

10-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Lambarth, J. K. (2011). 4-H Women and Their Horses: An Extraordinary Relationship with an Extraordinary Animal. *The Journal of Extension*, 49(5), Article 9. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol49/iss5/9>

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October 2011
Volume 49 Number 5
Article Number 5FEA8

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4-H Women and Their Horses: An Extraordinary Relationship with an Extraordinary Animal

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Abstract: There is minimal research on the large animal-human companionship bond. The purposes of the phenomenological study reported here were to identify the meaning of the relationship between women and their horses and the impact on their adult lives of the human-horse bond. Analysis is based on in-depth interviews with five adult 4-H alumni horsewomen. The meaning of the relationship was a deeply emotional response to a reciprocal relationship between women and their horses. The central finding was the role of the horse in providing needed social support for the women to meet the challenges of life on an everyday basis.

Introduction

The state of Washington has one of the highest numbers of young people enrolled in the 4-H horse project in the nation. Approximately 89% of the state's horse project members are female (USDA, 2003-2004). The 4-H horse curriculum encourages mature development of its 4-H members through well-defined horse subject matter learning experiences (National 4-H Council, n. d.; Newman, Fouts, & Schmidt, 1993). Systematic contact with horses on a regular basis and the attention to task appear necessary to meet 4-H horse program goals. Such requirements suggest the potential for development of a companionable bond between horse and owner. Competitive horsemanship situations intensify the possibility of bonding because of the time and attention spent in concentrated effort by a girl and her horse.

Research regarding the animal-human bond has tended to focus on the small animal/human bond, specifically companionship studies involving dogs and cats (Kidd & Kidd, 1984). Kidd and Kidd indicated that animal-human companionship researchers have tended to group horses in the mix with small animals in their animal-human companionship studies. I located one article in the *Journal of Extension* that included miniature horses along with goats, cattle, llamas, and rabbits in a reported animal therapy study in a Wyoming residential childcare facility (Weigel, Caiola, & Pittman-Foy, 2002). Although a 2010 Oregon State University Extension study cited the exploratory study reported here, the Oregon study focused on life and personal skill development, perceived conflict, and positive youth development among 4-H horse project members and leaders (Arnold, & Nott, 2010).

There is minimal research regarding the large animal-human bond, and particularly the horse-human bond (Scholl, 2004). There appears to be a persistent phenomenon of girls relating to horses. The overall purpose of the exploratory study reported here was to understand the impact on their lives of the bond between 4-H alumni women and their horses.

One of the major questions from the exploratory study was: What is the meaning of the horse-human relationship in the current lives of adult women who were award-winning 4-H horsewomen as teens?

Phenomenological Research

The methodology for exploring the horse-human relationship was phenomenology. Phenomenology is a major theoretical perspective stemming from the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Lauer, 1958). This approach is recommended when researchers want to describe a phenomenon. "The commonplace, taken for granted, becomes a phenomenon when it becomes questionable" (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). In this reported study, the persistent phenomenon was girls relating to horses in the context of the 4-H program.

Phenomenological methodology examines everyday human experiences through the *descriptions* provided by people who live them. It validates and respects commonsense knowledge and practical reasoning that make experience intelligible and meaningful to ordinary members of society (Nieswiadomy, 2002; Cresswell, 1998). "It is essential in the study of people to know just how people define the situations in which they find themselves. What people define as real has real consequences for them" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

The goal in analyzing a phenomenon is to understand motives and actions. The rigor of analysis follows specific steps developed by Duquesne University researchers to "ground the procedures in insight rather than assumptions" (Polkinghorne, 1989). Analysis also includes intuitive thinking, disciplined reflection, and researcher insight regarding human life and motivations.

Analysis searches for the distinguishing moments of each person's life-story or *lived experience* of the phenomenon (Boyd, 2001). These moments are the constants among all study participants. They become the underlying meaning of the phenomenon. The final written analysis is a faithful, undistorted description of the whole phenomenon that rings true to all people with similar experiences, regardless of the facts of their individual cases (Dukes, 1984).

Study Methodology

Interviews were the preferred method to gather descriptions of the "what" of the horse-human experience among participants. Themes for conversation rather than a traditional interview schedule were prepared. Topics explored with each woman included early interest in horses; descriptions of a typical day spent with horses; significant events in their lives as 4-H youth and adults; bonding through competition; and the meaning of the horse-human relationship. Each interview lasted 2 to 4 hours.

In-depth interviews with up to 10 people are recommended in phenomenological research (Cresswell, 1998; Dukes, 1984). Five women in their 40s were interviewed. This age-range provided distance from their experiences as young adults, yet was close enough for participants to call up trustworthy memories of spending time in the 4-H horsemanship culture (Harris, 1985). The context was their experience as teen award-winning 4-H horse project members. I called the women in the study Nora, Marilyn, Sandy, Bonnie, and Linda.

Data analysis by the individual researcher is common in phenomenology. In this reported study, analysis included reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews; identifying common phrases or distinguishable moments; determining basic themes from all descriptions; describing each theme; describing the overall phenomenon, based on themes; writing the meaning of the experience common to all participants.

The goal was to produce a report where readers could follow the thought processes that led to the description of the meaning of the horse-human relationship for these women.

Results

Four themes regarding the relationship between women and their horses emerged from the data collected from study participants. The themes were (a) the constancy of the horse in human life; (b) intense interest in horses; (c) the horse as a stabilizing factor in daily life; and (d) the horse as companion and friend.

Life Without Horses Is Unimaginable

For these women, the meaning of the horse-human relationship was the deeply emotional response they felt to the satisfying reciprocal relationships that developed between themselves and their horses. In discussing the bond they felt with their horses, they described a compatibility the source of which even they could not easily identify. Their interest in horses could be described as part of their being. Marilyn mused about her affinity with horses: "You know, sometimes you think it is a gift."

Whether married or not, whether they had children or not, and regardless of family income, life without horses for these women was unimaginable. These women had family responsibilities, employment obligations, and education expectations. They also experienced a persistent attraction to horses both in childhood and in adult life.

Explanations referring to the bond they felt with horses included, "As a teen, I hung out with my horses all the time" and "I wouldn't miss a day riding my horse when I was younger. I wish I could do it now." "I liked boys, but they were not my focus. My focus was my horse." Nora stated flatly, "I never could give up my horses."

In several cases, life from childhood on was about very clear choices involving horses. When Marilyn was 18, her mother told her she could no longer attend 4-H horse meetings:

She told me that if I went to the meeting, I'm not to come home. She put the ultimatum out. I spent the balance of my day, without her knowing, moving my stuff out of my bedroom window and loading it into my carâ bridles, saddles, a couple bags of clothes, etc. I made that choice then. Mom did not speak to me for a year.

The meaning of the horse-human relationship to these women was filled with emotion. Their words to describe the meaning included "best friend," "comfort zone," "just like people," "family," "a definite relationship," "passion," and "therapy." Each had devised individually prescribed programs for improving her own quality of life on an informal basis through activity with horses. Those activities, by their regularity and because of the responsibility women took towards caring for their animals over time, strengthened the bond and deepened the meaning of the relationship for each woman.

An Intense Interest in Horses

Among the women in the study, parents or grandparents provided their introduction to horses. All five women discussed periods in their lives characterized by a passion for horses. Nora referred to the attraction as being "horse crazy." Marilyn called it an "addiction." All wanted to share their strong feeling for horses with others and to offer others the opportunity to experience the fulfillment with horses that they themselves had experienced. Linda, who was a schoolteacher, said:

I don't know if people understand who I really am. At school, I'm not the real person I really am. Until they (colleagues) come here and meet the horses and see the barn, see what we've got here, I don't think they get it.

For Sandy, passion for horses was "living and breathing horses." When she talked about her bond with her horse, she explained:

When you spend that much time with something, they are just like a graft on your arm; it is like they are part of you . . . like children or your husband, when you wake up, that's the first thing on your mind.

When asked what it took to be an award-winning 4-H horsewoman, Marilyn replied, "First you need the passion." She skied and traveled with husband and children, but:

I'm in my comfort zone with horses and no matter how much work the horses may be, that's where my skills are. For me, that is vacation. Every aspect of my life, every energy, every brain cell is ways of tying horses and youth and families together . . . trying to share that same passion and find people who have that same interest.

The Horse As a Source of Stability in Life

In the horse world, the phrase "collected horse" refers to a positioning of the horse's body for balance, when the hind legs of the horse feel firmly and solidly situated underneath its body before horse and rider move off together. A collected horse is balanced, responsive, in control, and sensitive to its rider. Its mind is with its rider. In the study reported here, a central finding was the role of the horse in providing sure footing and the needed balance to its female owner for her to face not only life's special challenges, but also to move ahead with confidence, courage, and competence in everyday living situations.

Comments by the five women indicated that, at various periods in their lives, horses were necessary for their "sanity," good health, and capacity to deal with issues of life beyond the daily care of horses. None deviated from the stated conviction that, whether or not there was an actual horse on the property, she was better able to cope with the rest of life when her life also included horses. What the women seemed to have in common was personal experience with at least one horse that, to its owner, had a presence that was a powerful stabilizing effect in her life.

Social support has been found to be a strong buffer against the potentially negative effects of stress in human life (Hart, 2000). In human interaction, social support has been singled out as the primary non-health factor associated with well-being in people (Wilson, 1998). The horses were participants in determining quality of life issues among the women in this study. The grounding provided by horses in each woman's life was comparable to social support among human beings.

Each woman told of times when she carried emotional burdens to her horse, to confide in her animal what she believed would have been more difficult to tell human friends and family members. The horses' responses in such situations appeared to their owners to be adequate. Research indicates that, in human friendships, it is the presence of a confidant that is the measure most strongly associated with mental health outcomes (Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999). For these women, the horse seemed to provide the support that was extremely important in coping and working to attain well-being for self and family.

The Horse As Companion and Friend

The strength of the bond with their horses as described by the women was significant. As these women discussed their relationships with their horses, they described a sense of horses as animals with extraordinary presence and powers. While they acknowledged safety issues when working with horses, it was a matter of the woman and horse needing to work more successfully together to accomplish goals the women saw as mutually agreed upon between horse and rider. The friendship relationship as described by these women was give-and-take, and the women seemed to give their horses, at times, more-than-equal credit towards the success of the relationship.

The temperament or appearance of the horse did not negatively affect the bond between horse and woman. Nora, who described her first pony as "stubborn," further explained, "There will be days when you cannot stand that animal, and you just want to clunk it. But other days? It's kind of like working with children basically. Unconditional, but with horses."

The women discussed how they would explain to a non-horse owner what it was all about to own, work with, and care for a horse. For Sandy, it was a friendship that provided mental and emotional therapy. For Bonnie, it was the comfort and freedom of riding. Nora stressed teamwork. Linda said, "We talk about them more like people than like pets. They are family and they are partners. They respect you if you respect them and it's a team thing. "

The friendship the women described fits the definition of human friendship offered by Savin-Williams and Berndt (1990), being important, enduring, relatively problem-free relationships accompanied by new learning experiences and understanding. These women found trust, emotional closeness, and intimacy in their bond with horses, similar to traits that people would expect to find in their friendships with each other (Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hoffman, 1981).

You spend time trusting the animal that trusts you and you find that one in a hundred that makes the same connection with you. You are not going to find any better reward. The bond with a true pet is the same bond, that same respect and compassion you have had with another human being.

Discussion and Implications

Inherent in findings reported here is support for the social value of horses. The relationships between these women and their horses were comparable to human-to-human relationships but appeared in some ways to surpass the power of human-human relationships in stabilizing life. For the women in this reported study, bonding with their horses presented a significant method for buffering life's stresses and augmented their own strengths in coping.

As described by these women, the horse-human bond was intelligible, meaningful, and beyond the commonplace. The exceptional nature of horses, as seen by study participants, created exceptional bonds between the women and their horses. The descriptions by these women of the horse-human bond echo animal-human companionship research findings of the emotional, psychological, and physical health benefits to human life of the human-pet bond, regardless of animal species (Friedman, 2000; Serpell, 2000).

The methodology in this reported study of horse-human companionship deepened the understanding of behavior and motivation among horsewomen as horse owners and 4-H horse project leaders. Study results presented a picture of five 4-H adult horsewomen who were productive, engaged, dependable, thinking, contributing members of society. This calls into question the "nearly universal" view of 4-H horsewomen as

combative individuals immersed in conflict in the 4-H horse program, a perception behind the Arnold and Nott study of Oregon 4-H horse leaders (2010). Findings by Arnold and Nott indicated that just a small group of horse leaders might be engaged in conflict in 4-H programs, despite "considerable anecdotal evidence" to the contrary nationally (p. 5). Use of phenomenological methodology in future studies may result in additional challenge to the stereotypical view of 4-H horsewomen as combative people. Insights created from the methodology reported here may also encourage more satisfying approaches to 4-H management by program managers and volunteers.

The exploratory study reported here was among a small group of women with similar backgrounds who were strongly attached to one or more horses over their lifetimes. The associations were of great therapeutic value to these individuals. Additional research may contribute to a better understanding of this special relationship and also further expand the limited understanding about large animal-human bonding in general.

The study reported here did not explore the level of involvement needed to achieve the benefits reported by these women. Nor did it address differences in benefits of a horse-human bond described differently from the one portrayed by women in the study. In addition, horses had different places in the lives of these participants over time. What happens to adult well-being when horses are put on the back burner, as Nora called the situation when attention to children took precedence over attention to horses?

Finally, in the study, the horse-human relationship was described in positive terms. The study participants were exceptional women in their commitment to horses. There is a question about the possible negative impact and the experiences of women who drop out of the 4-H horse program as youth.

The findings regarding the horse-human relationship with women in the study are consistent with the view that animal therapy is appropriate to and important among people who are well and functioning effectively in society (Levinson, 1984). For these women, including animals in human lives made sense and was a much valued way to receive love and comfort, two conditions Levinson (1984) recognized as necessary to human life.

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