Interpreting animals in spaces of cohabitance: narration and the role of animal agency at horse livery yards

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1. Introduction

This chapter contributes to an understanding of how interspecies care is enacted, mediated and interpreted within everyday human–animal relationships. We are specifically interested in how and why the technique of human–animal narration, including the giving of voice to animals, is invoked and how it may be used in investigating how the practices of horse care are understood as ethical actions. In exploring the use of narrative techniques as active devices in the practicing, interpretation and communication of interspecies care, we begin by considering the roles that human–animal narration and verbalisation can play in the construction of professional expertise and in the communication of tacit knowledge within the human–horse relationship. We then review the use of narration and verbalisation as a way of negotiating the situated 'becoming' of human-animal relations, and in turn, as a mechanism for intervening in, mediating or controlling interspecies encounters. We are guided conceptually in our analysis by recent work in the field of human–animal studies on relational encounters, interaction and embodied communication.

In the case of equines, interspecies care takes place in a plethora of spaces with the potential to involve a multitude of actors (Nyman & Schuurman 2016; Philo & Wilbert 2000). We concentrate here on one space: horse livery yards. In analysing the ways in which the relationships between humans and horses, spaces and places, practices, knowledge and expertise of livery yards are characterised – and controlled – through human–animal narration and verbalisation, we approach this particular type of care regime through the lens of the main care provider: the livery yard manager. We review the use of narration with the attribution of animal voice as a way of verbalising the behaviours and emotions of individual horses, as they are interpreted by livery yard managers. We discuss the importance of animal interpretation as a means by which yard managers are able to evidence and reinforce their own role and identity as professional and experienced interpreters and mediators of interspecies care in the context of a complex network of human–horse relations.

We especially pay attention to the ways in which interpretations of horses' actions and emotions lead to ethical decisions in care practices at horse livery yards. In contrast to the tendency to anthropomorphise animals, we approach the verbalisation of the interaction between humans and horses as an effort at understanding it and communicating it to others. This effort includes an attempt at conveying the viewpoint of the horses themselves, as they might perceive their situation as specific animal individuals (Arluke & Sanders 1996). Central to doing so is the agency which such a technique simultaneously affords to horses. By animal agency, we mean spontaneous action which carries meaning to the animal itself and which is understood by humans in different ways depending on context (Crist 1999, p. 2–3). The animal thus acts independently, in order to convey its thoughts, feelings, emotions and perceptions to humans and other animals, in ways that are characteristic of the animal in question (McFarland & Hediger 2009, p. 1–2, 16).

The empirical data in this chapter is drawn from research interviews with livery yard managers in the UK. The use of human–animal narration and verbalisation during the

interviews is analysed with performative narrative analysis (Riessman 2008). The topic of human–animal interaction and communication has attracted considerable interest within human–animal studies lately (e.g. Birke 2008). By focusing on the question of interpreting animals through animal narration and verbalization within the space of livery yards, we want to turn the attention to communication within more-than-human communities. In such communities, the interpretation is not limited to communication between two individuals, a human and an animal, in isolation, but extends to multi-actor groups and networks of humans and animals. By analysing the ways of giving of voice to both humans and animals in their relationship with one another and with each other, this chapter sheds light on how interspecies care practices are created, managed and verbalised within these complex relational networks. It also contributes to an understanding of the processes in which everyday interactions with animals and animal agency are interpreted and accounted for at the interface of the human–animal species divide.

2. Interpreting animals

In modern equestrianism, it is common practice that owners of leisure or sports horses keep their horses at livery yards, where the manager of the yard takes care of the daily needs of the horse.[i] The owners mainly visit to undertake specific tasks or activities, leaving again soon after they are completed. In contrast, the yard manager commonly resides at the yard and is the one who actually cohabits with the horses (Irvine 2004). As a result, the person with the most knowledge of the horses and their needs is often the yard manager. They communicate this knowledge to the owners, who in turn approach the yard manager with requests concerning the management of the horse. The owners do not have a chance to regularly observe their horse for a prolonged period and therefore, narration is the primary means that a yard manager has for communicating the horse's welfare to the owner. How this exchange of information takes place and what possibilities there are for successful communication between yard manager, horse, and horse owner, is of central concern to us here. We approach the different flows of communication as a process of interpretation, in which it is the task of the yard manager to interpret the horse, its actions and messages and also, crucially, the horse–human relationship. Consequently, the yard manager also interprets their own role in the network of relations involving horses and humans.

Drawing on recent discussion within the field of human–animal studies, we understand interpreting animals as a process whereby the animal's movements, messages, needs, and personality as a whole are understood and communicated to other humans. Interpretations of human–horse interaction in everyday practices include descriptions of feelings and emotions experienced and expressed by the horse, the horse's reactions to various situations, and intentional actions of the horse, including feedback on human actions. The process of interpreting animals is guided by different conceptions of animals; for instance, scientific interpretations within modern ethology, traditional understandings of horses as work animals, contemporary, often instrumental ideas of animals in sport, ideas about animal rights and emotional attitudes towards animals as pets or companions (Buller and Morris 2003). This process, as we will show, is deeply subjective, albeit based on different, shared conceptions of what a horse is as an animal.

Humans interacting with animals in everyday contexts often understand them as conscious, sentient, communicative, and creative beings (Arluke and Sanders 1996). These conceptions are sometimes interpreted as anthropomorphism, a way of thinking that attributes human characteristics to animals, such as thoughts, emotions, motivations and beliefs, as well as roles and relations from human society (Crist 1999). The possible risks and benefits of

anthropomorphizing animals have attracted considerable attention in society as well as in scholarly literature in recent years. Anthropomorphism has been claimed to be increasing in individual human–animal relationships, and it has been criticized as faulty reasoning, on the grounds of a lack of evidence concerning animal thoughts and alleged welfare risks for the animals themselves (Serpell 2003).

In everyday contexts, verbalizing the actions, intentions, and feelings of an animal does not necessarily equate to anthropomorphizing it; instead, it may be the only possible way of communicating about animals (Schuurman 2017, p. 45). Describing observations of animal behavior 'objectively' would hardly be possible, as verbal expression is never neutral. Rather, the personal experiences of the observer affect all interpretations made from observations (Grieco 2007). Observations of the animal in the everyday context in more-than-human communities have, however, the possibility of producing knowledge of the animal as an individual, capable of experiencing feelings, emotions, and intentions, and as an active agent that interacts with other animals and humans. In such a situation, the human learns to know the animal not only as a general representation of the species, but as a nonhuman person with its own life history, experiences, intentions and relationships with both humans and nonhumans (Irvine 2004).

For the yard owners, to be successful as mediators between humans and horses, they also have to be capable of communicating their knowledge of the horses to other humans. This may present a challenge, as a considerable part of the everyday knowledge created and used in human–animal encounters and care practices is not necessarily conscious (Ingold 2000, p. 52). These encounters are based on lived practices and embodied relations. As such, a large part of the knowledge about animals can be understood as tacit. According to Polanyi ([1966] 1983), the concept of tacit knowledge refers to a personal knowledge or skill that is used in action, but is difficult to explain verbally. Because it is typically practical and embodied, and is acquired through personal experience, tacit knowledge has been defined as the opposite of explicit or written knowledge. Polanyi ([1966] 1983, p. 20), however, emphasises that all knowledge includes both explicit and tacit elements, which is one of the reasons why defining tacit knowledge is found to be complicated (Toom 2006, p. 49).

Learning tacit knowledge cannot be reduced to the following of abstract rules.I Instead, it is learnt by observing the work of others and practicing to do the same. A characteristic of tacit knowledge is that it includes ethical assumptions about what is right and what is not, based on worldviews and belief systems (Nonaka 1991/2008). These include, for instance, ideas about what an animal is and what responsibilities humans have towards animals. Ethical decisions are made in practical action contextually. Therefore, the ethics involved in the use of tacit knowledge can be understood as situated. It can also be scrutinized by way of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. Best translated as "practical wisdom," or as "deliberation about values with reference to praxis" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 57), phronesis contrasts with the concepts of *episteme* (scientific knowledge) and *techne* (craft or art). In the sense of Greek virtue ethics, phronesis is oriented toward concrete action, the effort put into making good decisions, and the pursuit of a good life (Jamal 2004). Being pragmatic and contextual, phronesis illustrates the use of tacit knowledge in contexts where humans interact with animals and learn to know their individual characteristics and needs (Schuurman 2014). Decisions made in everyday practices make use of this knowledge and, when directed toward a good life for the animals, can be understood as phronetic. Knowledge about individual animals and ways of taking care of them varies in each circumstance, but what is universal for these phronetic efforts is the purpose of caring about and for the animal.

3. Method

The data for this chapter consists of seven semi-structured interviews with managers of horse livery yards, including retirement yards, in the UK. The interviews were undertaken during 2014–2016, with each interview lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. In all but one case additional time was then spent on a guided tour of the yard, accompanied by the yard manager. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity in reporting the research results.

In the interviews and the subsequent analysis, we explore the ways of mediating issues such as knowledge, experiences and conceptions of horse-keeping, different perspectives and needs. Our focus is on how knowledge is shared with other humans at the yard, how space is managed in the everyday and how interpretation becomes tangible through practices of narration and verbalisation. We thus primarily scrutinize the *use* of tacit knowledge, not its content. While the latter may not be expressed in interviews with the reseacher, the process of tacit knowing can be deduced from what is said (Toom 2006, p. 49–50). The interview method is useful for studying the ways in which tacit knowledge is intervowen in ethical decisions. The narration consists of the interviewees' own observations and interpretations of events understood as significant, as well as their own related actions. We also look at instances and ways of invoking narration and verbalization as a means of managing confusion and diagnosing failures of interpretation on the part of others. We discuss the notion of animal agency in the context of their actions and interaction with humans, and the subsequent ways in which space plays into the process of interpreting animals. We also pay attention to the interviewees self-reporting of how they perform their relationship with the horses and humans, as well as their own role and expertise as a yard manager. Understanding the interviews as staged performances means that in telling about their encounters and interactions with the horse, the yard managers enact or perform the key moments of their daily management practices, the ones that have significance for the ways in which horses are conceptualized and their care is practiced (Riessman, 2008, p. 29,108–109). The yard managers thereby construct their identity, based on how they want the interviewer to see them as experts in caring for horses professionally.

The significance of narration for exploring ethical decisions and practices in horse care is that it gives us access to the interpretations of the interviewee as to how they understand and give meaning to specific events in their experiences of horse care. According to Riessman (2008, p. 112–113) in performing the narrative in an interview situation, the narrators aim for commonality between themselves and the interviewer by dramatising their story. From the several linguistic features that can be used to dramatise the text, the following proved useful for analysing the interviews: *direct speech*, in this case giving voice to the horse (or the human), on the basis of interpreting its bodily actions as messages to the human, and sometimes to other humans as well; *asides*, where the informant steps out of the action to clarify a point to the interviewer; and *repetitions*, marking important moments in the narrative. In addition, we noticed specific *assertions* given in the text in order to justify something to the readers as well as *bodily gestures* to illustrate the actions of horses to us during the interview. These alternations in the telling direct the attention of the listener towards particular points in the story of the interviewee. In the context of the current research this has the effect of emphasising both the agency of the narrator and that of the horse in the events, thereby performing the relationship. In the analysis that follows, for clarity, the individual interview extracts are each divided into sub-paragraphs to highlight changes in narration technique (Riessman 2008).

4. Communicating expertise: interpreting, mediating and narrating interspecies care

Observing the horse, interpreting its communication and assessing its welfare can be understood as a process of "reading" the horse (Birke 2007). This is, in itself, a form of tacit knowledge, illustrating a process in which a certain observation precedes an incident, but the observation is not recognised until after the incident (Polanyi ([1966] 1983, p. 10–11). Reading the horse is based on interaction and companionship between the horse and the human and personal knowledge of the individual animal and its life history; accordingly, it is not easily passed on (Birke 2007). The horse is not a passive object to be observed. Rather, it also acts in such a way that the human has to interpret its messages (indicating, for example, that it wishes to go out to the field, or get something to eat) (Schuurman 2017, p. 41). This requires that a yard manager charged with a horses' care has to first get to know it thoroughly as an individual. Doing so enables them to more accurately manage, and where possible accommodate, physical and behavioral care needs. This includes, interpreting and responding to any subtle changes in a horse's condition, or anticipating and controlling its behavior with others – be that with other horses or humans.

Significantly, in the case of new arrivals, this is something that the yard manager has to involve themselves in first hand. In some cases this initial reading has to be completed with only the most basic of prior knowledge of the life history of an individual horse:

> We've had one horse that came from Dubai, he hadn't seen grass for 8 years. […] He was in quarantine, he flew across, they transported him, I got him off the lorry, sat with him for a while and it must have been about 9 o'clock at night, it was in the summer, and it started to get dark and he started to get sweaty and I thought we need to go for a walk.
>
> I didn't know this horse and he didn't know me but off we went, dogs came, took the torch, off we went for a walk together, how trusting was that animal, he snorted all the way down the lane and back, but he said 'alright Mum if you're going, I'm coming', but I just, they amaze me, they are really trusting, delightful things, they really are. They're amazing.
>
> I mean I just fell madly in love with that horse, and I had to text his owner, because of course, bless her she couldn't see […] and I had to text her and say, we've all fallen madly in love with him, absolutely, you know, he's a darling, absolute sweetheart, you know he wants to kiss you all over. (RY02)

The yard manager begins her narrative by introducing the situation where she decides to take the new horse for a walk, justified by assertions about the nature of the journey, quarantine and that "he started to get sweaty". During the walk, the yard manager describes the new horse's willingness to accompany her, despite "snorting",[ii] by giving voice to the horse in direct speech: "alright Mum if you're going, I'm coming". The manager interprets the horse's action as a sign of trust, expressed in the repeated asides emphasising her amazement. However, there is also a suggestion in the narrative of the yard owner's expertise, in the voice of the horse, addressing the narrator as "Mum" and thereby giving the impression that the manager has already been able to create a relationship with the horse. In the last section of the narrative, agency in creating this relationship is nevertheless given to the horse, described as "a darling, absolute sweetheart, you know he wants to kiss you all over".

In the narrative above, the owner of the horse is not present during the event, also in a broader sense, not taking part in the interpretation of the horse in the situation. Where a new arrival is accompanied by a detailed 'reading' of their character and life history by the owner, rarely is this interpretation trusted by a yard manager without reliance on their own personal reading:

> Some horses will come here quite aggressive but it's only because of their lifestyle, they've been living in a stressed environment and they come here, because they're turned out more and they're back to nature then they'll change. And they'll say 'oh they'll attack dogs' and then these dogs come everywhere with me and then they're fine, so a lot of the time, what they think they know about their horse, is not, and they'll say, 'it's bottom of the pecking order',
>
> this one that came from Scotland […] she said he was kicked to pieces, 'I'm so nervous' and he'd also never lived out at night, never, she said, 'I'm really worried about him staying out at night',
>
> and he came in the summer, we turned him out and I went back that evening and hid so he couldn't see me because of course if you go to the gate they think, 'oh going back in', and he was trotting up and down the field thinking 'it's time to go in, it's time to go in', and I just hid so he couldn't see me and watched him,
>
> and he was, started to beat up all the other horses, he was top of the pecking order
>
> and she said he'd been kicked to pieces, so she was really nervous and he's really, you know, top dog. (RY01)

To start her narrative about a new arrival, the manager describes the ways in which horse owners give interpretations of the horses by using direct speech, "oh they'll attack dogs" and "it's bottom of the pecking order", in order to justify her own view that the horse owners' interpretations of the horses' character are often wrong. Interpretations can thus be contested, with apparent ethical consequences. Narrating the story of a specific case, the above yard manager then recounts the owner's expressions of nervousness in two different quotes before describing the actual event of the horse's introduction to the field. The manager watches the horse unseen, explaining in an aside how the horse would act differently were she visible to the horse. Here, the owner is no longer present but the focus is on the horse, whose thoughts are interpreted in direct speech, "it's time to go in, it's time to go in", repeated in the narrative. The horse then starts to act, to "beat up all the other horses", interpreted be the yard manager as a sign of the horse being "top of the pecking order". Here, the manager interprets the horse's character in a totally different way from what was described by the owner. In the last section, by contrasting the owner's "nervousness" with the horse's character as "top dog", the yard manager asserts the superiority of her knowledge and expertise to that of the owner, based on her ability to take a more accurate reading of the horse, including the assessment of the time and place for taking that reading.

For a yard manager, being able to interpret horses is not only a case of understanding the horse as an individual in isolation. This is only one dimension. It is just as important in the context of managing a livery yard and in order to make ethical decisions on the care of any specific horse, to understand the relationship between horses. The reading of an individual horse's character works to inform a manager's ability to anticipate how that horse will in turn then interact with other horses. However, this itself can only be really known through the process of enabling them to build relationships with other horses. And, to complete the initial (iterative) loop of knowledge, it is by reading their behavior when in the proximity of other – particular – horses, that the managers are in turn able to build a greater picture for themselves of the characteristics of each individual horse.

During the interviews all the respondents presented themselves as having the knowledge and skill to work collaboratively with the horses in their charge. Moreover, they also clearly evidenced the importance of such collaborative forms of shared interspecies practice when it came to achieving and maintaining a professional standard of care. Central here is the

establishment of a community of practice which sees them enrolling all horses in the care of each other rather than this being the task of the yard manager alone.

> They all know who is, who we are, and who all the other horses are around them, so they think they are one big family. […]
>
> and if a new horse comes onto the yard they are really funny, they're really like, 'well what are you doing here' and 'who are you'. (RY02)

The metaphor of the family reoccurs throughout the data, especially in contexts of shared responsibility and knowledge of each other. Here, the yard managers enrol the agency of the horses in the care practices of the yard, evident in the direct speech given to horses, "well what are you doing here" and "who are you", indicating the horses' preparedness to welcome new arrivals and care for them.

Interspecies enrolment requires the recognition and interpretation of animal agency. It is based on a conception of horses as animals capable of conscious and intentional action and, therefore, able to share with humans the ethical responsibility of the wellbeing of a conspecific (Leinonen 2013). At the yard, the agency of the horses contributes to the care of other horses in the herd in multiple ways. The following quote illustrates the way in which the yard owners may draw on, or even be dependent on their ability to read the horses' actions in times of crisis:

> …her horse got stuck in a ditch 3 years ago, and I went out to get the horses in from the field and […]
>
> the other horses stood at the top of the field, almost with foam fingers on, doing that [*gesticulates directional pointing of a large artificial finger towards ditch*], drawing my attention […]
>
> And your eyes pan and immediately you go, 'Bruno's not there', so you go through the gate, on the quad, and you look to where the horses are literally stood looking, and there's a horse in the ditch. (LY02)

Here, the yard manager reacts to the actions of "the other horses" as messages informing her about a situation where assistance is urgently needed. During the interview, the narrator illustrates the horse's gestures with her own hand, emphasizing her interpretation of the horses' actions as "drawing my attention". Later on, as an assertion of the meaning of the horses' actions, she finds the missing horse "Bruno" from where "the horses are literally stood looking". The narrative illustrates the central role of animal agency in interspecies care practices, and how the actions of the animals are constructed as reliable contributions to the care of other animals. Without acknowledging these actions, the work of the manager would be considerably more complicated.

The use of personal names as a technique of performing the intimate knowledge inherent in the relationship between the narrators and the horses is regularly observed in the accounts by the yard managers. This reinforces an impression of close ties resembling family relationships. It is notable, though, that this seems to include an acceptance of different characters and personalities. As in human families and communities, mutual dependency and obligation do not necessarily lead to all relationships being characterised by feelings of intimacy, trust and respect (Charles 2014). To be able to enroll all horses in the process of caring for and being cared for themselves, the yard manager has to specifically identify and manage different sub-groups of horses. The size and mix of horses placed in any one field, for example, is significant in maintaining optimum conditions for self-care. The less conflict there is in the relationships between the horses, the more they can be relied upon to take care

of each other. In the case of the livery yards, field groups are commonly kept relatively small or single-sex for this very reason.

Consistent across all interviews, is a particular sensitivity for events which risk disrupting existing patterns of relational behavior, illustrating how working with horses is never a given; it depends on many things, both individual and collective, as well as being environmental or space specific. As is seen in the following extract, sometimes such disruptions can create issues of safety among the herd, requiring direct intervention on the part of the managers for the sake of one or more of the horses involved:

> I could see when he went in with them that he was very aggressive to the others, he was really aggressive, behaving like a stallion, and the others kind of ran around and got out of his way,
>
> but Harley likes to just stand at the gate and gaze at the girls. He doesn't do anything but that's his place, his spot,
>
> and this new one wouldn't let him, he kept galloping up to him and driving him away, and
>
> within 2 days Harley was actually standing at the gate shaking and shivering and sweating as if to say, 'just get him out',
>
> so we had to move him and I thought I've got to move him here where he's got absolutely no access anywhere near mares, so we had to put him with our big, tall, warmblood gang,
>
> he's a Lusitano, but he went in there and I said like […] he just wants to fight. (RY01)

In setting the scene in the first section, the new horse, is described as behaving "like a stallion". By not providing a name for this horse, he is further positioned as coming in from the outside. The yard manager then explains in an aside the customary habit of the horse called "Harley", who "likes to just stand at the gate and gaze at the girls". Conflict arises between the unnamed newcomer and "Harley", as the former "wouldn't let him, he kept galloping up to him and driving him away", resulting in "Harley" "standing at the gate shaking and shivering and sweating". The narrator emphasises "Harley's" misery by using direct speech: "as if to say, 'just get him out'". "Harley", the older horse, is familiar to the yard manager and therefore easier to relate to and read than the newcomer, who is clearly seen to be the cause of the trouble between the horses. As a solution, the yard manager tells how "we had to move him". It is not, however, always straightforward to manage the subgroups in a way that ensures safety and self-care for all horses. This is evident in the conclusion of the narrative, where the yard manager has to re-assess where to place this individual. This is supported with an assertion describing the horse as only wanting "to fight". Here, the agency of the newcomer is interpreted as irresponsible, and removing the horse from the herd appears as an ethical solution for all involved.

Yard managers constantly prepare themselves for and try to anticipate the in-the-becoming nature of both intra- and interspecies relationships that may lead to disruptions in standards of care. Where disruptions do occur though, they do not necessarily always come from the horses, as in the above account. On other occasions, illustrations are given of humans being the origin of a disruption. On such occasions, even though the managers often position themselves as being more connected with the animals in their care, they have to find a way of responding to the needs of both horses and humans, which can be an ethical dilemma. In the following example of horses placed in fields in pairs, the owners of either horse are expected to bring both horses in, so as not to leave the other one alone in the field.

> Elmo, this little new cob we've got, he's the most sedate pony I've ever met in my entire life, and Titus is quite a fizzy, thoroughbred, and I've actually paired them

> because the pony just stands and looks at Titus, as Titus kind of shoots off and has a buck and turns round to say ‘are you coming’ and Elmo’s like, ‘no, why would I be running and wasting unnecessary energy’,
>
> whereas any other horse we have in the yard would run off with Titus and it would keep setting him off, but that pony calms him down, but,
>
> you know, my concern is whether his, Elmo’s owners would be able to bring Titus in.
>
> So that’s why we work on Titus every day, we leave Titus a little bit longer and a little bit longer, so yeah, it is very difficult, yeah there’s lots of, kind of fiddling. (LY01)

In this narrative, to justify their decision of placing the horses together, the yard manager uses direct speech to illustrate their interpretation of the horses’ mutual communication: the one called Titus “turns round to say ‘are you coming’ and Elmo’s like, ‘no, why would I be running and wasting unnecessary energy’”. In an aside, the narrator refers to her personal knowledge of Titus’s character by noting that “any other horse we have in the yard” would behave differently, which would provoke Titus (“setting him off”). The arrangement suits the horses in question as well as the yard manager – but here the owners of the other horse, Elmo, present a disruption. As a result, the yard manager and staff have to intervene in the form of “working with Titus”. The extent of the problem is emphasised in the conclusion of the narrative: “it is very difficult, yeah there’s lots of, kind of fiddling”, where the narrator repeatedly expresses the difficulty of the situation. The narrative clearly illustrates the challenges of making ethical decisions in the specific context of a livery yard, where care practices have to be negotiated collectively between horses and humans.

In the above example, the yard manager actively tries to avoid a situation of failure occurring. In other scenarios, however, the power to prevent a failed interspecies interaction does not always reside with the yard manager. In the following narrative, the yard manager tells about an event where the owner of a horse has difficulty in getting it to leave the yard when ridden:

> So, as soon as something went wrong, ‘well what do I do, I wanted to go out, he wouldn’t go out the gate, he doesn’t like your gate’…
>
> And I say, ‘no, it’s not my gate, you’ve got to make him go, make him go out there, you have to have the confidence to give him the confidence to make him go out there’, ‘you may have a bit of a problem the first time but, you know, it will work and then…’,
>
> it was always, you know, it’s the workman blaming the tools, there’s always something else, it was the lane, he didn’t like the stones at the end of the lane, he didn’t like my gate. (LY03)

The narrator uses direct speech to illustrate the owner’s confused interpretation of the horse’s motivation for not following the owner through the gate. The yard manager then goes on to show their understanding of the underlying problem, again in direct speech: “you have to have the confidence to give him the confidence”. The manager interprets the situation as centred around the owner’s lack of trust in the horse and themselves. Despite showing an understanding of the situation, the manager remains powerless to resolve it, as the concluding section of the narrative indicates. The narrative emphasises the importance of mutual trust in human–horse encounters, embedded in daily routines, the safety and stability of the interspecies community and the clarity of the communication (Despret 2004).

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed interpretations of animal agency and performances of expertise through narratives, within the human–horse relationship and interspecies care practices. Using narratives as a method offers a way to analyse interspecies encounters, practices and the construction of expertise as they are experienced, understood and interpreted by the narrator. This is only possible if the way in which the interaction with animals is verbalised is not dismissed as narrow anthropomorphism. Rather, narration can offer a rich stream of insight into interspecies care relations. The situations in which narration is invoked are multiple. It is used as a technique to communicate interpretations of animal agency within both mundane and eventful human–horse interactions as they take place. It is also drawn upon as a tool to communicate these interactions to others at a later occasion. In this way, narration can assist in articulating tacit knowledge in situations where it would otherwise be difficult (Nonaka 1991/2008). This is important in order to understand how tacit knowledge is involved in ethical decisions, in the context of interspecies care practices, and the process by which these practices become phronetic actions (Schuurman 2014). Narrative analysis thus becomes an extremely malleable, flexible and largely effective method for understanding embodied communication and tacit knowledge within human–animal interaction.

The purpose of using narratives as data for analysing human–animal encounters is to gain access to performances of animal agency at the level of the individual. Here it has been used to understand the role of animal agency in co-constructing relationships within one form of interspecies care setting. There are, however, many other forms, contexts and networks of care relations to which it can also usefully be applied. These include, for example, situations in which the animals work, are kept as pets, or as livestock; also, encounters within other practices of care, such as when individual animals are interacted with by veterinarians, farriers, trainers or scientific researchers. Furthermore, the use of a narrative approach creates novel avenues for future research on the boundaries of animal agency, by addressing issues such as animal ownership and power. The analysis of livery yards discussed in this chapter reveals a relational network in which the individual horses participate in co-constructing multiple relationships with different human and non-human actors and are enrolled into the practising of care by humans. By demonstrating that the horse is not simply an accessory to its owner the study points towards the limits of ownership in controlling the ways in which an animal expresses agency. It thus suggests that there are boundaries in the extent to which human power can harness the impact of animal agency and subjectivity in shaping human–animal space.

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[i] In the UK livery yards commonly offer a range of service levels from full- or part- livery, to 'Do-it-Yourself' (DIY) arrangements. There is also often a possibility of switching between different care services on a weekly or even daily basis, as dependent on the needs and availability of the owner. In the case of DIY arrangements, it is left for the horse owner to address all of the daily care needs of their horse (for example, mucking out the stable, feeding, turning-out and bringing the horse in from the field, exercising the horse etc). The yard manager is, however, often available should additional advice, or even direct assistance, be needed with a horse.

[ii] Snorting, the noise that occurs when horses forcibly push air out through their nostrils, can signal that they are reacting – fearfully or excitedly – to a given situation with which they have been confronted.