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Interspecies care, knowledge and ownership: children's equestrian cultures in Sweden and Finland

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ABSTRACT

Riding became a widespread leisure activity for children in Sweden and Finland during the post-war decades through the emergence of riding schools. Drawing on books and comics published in Sweden and Finland from the 1960s to the present, together with interviews and observations at contemporary Swedish riding schools, we approach this development with a geographical, historical and sociological focus. We ask how children's equestrian cultures were formed within the spaces of horse yards, especially riding schools, and how caring well was understood and negotiated through different types of knowledge and the idea and practice of horse ownership. As we show in the analysis, despite the increase of written knowledge about horses and their care, situated and relational knowledges based on interspecies interaction prevailed in children's equestrian cultural spheres in which children had a chance to interact with animals and care for them outside the everyday spaces of family and school. In these cultures of interspecies care, ideas of horse ownership carried expectations of continuity where the child-horse relationship was secured and could develop. The entry to these spatial cultures was through rites of passage characterised by embodied interaction and hands-on care, where children learned to care for animals well.

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In the decades since the Second World War, there was a significant cultural and societal shift in the practices of horse riding in the West. Due to the motorisation of transport, agriculture, and the military, the previously male-dominated activity became increasingly popular among women and girls (Adelman and Knijnik 2013). A cultural sphere of equestrianism emerged for children on an unprecedented scale, including riding schools, clubs, and popular culture comprising books, films, TV-series, and magazines. In Sweden, the expansion of riding schools and their increased popularity grew particularly strong from the late 1940s, closely followed by a similar development in Finland from the 1960s onwards (Eklund et al. 2007; Hedenborg 2006; Vasara 1987). Riding became a widespread leisure activity for children, particularly girls, in Sweden and Finland at about the same time. Horse yards, especially riding schools, thus provide a unique context for the analysis of the emergence and continuation of children's relations to animals and their care in the Nordic countries. In this multidisciplinary article, we approach these cultures with a geographical, historical, and

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sociological focus, drawing on Finnish and Swedish books and comics stretching from the 1960s to the present, together with observations and interviews with students at contemporary Swedish riding schools.

Due to the similar development of children's equestrian cultures in Sweden and Finland, both countries serve as examples of what Garnier (2013) calls the 'childification' of sports. The Swedish government established a goal in 1946 for riding to become a widely spread sport for young children, promoted as a means to increase movement and general health in children (Hedenborg 2006). This goal, together with state subsidies, enabled riding schools to flourish during the second half of the twentieth century. In Finland, the popularity of riding schools started to rise in the 1960s and new riding schools were opened around the country as part of the changes brought by strong urbanisation and the increase of free time (Vasara 1987). Riding became an increasingly accessible leisure activity for children and young people, associated with outdoor exercise and nature (Eklund et al. 2007). The role of the military, dominant until then in the equestrian culture, changed in both countries; in Sweden, however, it upheld a foster system, providing trained horses to be kept by riding clubs and individuals in times of peace. At the same time, riding changed from a primarily male activity to a mainly female one in both countries (Brandt and Eklund 2007; Hedenborg, Palmquist, and Rosén 2021). The feminisation of riding described in earlier research (Adelman and Knijnik 2013) is evident in our data on riding schools: women and girls dominate as recipients of literature and magazines and as riders.

Another evidence of the increasing interest in horses and riding after the war is the number of book series and comics published from the 1960s onwards, especially in Sweden, with most of them translated into Finnish. These 'horse books' had predecessors in the Anglophone world, for example the books by Diana Pullein-Thompson, the *Jill* series by Ruby Ferguson, and the *Follyfoot* series by Monica Dickens. As these were imported to the Nordic countries, they brought with them the riding school and pony activities which became a permanent part of children's culture in both Sweden and Finland.

An important part of riding as a hobby, mediated by popular culture and in practice, is spending time at the horse yard. Thus, learning to care for horses became a popular pastime for children. Caring for horses was seen as beneficial for the youth who would stay 'out of harm's way' and learn responsibility (Vasara 1987, 71), in line with a widespread view of sports in general. For the children themselves, the possibilities to connect and interact with a nonhuman being and learn to respond to and care for them would have been a primary attraction (Leinonen 2013). As the size of one's body has a special significance in childhood (Tipper 2011), embodied communication with a horse or pony gives the child a chance to be taken seriously by a larger being. The riding school is also a space where parents and the school are absent and where knowledge increases the opportunity to manage horses (Ojanen 2012). Knowing horses and being able to understand their messages is crucial in an activity involving a risk of injury through interacting with a strong animal that may kick or unseat a child when frightened.

Learning to care for horses well involves acquiring the general norms and values of the equestrian cultures of the time. This is a situational process, since every riding school and horse yard has its own version of the rules and manners that enable one to do things right. The process is further complicated by the horses themselves, who often do not act as expected. Becoming accepted into a particular equestrian culture requires time and ability to understand its different dimensions. By 'children's equestrian cultures' we refer to geographically and historically situated practices that are crafted, upheld and changed through knowledges, norms, and interspecies relations. As cultural norms become naturalised over time, it is particularly fruitful to study the emergence of and entrance process to the cultural sphere in question. For children to enter equestrian cultures, the key space has been the riding school where they have learned to ride and care for horses. Other horse yards where children have had a chance to interact with horses share and mirror the norms and practices that riding schools actively foster.

Drawing from our empirical materials, we ask how children's equestrian cultures were formed, stabilised, and transformed within the spaces of horse yards, especially riding schools, and how caring well was valued, understood, and negotiated. Our theoretical contribution is to further the discussion on children and interspecies care, while bringing together the field of 'equestrian social science' (Adelman and Thompson 2017) with geographical and historical studies of animals in the lives of children (e.g. Schuurman 2020; Tipper 2011). What makes the riding school and other horse yards a perfect case for doing this is that they are spaces where children interact with horses and where a particular kind of culture of care is shaped and maintained. The empirical contribution lies, first, in our use of a unique combination of data from childhood memories and popular culture. Second, the study is situated in the Nordic context where research on children's equestrian cultures has thus far been sparse.

In the following, we outline the theoretical framework, built on children's equestrian cultures as cultures of care as well as child–horse relationality. The following section on methods clarifies the empirical data and the analytical process of the article. We draw from the scrutiny of popular culture – children's horse literature and the *Min Häst/Hevoshullu* magazine – in tandem with interviews with riding school students. The analytical chapter that follows is divided into three parts: the structuring of the riding school and other horse yards as human–animal spaces; the dynamics of different forms of knowledge; and relational asymmetries between humans and horses. The concluding chapter draws the findings together with the conceptual framework and outlines the contours of an approach to children's equestrian cultures through the lens of interspecies care.

Interspecies care in children's equestrian cultures

Although studies of children and animals are still sparse (Tammi, Hohti, and Rautio 2020), recent work has shown the importance of relationships between children and animals such as family pets and horses (e.g. Tipper 2011). Children communicate with pets and describe them as close friends and confidants who listen to them in moments when adults cannot (Charles 2014; Leinonen 2013). The relationships that children can develop with horses are different in the sense that they are usually spatially and socially situated away from home and the human family, at the horse yard. Riding schools and other horse yards are spaces where equestrian cultures are established and reproduced and where interspecies relationships are co-produced and experienced. Here, they are understood as relational spaces in which children and horses co-constitute each other situationally (Philo and Wilbert 2000; Rutherford and Wilcox 2018).

Adelman and Thompson define equestrian cultures as 'historically evolving modes of human/horse interaction which include forms of working (and playing) together; tools and technologies; and forms of knowledge and other deep symbolic constructions' (2017, 2). Birke and Thompson further underline the plurality of equine cultures and their respective norms and ways of relating to horses. These cultures 'create, shape and constrain humans, horses and their agency in specific ways' (Birke and Thompson 2018, 72). Hedenborg (2006) uses the term 'yard culture' (*stallbackskultur*) for the work, relations and morals surrounding young girls' lifestyle as horse enthusiasts and caregivers for horses. This resonates with Ojanen's (2012) study of the 'stable girl' community, referring to girls and young women who spend most of their free time at the horse yard, not only riding but caring for the horses without pay. The community provides friendships as well as moral codes of conduct concerning horse care that have to be adhered to.

Ojanen points out that as a social environment, the riding school may have become a girls' space precisely because it is centred around care, a practice culturally associated with femininity: '[s]ociety appears to encourage the girl–horse relationship' (2012, 141). In relationships between humans and domesticated animals, however, care practices can be considered fundamental, enabling the species to interact, work, and live together (Schuurman 2021). Care is co-produced by providers and recipients situationally, building on knowledge of the other; as such, it is always relational, involving interdependence, responsibility, and commitment (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). The social, political

and cultural dimensions of care (Tronto 1993) further contribute to what is accepted as correct knowledge or proper care in any given situation. The cultural sphere of equestrianism is permeated by a normative framework structuring relationships between humans as well as between humans and horses, with consequences regarding cultural conceptions and knowledges about horses (Birke and Thompson 2018). Equestrian cultures can further be understood as distinct ‘cultures of care’, defined by Greenhough et al. (2023, 2) as ‘norms of caring behaviour, practices of care and modes of relating which promote and enable effective care’.

In interspecies relationships, knowledge and care are intertwined: as knowledge of the other being involves and generates care, care creates knowledge (Despret 2004). For humans aiming at interacting and living well with other animals, knowledge can thus be considered a gateway to interspecies relationships (Karkulehto and Schuurman 2021). Knowledge about horses derives from scientific or expert authority, stating how horses should be handled, trained, ridden, and cared for. Written knowledge about horses and their care and training has a long history, one of the oldest known sources being Xenophon’s *The Art of Horsemanship*, written around 400 BCE. Knowledge is also formed through interaction with individual horses, and relationality forms a prominent entry to understanding how horses come to be understood and known. This knowledge and the associated skill of handling and caring for horses as a collective, develop over time, with personal experience.

For the human, knowing an animal individually requires listening to them, ‘reading’ their communication to interpret their agency, and responding to their needs (Karkulehto and Schuurman 2021). As such knowledge is accumulated in a relationship and a dialogical mode of caring, it is both embodied and situated (Donovan 2006; Haraway 1988). The spaces where care is practiced, such as horse yards and riding schools, can be understood as ‘carescapes’ (Bowlby 2012). At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that the relationship is an asymmetrical one where humans control horses and have ultimate power over their lives. Asymmetrical does not equal unethical, however, as power is often associated with responsibilities and power relationships can be productive of new ways of being and relating (Redmalm 2019, 2021).

In recent studies, horses have been considered active agents in the equestrian relationship (see e.g. Birke and Thompson 2018). The question of agency, however, carries special meaning in the context of childhood, as has recently been acknowledged in child studies (Spencer and Doull 2015). It was previously thought, in the spirit of Romanticism, that children were similar to animals and their relationships with animals were naturalised (Taylor 2011) in the same vein as care relationships in general were idealised. In the essentialisation of children they have been seen as universally caring, in uncritical ways (Tammi, Hohti, and Rautio 2020). Recent studies on children and childhood have shed more light on how, in their mutual relationships, both children and animals interact as active agents (Wyness 2012). In the context of riding schools, the agency of children is visible in their interactions and relationships with horses and the ways in which they accumulate different types of knowledge within practices of horse care, including riding and handling horses.

Studying children’s equestrian cultures

This article is based on a study of three different sets of materials: (1) children’s novels about horses, (2) a horse-themed magazine, and (3) interviews and observations conducted at riding schools in Sweden. The earliest popular culture materials date back to the late 1960s, and the latest ones to the 2010s, thus reflecting on and contributing to children’s equestrian cultures of the time, focusing on the spaces of riding schools and other horse yards.

The books and the magazines, immensely popular at the time, highlight changes in practices of care and perceptions of horse ownership over time. The children’s novels selected span from 1966 to 2010. We focused on the most popular book series: the *Annika* books by Anna-Lisa Almqvist (1903–1993), the *Britta* books by Lisbet Pahnke (1945–), the *Klara* series by Pia Hagmar (1961–), as well as Lin Hallberg’s (1956–) books about *Sigge* the horse, aimed at young

riding school attendants. All of these books were originally published in Swedish. They were translated into Finnish and widely read in both countries. The awareness of there being a good market for books for young girls was quite established in Sweden. The largest and most popular publishing house was Wahlströms, which started their own pony club in 1963 selling books, magazines and posters to young readers (Hedenborg 2006). Often the juvenile equine fiction is presented as a series that enables the reader to follow familiar characters over time, from book to book (Singleton 2013). The authors of the selected books were or still are active horse people, engaged and knowledgeable about the horse world.

In 1972 a children's magazine called *Min Häst* (translated as 'My Horse') was launched in Sweden, including comics, short stories, and informative articles. *Min Häst* was also published in Finland, under the name *Hevoshullu* (translated as 'Horse Crazy'), and the two 'sibling' magazines shared a major part of their content, especially comics. Their concept has been rather consistent over the decades: comics in combination with short stories, non-fiction articles, and letters from readers. The comics analysed in this article, collected from the Finnish version, were published in both countries. Their stories revolve around everyday dilemmas concerning child-horse relations and care, in the social environment of the riding school or horse yard. We chose one volume from each decade, starting in 1974, when the magazine had been established as a bi-weekly publication, ending with 2014. We selected the first three issues of each year, of which ten stories in total were chosen to be included in the analysis.

The empirical material collected from Swedish riding schools consists of 25 interviews (23 women, two men), each around an hour long, and observations of three riding school groups over the course of one semester in 2016, with additional interviews conducted in 2017. The field notes amount to approximately 100 transcribed pages. The interviews focus on the interviewees' experiences of riding and the riding school setting both during their childhood and as adults, thus covering their childhood memories of riding as well as more general reflections on horses and riding schools. Although the material was only collected in Sweden, it corresponds to the conditions described in Finland (Brandt and Eklund 2007; Vasara 1987). There is a wide age span among the interviewees, the youngest being in their 20s and the oldest participants in their 60s, with childhood experiences from horse yards and riding schools from the 1950s until around 2010. There are thus different but intertwined temporalities at play in the different sets of data. All interviewees were given written information about the project, its aims, and how the data would be anonymised, used and stored, and gave their informed consent to participate.

All materials were analysed with thematic analysis, including visual analysis in the case of comics (Braun and Clarke 2006; Rose 2016). We explored each set of materials in relation to the others, to reveal the interconnections between popular culture and lived experiences of children's equestrian cultures. Having read the materials separately, we then compared and synchronised our preliminary categorisations of themes, after which we returned to the individual analyses. This process was iterative; it was repeated three times. While the early categorisations focused on care practices, horse ownership took shape as another central theme in all three materials. The analysis is mirrored in the presentation below, in the three sections focusing on space, knowledge, and asymmetric relationality.

Children's cultures of interspecies care

The first section in the analysis concerns the structuring of the riding school or horse yard as a relational space in which the ideals of good care have been fostered. The second part highlights how different kinds of knowledge have functioned as gateways to the formulation of 'good care'. In the third section, relationality is investigated through the practice and trope of ownership; the asymmetries and responsibilities that accompany them are put forward as proof of care as a means of earning a horse's trust.

The child–horse space

In this section, we explore the generational shift during the first decades of children's equestrian cultures, highlighting negotiations between children, adults, and horses in the interspecies spaces of horse yards of the time, including the riding school.

One of the key changes concerns the distribution of knowledge. In the earliest books studied, knowledge about horses is typically held by the riding school owners and teachers – all of them male – who are able to transfer knowledge to younger generations, often with an authoritative voice. The older generation of teachers with a military background and knowledge, formulated in a 'militarised' language, are usually ambiguously depicted; on the one hand, as strict and not very pedagogical and, on the other, as wise and as having a good hand with horses. An illustrative example of the latter is the riding school manager in the book *Ta tåten Annika*: 'Rarely did lieutenant Starke involve himself in the care of the horses, but when he did he certainly was knowledgeable' (Almqvist 1968, 13; see also Pahnke 1966, 122). In the interviews, the 'older generation' of teachers is described in a similar manner, as 'old men' who 'scream at children' but have a great knowledge of horses. An interviewee who began riding at a military riding school in the late 1950s recalls the social context as tougher than today's riding schools: the horses were bigger, the riding was rougher, and students fell off much more often. Yet, some of the interviewees with a long experience of riding also speak fondly of the older teachers' authoritative straightforwardness, which one of the students contrasts to younger teachers who were kinder but also more vague – something she connects to Sweden's consensus-oriented culture.

The comics not only frame the older generation of teachers as lacking pedagogical skills but also as nurturing outdated ideas and practices. This is especially visible in the context of rural horse work. Using horses for farm labour had practically ceased by the 1980s, the time of publication of the comics story about Marja who stays with her grandparents during her childhood summers and takes care of the elderly work horse Helmi (Furberg 1984). Marja and Helmi become close friends and Marja feels that the horse is not properly cared for when worked in the forest over the winter by her grandfather: 'Grandpa is nice but negligent. He never remembers to groom you! – You'd look horrible if I didn't care for you' (Furberg 1984, 7). The horse's old age is paralleled to the aging grandfather, highlighting the transformation which has taken place in equine cultures as a generational change. Moreover, by living on the farm, the 'forgotten' and soon also dying work horse is placed at a disadvantage compared to the active riding school horses, representing the by then burgeoning equestrian culture that every child enthusiastic about horses could enjoy. This controversy is emphasised in the story that highlights the emerging child–horse relationality as care-full – as opposed to the 'harsh' military ways that were still prevalent in the riding schools during the early decades.

What is striking about the horse books studied is that they are especially instructive, forming a generation of horse people and thus, for their part, caring for future generations of riders. The instructive context – interaction between student and teacher – in the books allows for knowledge to be transferred (Pahnke 1966, 76). A central part of the knowledge concerns caring practices such as grooming the horse, expressed as codes of conduct to be obeyed, for the good of the horse but also for the benefit of the girl herself (Ojanen 2012). The *Sigge* books provide an example of strong guidance by another girl: 'If you don't want to take care of the horse, you're not allowed to ride, Elina says. The horses can get sores if we don't brush them.' (Hallberg and Nordqvist 2010, 46).

In the books, the new equestrian spaces appear as separate and radically different from the rest of the world. The importance of caring for horses and becoming a good rider is not valued in the same way by non-riding parents or school (Pahnke 1966, 102). In the stories, the horse yard is often disconnected from the home and parents may have trouble understanding the 'horse dramas' that the children experience (Hallberg and Nordqvist 2010, 52). As an active agent, the protagonist has to find her own way into the horse world and learn about horses herself, without parental support. The stories also convey a moral message concerning the balance between home and the horse yard,

revealing a hierarchy of knowledge prevalent in society: one must do homework before going to the horse yard. The yard may offer a means to become independent from the family, but the freedom has to be acquired through the child's own agency and responsibility. Similarly, the interviewees talk about the riding school as a separate sphere where the students can share riding experiences and knowledge of the horses that school mates and parents cannot understand. Several riders have fond memories of spending whole weekends at the yard, caring for horses and making friends. Some students also testify to strong hierarchies among young riders, where the older and more experienced were in charge. One student describes her experiences of riding at a 'posh' yard where many riders had horses of their own and had strong opinions about riding and horse care, which made her afraid of expressing her own opinion.

The relative distance of the horse yard from other spaces seems to have carried to the present. As adults, the yard has continued to serve as an important 'other' space to the interviewees where they can set their daily life aside and live in the present together with the horses. Many emphasise the smell of horses' body odour, ammonia, and beet pulp, commonly fed to horses in Sweden, as marking the entry into a different kind of space. The riders usually share negative experiences from their work week when arriving at the horse yard and when grooming the horses – a ritual for setting these thoughts aside to be able to focus more fully on the lesson. A large majority of them are women – one rider mentions that the yard was dominated by girls already in the late 1950s. Back then boys came to the yard to ride the horses in gallop, but it was the girls who devoted time to the horses and cared for them. During the observations, it was almost exclusively women who stayed behind to spend time with the horses after lessons (around nine out of ten students were women).

In this section we have shown the horse yard as an interspecies space that has been structured around the passing down of cultural norms, knowledges and relations where children inherited – and sometimes resisted – shared practices and knowledges from older generations, riding instructors and peers. It has also been a space where worries and fixed identities could be put aside but where, nonetheless, invisible power structures existed. Entering these spaces children risked overstepping the established rules. For many, the experience of becoming part of equestrian cultures in childhood was so vivid that it carried over to adulthood, with new meanings added to the childhood ones. In the next section, we focus on the different kinds of knowledges that prevailed and emerged at riding schools and how children managed to navigate them.

Knowing horses

In order to navigate in the equestrian culture of the riding school, the child needs to articulate the right kind of commonly accepted knowledge. Care as process involves past experiences and future expectations, rhythms and routines and the development of different types of knowledge over time (Bowlby 2012; Milligan and Wiles 2010). The data reflect the increase of scientific knowledge that challenges the prevailing situated, practical, and relational knowledges that are part of the legacy of tacit knowledge in equine cultures (Karkulehto and Schuurman 2021). As we show in the analysis, these knowledges were used in parallel and were often in conflict, which made it difficult for children to navigate between them in the spaces of riding schools and other horse yards.

In the data, practical knowledge appears first and foremost relational, generated and applied in interaction with particular, individual horses. This is often presented in the form of the characters aiming to be better riders and carers, as in Hallberg's *Sigge*-books, where the riding instructor is the authority about knowledge concerning horses. The instructor emphasises the significance of learning by doing, and from the horses themselves: 'Ingela [the riding instructor] says it is important to learn to ride many different horses. Lively, lazy and mischievous. If you don't learn how to handle all types of horses you will never become a good rider, says Ingela' (Hallberg and Nordqvist 2010, 18; see also Pahnke 1966, 106; Pahnke 1972, 43–44). The example illustrates the production of relational knowledge through a dialogical mode of listening to and learning from animals (Donovan 2006).

The interviewed riding school students speak fondly of some horses as teachers – these old, experienced horses are not always exciting to ride, but are described as patient with new students, taking the lead when the rider hesitates. Riding schools provide students with experiences of many different equine ‘teachers,’ and interviewees say that they learn to be ‘flexible,’ to develop ‘a habit of feeling for’ individual horses, and to come to terms with the fact that ‘all horses are different, and you have to ride them differently.’ This also makes them more conscious of their body as many are university students or have a cognitively demanding occupation. Riding, in contrast, is an embodied experience, a practice where you have to stop thinking – something of which teachers remind their students every now and then during the observed lessons. When you ride ‘you have to be so much in the present and you have to be very focused, because otherwise you’ll lose balance’, a woman working in accounting explains. She had decided to realise a childhood dream and pick up riding, and after her first lesson she realised: ‘Oh god, I haven’t thought about work for over an hour!’

Because of the constant exchange of horses, however, some interviewees missed ‘continuity’ and expressed frustration at not being able to get to know a horse ‘properly.’ The structured character of riding lessons can inhibit closer connections between individual horses and riders, leaving little room for getting to know the horse as a full and complex being. In one interview, when asked when she first realised she really enjoyed riding, the respondent mentions a horse she rode for one summer as a teenager. She would often hack out into the forest, jumping over natural obstacles: ‘I was a bit stupid and jumped, I thought it was really great, and went for a full gallop, bareback. That was so much fun, and things fell into place.’ She adds that similar experiences are rare during riding school lessons. Her feeling of inhibition is telling of a wider experience that there is an authentic and more immediate relationship with a horse that is difficult to reach within the setting of the riding school.

In the stories in the comics and novels, knowledge about horses appears situational and relational – generated in a specific space and relationship, it applies to these particular contexts. The accumulation of knowledge about individual horses leads the rider to become more knowledgeable and sensitive. For instance, in a comics story from the 2010s (Wigelius 2014), there are individual horses that need special attention because they are ‘sensitive’ and unused to regular riding or because they have ‘injured a corner of the mouth as a foal so that they cannot use an ordinary bit’ and the rider has to be careful so as not to hurt them. Here, situated knowledge is applied to the individual horse, based on reading and interpreting their feelings and experiences, and becomes a prerequisite for caring well. Using only general knowledge in interacting with these horses would not be sufficient.

As an antipode to practical, relational, and situated knowledges, the ‘scientification’ of horse knowledge, a development where scientific knowledge gradually becomes more easily available and applied to horse care, stands out in the materials. This kind of knowledge concerns horses as a collective, as a species rather than as individuals, for example in stories on horses’ health and risk of injury. This narrative is popular in the magazines: while the comics emphasise personal child–horse relationships, there are always educational sections on horse care included in each issue. Likewise, the novels contain practical information about horses and riding. The magazines and books are important sources of knowledge about riding, together with instructors and other, more experienced riders mediating the riding terminology used. There are also examples of confusion in the interviews when situational knowledge gathered in childhood clashes with the scientific one later in life. One interviewee, a student of veterinary science, notes the difference between the yard culture language that she learned as a child and the scientific language used at the veterinary school; she describes how students with no riding background have trouble understanding riders talking about their horses.

One of the sources of scientific knowledge in many stories is the veterinarian who becomes a reliable expert, treating the horses, performing surgery on them, and euthanising them. This can be found in Lisbeth Pahnke’s *Britta*-series from the 70s. The *Britta* books are written in first person, as opposed to the other books studied, and the protagonist, Britta, works as a riding instructor at the

school (Pahnke 1972, 14). The books are instructive and give detailed advice on horse care and veterinary practice. As an illustrative example, the book *Britta och Silver på vinterritt*, gives insight into how horse culture is mediated almost as a contract between the story and the reader. In the book, a foal has to be slaughtered because of a deformity in the mouth (Pahnke 1972, 28–30). Britta tries to save the foal by giving it vitamins and plenty of feed, yet the foal will not grow, and finally the veterinarian gives the harsh diagnosis. The vet, Britta's uncle, is the scientific expert in the story whose words carry the most weight, and as not all problems can be treated, euthanising the horse becomes the only form of care possible. The role of medical expertise is similarly found in a comics story from 2004, where a young woman encounters a horse with whom she creates an immediate bond (Andersson 2004). After buying the horse she finds the horse has an old, painful injury that prevents riding. Her guilt at negligence is alleviated by the vet who successfully treats the injury. These stories illustrate how children negotiated the strengthening role of scientific knowledge in equine care, at the same time downplaying the significance of tacit and relational knowledges.

The hierarchy between relational and scientific knowledges is visible in the comics studied, already in the first years of the publication of *Min Häst/Hevoshullu*. In a story from 1974 ('Tytöt ja hevonen' 1974), a girl called Mavis neglects grooming her sweating horse after exercise, and the horse becomes seriously ill. What is expected of her is a practice of care that is based on shared everyday knowledge about horses in equestrian culture, but in its absence, scientific knowledge is needed to remedy the situation. The horse is saved only by the actions of Mavis's poor cousin – the protagonist of the story – who secretly takes the horse to the veterinary clinic. The complex dynamic of knowledge, relationality, and care unfolds in the story: the owner of the horse does not care for the horse because she does not care *about* it, whereas the protagonist's care-full actions are based on an emotional bond with the horse, leading to an effort to seek resources to solve the problem (Irvine 2004). The story demonstrates how response-ability, care, and knowledge are intertwined in an ethical, epistemological, and relational whole (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). In later stories, the emergence of ethological knowledge is evident, often embedded in the existing body of everyday knowledge.

The narratives above demonstrate how the increase of scientific knowledge permeated the cultures of equine care that had primarily relied on tacit – practical, relational, and situational – knowledges. For children aiming to become good caregivers this presented a cultural dilemma: while they had to understand individual horses relationally and respond to them, they also had to know when to obtain expert knowledge and manage these different knowledges situationally. Finally, relational and embodied knowledges of horses gained in childhood can last to adulthood, creating new meanings of embodied co-existence between human and horse.

The power of ownership

The care relationship with horses demonstrated above with different forms of knowledges is related to norms around morally good ownership. In human–horse relationships, the ownership of a horse carries with it power to determine the care, handling, and training the horse will receive, and thus enables both dominance and affection (Tuan 1984). At the same time, ownership comes with duties and expectations of respect, highlighting the inherent relationality of care ethics (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012). However, the riding school mostly houses horses that are cared for by children but not owned by them. Negotiating care in such a situation becomes a question of power where ownership appears as a possibility to control the care for a horse that is already intimately known. In the horse books and comics, a common theme is the dream of horse ownership, as exemplified in Hagmar's book:

At the time I was still happy about learning to ride. I did not even dare hope to become a carer of one of the riding school horses. Becoming a horse owner was about as likely as my mother becoming prime minister. (Hagmar 2002, 51)

In the books and comics, the dream of becoming a horse owner is allowed to be fulfilled – possibly explaining the stories’ popularity in helping readers to identify with the protagonists and fantasise about what it would be like to have a horse of their own.

Another common theme in the interviews is the contrast between a horse owned by the riding school – often overused and misunderstood and sometimes neglected – and one owned by an individual who knows it intimately and can tend to its unique needs. As children, many of the interviewees dreamt about a horse of their own, and a few did have a horse, owned by their parents. As adults, however, most of them have grown out of that dream, explaining that it would be too expensive and time-consuming to take care of a horse. Yet, some still entertain the idea of horse ownership. While some interviewees joke about adopting a specific horse at the yard, one of them has actual experience of adopting a riding school horse. As a teenager in the 1970s, she rode an ex-military horse. She did not like how the owner – a ‘crazy policeman’ – treated the horse, and one day she dared question his methods. He replied that she should take over the horse if she thought she knew better, so at eighteen she suddenly had a horse that she paid for by working part-time during her studies, riding and caring for it for over a decade.

Similar situations are found in the fictional stories. A typical narrative includes a protagonist who has a special bond with a horse that is mistreated by the owner. The protagonist then proves worthy of ownership in a power struggle with the owner by caring for the horse, saving it from danger – for example, from being slaughtered – or otherwise showing an intimate knowledge of the horse and its needs. As a reward for good actions, the protagonist is in many cases given the horse as a gift, by her parents or the remorseful owner of the horse. One example is the story of Mavis above: the horse, ‘fighting for his life’ (‘Tytöt ja hevonen’ 1974, 12), only recovers after Mavis regrets her negligence and gives the horse to her cousin (for later examples, see Ericson and Leppänen 1984; Noomi and Jou 1994). The reward of ownership is presented as an act of justice towards the human protagonist; for the horse, it represents a guarantee of good treatment in the future. Ownership, based on an emotional bond and therefore supported with knowing the animal through individual interaction, is thus put forward as a prerequisite for proper care and an insurance against mistreatment.

In the stories, the idea of earned ownership is presented as proof that the new owner has developed an identity as a ‘horse person’, someone with sufficient knowledge and experience about horses to be able to care well. In the books, it is also linked to wider personal development in the protagonist. In *Klaras vintersorg* the joyful transformation of becoming a horse owner is promptly expressed: ‘Klara Andersson, horse owner. More beautiful words cannot be found.’ (Hagmar 1999, 152). In *Äventyr med Sigge* (Hallberg and Nordqvist 2010, 39), the protagonist Elina dreams of owning Sigge the horse, and is convinced that her whole life will change once she has accomplished her goal: ‘if he only were mine I wouldn’t be alone ever again.’ The transformative potential of the child–horse relationship thus includes equine agency, albeit indirectly: not only do the protagonists save horses through ownership, but the horses may also save their carers.

The asymmetry of the human–horse relationship is sometimes expressed through violence. Horse training is traditionally based on the use of negative reinforcement (McLean 2005) in the form of ‘aids’ to communicate with the horse. However, these aids – especially reins, legs, whips, and spurs – can be misused, becoming a means of disciplining, correction, and physical punishment, measures that have been widely used in human–horse relationships. While this can be found both in the fictional material and the interviews and observations of interactions at riding schools, it is also challenged. Especially in the later books, it is often the ‘bad owners’ who need whips and other punishment to control horses. In *Äventyr med Sigge* (Hallberg and Nordqvist 2010, 50–51) a new girl at the yard suggests that Elina, the main character, should try the whip to discipline Sigge, Elina’s favourite horse. Elina is sceptical of this idea and reluctantly watches the new girl using the whip on the riding school horses. In the end, Elina proves that she has a better hand with Sigge, without using violence, and the new girl has to accept that it is now Elina who rides him. Similarly, in *Ta täten, Annika!* (Almqvist 1968, 108) Bettina cries when she thinks that the

teacher Harry is too harsh towards a horse called Filur, yet she does what Harry tells her. Harry explains that she can't go easy on Filur because the horse will then take command (see also Pahnke 1966, 61). The older books frequently express ambivalence about disciplining the horse, however, it is most often expressed as necessary.

Many of the interviewees talk about learning to discipline horses when they began to ride. It is difficult to learn to dominate a large animal, especially as a child, and forcing an animal into doing something or punishing it can feel wrong, in spite of teachers' instructions to do so. A widely shared view is that physical punishment is usually needed sooner or later with any horse, to teach them that humans are in charge. Commonly expressed in the interviews, some riding school horses know that they can take charge when ridden by inexperienced riders and will only make an effort if they know that the rider has a whip and is ready to use it. It is also common that teachers expect students to use the whip with horses regarded as 'lazy' or 'uncooperative.' Some students legitimise the use of whips and spurs by emphasising that they use them sparsely, just to get the horse going. Others feel uncomfortable doing so and would prefer not to do it at all. These students usually seek alternative explanations for the horses' unwillingness to cooperate; they may be portrayed as old, bored, or insecure.

While corporal disciplining highlights the asymmetrical relationship between human and horse, especially in the fictional stories, there is also a counter-narrative of horse agency – even of horses controlling the relationship. A popular idea in the comics and books is that horses choose their riders. As we have shown, the protagonist of these stories usually understands the horse better than anyone else in the story, and the horse can usually feel this. The horse's acceptance of the human 'soulmate' is often a crucial step towards the happy conclusion of the story. Another narrative present in both the fiction and the interviews is that horses could always potentially throw the rider off and injure or even kill the rider with one kick. While the horse's capacity for violence is sometimes used to legitimise physical correction, it is also used to frame the relationship as equal: if mistreated, horses would ultimately hurt or run away from their humans. As they do not, it is presented as proof that they are willing to cooperate.

In the data, horse ownership is seen in a positive light, securing the continuation of the child–horse relationship. The riding school acts as the space for learning to know horses and building relationships with them, but it is through the ideal, caring ownership that these relationships can develop into a lasting bond. In the stories, the protagonist who earns the ownership of a horse is the one person who acknowledges horses' agency, understands their vulnerability, and is able to care for them in an ethically responsible way. In other words, ownership is framed as a result of becoming with the horse in an altruistic way – of becoming a caring moral subject.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the development of children's equestrian cultures in Sweden and Finland from the 1960s to the 2010s, through a temporal and spatial lens. We asked how children's equestrian cultures were formed as 'cultures of care' (Greenhough, Davies, and Bowlby 2023) within the spaces of horse yards, especially riding schools, and how caring well was understood and negotiated through different types of knowledge and the idea and practice of horse ownership. As a context for this development, Sweden and Finland proved fruitful because of the similarities in how the emergence and development of children's equestrian cultures took place.

Children were invited to the community of the riding school via popular culture where they encountered peers who interacted with horses, rode them, and cared for them. The books and comics introduced the importance of knowledge and circulated ideas about proper care for horses. At the riding schools, children learned to understand and manage different types of knowledge as well as the lack of and limits to knowledge. This reflects the observed change in the context of horse care: where it took place, what the role of the horse was, who was responsible and, thus, what kind of care was provided. Knowledge was the way to the proper care for horses during the post-war

expansion of children's equestrian culture, but there was a great transformation in sources of knowledge as well as preferences and hierarchies between types of knowledge. Caring for work horses was tacit and relational (Leinonen 2013), whereas riding schools inherited the majority of their practices and rules about horses and their care from the military. However, relational knowledges based on interspecies interaction prevailed. The books and comics made it more explicit, emphasising the role of the horse and giving the readers an idea of how to interact with horses individually and build a relationship through practices of care. While the books provided ample knowledge about horses in written form, they illustrated the creation of relational knowledge through child–horse friendships, based on trust in the horse as an agent capable of collaboration. Further, as we show in the analysis of ownership, horses were often framed as inviting the child into the relationship, choosing some but not others according to their actions, thus seeming to make an ethical choice regarding interspecies care.

The literature on care ethics in geography and human–animal studies seldom deals with spaces for children to express agency or negotiate power relations. We find that this is where the article makes an important contribution to the study of child–animal relationships and cultures of care within geography, history, and the field of human–animal studies. The popular culture materials as well as the childhood memories studied bring forward experiences and ideas about animal agency in how horses demanded not only knowledge but also reciprocal expressions of agency from their handlers. Mutual agencies, guided by knowledges of different type defined a cultural sphere for children, situated in specific human–animal spaces – equestrian carescapes with their own cultures of care. In these spatial imaginaries children had a chance to interact with animals and care for them, following situated codes of conduct outside the everyday spaces of family and school. The entry to this spatial culture of interspecies care was through rites of passage, characterised by embodied interaction and hands-on care, where children learned to become caring moral subjects – together with horses.

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Ethics approval

We have included interviews (adults) in the study, conducted in Sweden. However, these did not include any sensitive questions, and no sensitive data were obtained from the participants. Therefore, according to the applicable rules in the country, there was no requirement for ethical approval.

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