



## Blogging situated emotions in human–horse relationships



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### ABSTRACT

In contemporary equestrian culture, individual human–horse relationships are often based on communication, knowing each other, and doing things together. Through shared experiences and activities in everyday life, the relationship can be seen as a process of becoming with the significant other, in which both human and horse are eventually transformed. In this article, I discuss Finnish horse owner's blogs, from 2009 to 2012, as narrative performances of situated human–horse relationships, as interpreted by the writer and expressed in a way that both reflects the material reality of the relationship and follows the culturally shared idea of living with a horse. I ask how emotions and experiences are shared between the human and the horse, and how challenges and conflicts are experienced and managed relative to their spatial context. According to the analysis of the blogs, human–horse relationships are performed as narratives of shared emotional and embodied experiences situated in places that carry specific meanings. The rules regulating both the emotions felt toward the horse and their display affect the ways in which the horse's actions and emotions are interpreted differently in each place. Thus, place comes to be part of how the relationship is constructed.

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### 1. Introduction

The rise of contemporary equestrianism in the Western world can be understood in the wider context of new sensibilities towards animals in late modern societies (Franklin, 1999). Similarly to pet keeping, equine activities involve encounters with individual animals and a prospect of long-term companionship. Whereas humans do not live together with their horses as with pets, they do consider them friends and even family members, and individual human–horse relationships are based on communication, knowing each other, and doing things together (Wipper, 2000). Such relationships take place in amateur equestrianism and leisure riding, where the horse is often kept both for companionship and competition purposes. Human–horse relationships can, therefore, be considered emotional similarly to any human–pet relations, despite instrumental values related to equestrian sports. In addition, the appreciation of animals as sentient subjects has increased the awareness of equine welfare issues and owners' responsibility for the proper care of horses (Birke et al., 2010).

In human–animal studies, the relationships between humans and horses have been scrutinised from a range of different angles, including partnership between humans and horses (Keaveney,

2008; Wipper, 2000), different approaches to handling and training horses (Birke and Brandt, 2009), and the embodiment of riding (Brandt, 2004; Game, 2001). In geography, the embodied relationship has been approached by Evans and Franklin (2010) and Nosworthy (2013), while an account of the equine industry has been provided by Urbanik (2012). More research is, however, needed on how shared everyday events and experiences contribute to the human–horse relationship, including the unexpected events that may challenge the ideally harmonious relationship.

Individual human–horse relationships can be understood as part of equestrian culture with its own discourses of human–horse relationships and the definition of certain practices and displays of emotion as desirable and acceptable. Within this culture, the practice of blogging about one's personal life with a horse has recently become popular, along with the general increase in blogging. These blogs can be investigated as performances of horse-ownership, communicating the human–horse relationship to the readers as interpreted by the author, and as expressed in a way that suits the culturally shared idea of living with a horse, including expectations of attachment and the mutual enjoyment of riding experiences.

In this article, I discuss blogs written by Finnish horse owners as narrative performances of situated human–horse relationships. The narrative analysis of blogs enables the close scrutiny of shared and embodied encounters with animals as well as their subjective actions, something that has been lacking in recent studies of

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human–animal relations (Buller, 2014b). Using the narrative form of blogging, the shared events of the everyday are understood as parts of the process through which the relationship is constructed and performed to the public. Such a relationship can be framed as a process of ‘becoming with’ the significant other, in which both human and horse are eventually transformed (Haraway, 2008). I approach these relationships as situated, investigating the impact of place on human encounters with animals, and the rules concerning acceptable emotions and their display in specific situations. The analysis includes the agency of the animal and the role of place in enacting the relationship (Warkentin and Watson, 2014: 6). The analysis is based on recent studies on human–animal relationality in geography and related fields (Barad, 2003; Buller, 2014a; Haraway, 2008) combined with the sociology of emotions (Hochschild, 1990; Thoits, 1990; Turner and Stets, 2005).

The context of the research is equestrian culture in Finland, where the role of the horse has transformed similarly to many other Western countries after the fall of the work horse and the subsequent increase in equestrianism and especially leisure horse keeping. Leisure riding is predominantly a female activity, as more than 90 per cent of those who ride are women and girls (The Equestrian Federation of Finland, 2013), reflecting the Western tendency of ‘feminisation’ in equestrianism (Adelman and Knijnik, 2013; Birke and Brandt, 2009). The majority of horse owners live in urban areas and keep their horses at livery yards in peri-urban areas. Interacting with horses thus takes place in particular spaces devoted to equestrianism, within a specific culture with its own norms and shared practices.

My aim in this article is to illustrate how the process of becoming with actually happens, how emotions and experiences are shared between the human and the horse, and how the possible challenges and conflicts that arise within the relationship are experienced and managed relative to their spatial context. Understanding the processes taking place in individual human–animal relations is important in the sense of appreciating the role of animals in contemporary societies as subjects capable of complex communication with humans, although different from us (Fox, 2006). The article begins with theoretical discussions on animal subjectivity, place, and emotions within human–animal relationships, and blogs as autobiographical narratives, before describing the data and methods used. The second half of the article concentrates on the analysis of the blogs.

## 2. Animal subjectivity and place

The field of new animal geography set out to ‘bring the animals back in’ to the exclusive field of ‘human’ geography in the mid-90’s (Philo and Wilbert, 2000a; Wolch and Emel, 1995, 1998). The new approach acknowledged the agency of actual, living animals, and the different ways in which it is constructed in time and place (Buller, 2014a). The new animal geography also included the category of “domesticated” animals living within human culture in the focus of geographical investigation (Warkentin and Watson, 2014: 2), animals that were previously excluded from the quantitative and descriptive study of ‘zoogeography’.

The pioneers of the new animal geography were, however, slightly wary of attributing actual intentionality to non-humans (Nosworthy, 2013: 33–34). This wariness has recently been replaced by insight drawn from the relational developments within the human–animal studies with a visible emphasis on animal subjectivity and agency (Buller, 2014a; Warkentin and Watson, 2014). Another focal point has been the role of place within human–animal relations (Urbanik, 2012). According to Beumer (2014: 11), in human–animal relations, places influence the ways of seeing the animal and the subsequent interaction with them. As

Warkentin and Watson (2014: 2, emphasis original) argue, however, “scant attention has been paid to the *impact* place has on human–animal encounters”. Thus, in addition to human–animal agency they suggest an agency of place, an acknowledgement of the importance of place in human–animal encounters. A recent example of such an approach is the study by Emma Power (2008) on the ways in which dogs become family through the home. One of the aims of this paper is to investigate the ways in which places such as the yard, stables, and the arena affect human–horse interaction and the agency of the animal.

A central concept for analysis is embodiment as a site for communication across species. The role of embodied communication between humans and animals has been the subject of recent scholarly debate seeking to highlight the material and performative dimensions of human–animal relationships (Barad, 2003). In horse handling and riding, a considerable part of the communication is nonverbal, depending on embodied, invisible, and even involuntary messages and cues between the horse and rider, perhaps more than in any other context of human–animal interaction (Despret, 2004; Game, 2001). The aim of the communication is to develop a mutual understanding so refined that it is described as harmony. Embodiment brings a material dimension to the human–horse relationship, which is developed by not only discursive meanings but also material practices, defined by Despret (2004) as ‘anthropo-zoo-genetic practices’. The focus is on what happens to the two individuals forming a relationship, and on how what they experience and feel together in the context of everyday practices and events affects and eventually transforms them both (Haraway, 2008).

Seen as material-discursive practices, human–animal relationships can be understood as performances, productive processes in which the relationship comes into being (Buller, 2014a). Focussing on performance and performativity turns the attention to the “non-human otherness as a *doing* or *becoming*, produced and reproduced in specific contexts of human/non-human interaction” (Birke et al., 2004: 169, emphasis original), rather than as an animal essence (Thompson, 2011: 232). That the performance of a human–horse relationship is embodied, means that the human performs a body that the horse can read, and the horse offers her “a new identity: being a horse-with-human” (Despret, 2004: 122). Such a relational approach takes into account animal agency, as the animals themselves by their subjective actions are seen to participate in the production of the relationships (Barad, 2003; Birke et al., 2004; Haraway, 2008). It also contributes to an understanding of encounters between humans and animals as products of their practical actions in particular settings – in other words, enactments (Beumer, 2014: 13).

Within any culture, there are rules and beliefs concerning the acceptability of specific emotions and how they may be expressed (Turner and Stets, 2005: 26–31). These rules orient individuals in how to behave in an encounter and how to ‘present’ oneself (Goffman, 1959). They can also be defined as ‘feeling rules’ that govern the intensity, the direction, and the duration of the emotion, and as ‘display rules’ defining the proper expression of emotions (Hochschild, 1990). When culture changes, the scripts defining appropriate emotions and their expression also change (Turner and Stets, 2005: 36). After the profound transformation in the culture of keeping horses, the cultural scripts concerning emotions toward an equine companion have to be defined anew.

The ideal relationship between owner and horse carries a promise of companionship with shared positive emotions and mutual understanding – a process of forming a partnership or bonding with the horse (Wipper, 2000). Being individual in nature, human–horse relationships are based on close encounters and spending time together, in which “how to get on together is at

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