's living space. In Switzerland, the main culture in horse stables was traditionally based on a masculine hierarchical regime of domination of the horse (Plymoth, 2012). This hierarchical structure is still coexisting and clashing with the individual needs of owners and animals.

11 Conclusion

The experiences and statements of the interviewed and surveyed horse owners in our study highlight the importance of human–horse friendships in the Swiss equestrian leisure culture. The idea to develop the best possible friendship was central to all participants. We found a relatively strong agreement on the way of providing care, ranging from giving up the use of horseshoes to preferring group and outdoor housing for equids. In equestrian leisure, people relate to equids in multiple ways from domination to almost antispecism³ ideologies. Dominant–dominated relationships are often biologically rooted. Other relationship types increasingly see the equid as an independent friend. The unique character and agency of the equid shape the way the human will interact. This second relationship type highlights a human–equid friendship that challenges the popular depiction of the horse as a child substitute or as a submissive animal. However, the lack of consensus among the interviewees implies that leisure horses are highly diverse, dependent on who their human companions are.

Structures and values within the stable (e.g. training values) influence the shaping of relationships between people and their horses. In turn, relationships have also helped shape new types of horses' living spaces, such as adaptation of grassland types for horses that want to race with each other. These findings show the importance of designing intelligent stables – both in terms of human–human interactions and of human–equid interaction spaces – for more harmonious relationships with horses. These results should be explored further in other studies.

The many subcultures in the world of equestrian leisure offer rich possibilities for further, more ethnographic investigations. The role of horses in rural subcultures is a theme that has been little developed in this field of research (Peñaloza, 2000, 2001).

As with most investigations, the limitations of the study suggest potential avenues for future research. Interpretative phenomenological studies are appropriate for uncovering new themes and concepts, providing rich information on previously unexplored topics. One limitation of the present study is the interpretation by individuals; interpretations of the human–horse experiences by other researchers may provide additional insight.

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³ Antispecism in this article is considered as a current of thought challenging the idea that humans are at the top of the animal kingdom. The movement has spread widely over the decades and today can also be found among Swiss equid owners.

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