

## Becoming known: Practicing equine rescue and rehabilitation as a response-able ethic of interspecies care

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*In this paper we discuss the intertwining of care with learning to know and become with the other in interspecies relationships. Drawing on interviews at horse rescue yards (England), we ask: How does an animal come to be known? What does it mean to care with an animal well? How does animal agency shape the practicing of response-able care? Caring well for a rescue horse is centred upon establishing an intimate knowledge of horses as individuals and as agents of their own life. Often the life history of an individual animal is not known and it is up to the human to imagine a possible past and present for them by interacting with the animal. Central to this process is how the agencies of both human and horse shape the emerging relational embodied interaction. Weaving together scholarship on care, agency, and interspecies relationality, we explore how the situated and intertwined processes of getting to know the other and caring well unfold. Our main assertion is that the relational knowledge which underpins the practicing of a response-able ethic of interspecies care is itself dependent on the ability of both animal and human to actively enter into a mutual (ongoing) process of learning to know and become know-able by the other. By its very (relational) nature, therefore, practicing a response-able ethic of interspecies care is simultaneously situational, dynamic, intimate and unstable. It is beyond the control of either individual alone, yet ultimately not always determinable by mutual consent of either.*

KEYWORDS: interspecies care; relationality; agency; response-ability; horse; rescue

## Introduction

In feminist care ethics the concept of ‘caring with’, has garnered much attention in the past ten years (Bowlby 2012; Power 2019). Coined by Joan Tronto (2013), caring with shifts the focus from the care provider to reciprocal action between the carer and the recipient of care. As interspecies relations are never devoid of power, care has become a major theme in the interdisciplinary field of human–animal studies (Gibbs 2021). Most of this work focuses on wild animals, within a framework of environmental ethics (see, however, Taylor et al. 2020; Schuurman and Franklin 2018). There remains, however, a need for further empirical explorations of care practices and, especially caring with, between humans and domestic animals, in contexts of interaction and dialogue between the species (Donovan 2006).

In this paper, we focus on encounters and relationships between humans and what are commonly referred to in the horse industry as rescue horses; that is, abandoned, abused or unwanted horses that have been brought to the care of one of the several horse rescue organisations (charitable trusts) operating in the UK. As with any human–horse relationship, taking ‘good’ care of a rescue horse is centred upon establishing an intimate knowledge of the horse as an individual and mutual trust between the human and the horse. The intentional attentiveness towards getting to know the animal other within a relatively short period of time, in order to (potentially) become with them well, arguably renders equine rescue yards a particularly rich site of study. For horses with only negative experiences of interacting with humans, or none at all, this process is more complicated than for a horse with a background in a secure life with humans. Our particular interest is the ways in which the staff who work with the horses at the rescue yards, learn to know the horses through – and for – the process of becoming with them. That is, how knowledge of each horse as an individual subject is both established and applied, for the purposes of attempting to gain their trust, rehabilitate them and ultimately (where viable) rehome them. Integral to this picture is the relational nature of knowledge, becoming and care. We are guided in our analysis by asking: How does an animal come to be known? What does it mean to care with an animal well? How does animal agency shape the practicing of response-able care? The case of rescue horses and the associated space (and practices) of rescue yards provides a rich opportunity for exploring such questions. They allow us to observe how humans and animals get to know and become with each other, but also how their agency informs abilities to care with and to engage care-fully. Particular here, is the fact that many of the horses taken into rescue yards will have previously been abused, unhandled, or

accustomed only to infrequent herd-based encounters with humans.

In this paper we consider what effect such life histories and experiences have on an individual horse's process of becoming with humans. We present findings which inform understanding not only of how to care with rescue horses, but also more broadly about the initial process of beginning to get to know the other at the start of each new interspecies acquaintance, and in turn, about the circumstances in which animals and humans are able to begin (re-)learning how to become with one another in a mutually rewarding way. In conformity with the nature of all horse-human relationships, however, we also remain attentive throughout to the fact that the possibility of failure (either temporarily or permanently) remains ever present and subject to multiple contributing factors.

Weaving together scholarship on ethics of care, interspecies relationality, and animal agency, we begin by elucidating the conceptual frame which provides the foundation to our discussion and to which we seek to contribute. Next, we set out the methodology applied in the collection and analysis of primary data. We then draw on a series of empirical examples to explore how the situated interspecies process of getting to know the other unfolds on a rescue yard and how the yard staff develop an understanding of the horse as an individual, as a subject and an agent with – or without – a future. Throughout, we pay attention to the on-going relational process of becoming between human and horse. We do so firstly, in terms of the physical and mental condition of a horse upon arrival at the rescue yard – as shaped by their life history of becoming with humans – and secondly, with respect to the process of becoming with between the yard staff and the horse whilst on the rescue yard. Whilst our empirical foci are centred around care practice in the here and now of the rescue yard, our analytical gaze is simultaneously attentive to the influence of known and unknown past becomings, as well as anticipated future becomings, in actively shaping the experience and outcome of rehabilitation at the rescue yard. Such imaginaries form an integral part of the ways in which many of the yard staff approach the rehabilitation of rescue horses.

### **Relational knowledges: Getting to know and practicing response-able care through becoming with**

To care well can be understood, in an ethical and epistemological sense, as an individual endeavour, building on knowledge about the other (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). A relational approach to interspecies care turns the focus to mutual becomings, a process that produces specific knowledge about the other as an individual (Despret 2004). This

relational knowledge, which is both embodied and situated, is core to caring well. Caring for the other in an individual relationship is therefore always specific, as ‘a mode of caring is not necessarily translatable elsewhere’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 211). Knowing the animal other involves understanding them as agents and as subjects of their own life, with unique ways of relating to their environment and other actors in it, as well as their life history (Schuurman and Franklin 2019). In many cases, the life history of an individual animal is not known, and it is up to the human to imagine a possible past and present for them by interacting with the animal, interpreting their messages and reading their actions and bodily messages for signs of discomfort, insecurity, fear, or trust (Schuurman 2022). This is a direct mode of relating and attending to the animal other, using one’s own body as a tool for knowing the other and learning *from* them as opposed to learning *about* them (Despret 2004; Desai and Smith 2018).

Drawing especially on the scholarship of Joan Tronto (2013) and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2012; 2017), we understand the notion of ‘caring with’ as foregrounding trust, solidarity, and reciprocity in caring relationships. These foundational elements are co-constituted and performed by the caregivers *with* the care receivers. A caring with ethics, emphasising understanding, empathy, compassion, and feeling for the other (Taylor et al. 2020), simultaneously emphasises attentiveness and responsiveness to different needs and responsibilities – what Haraway helpfully terms *response-abilities*, understood as capacities to respond (2016, 78). Response-abilities are not solely restricted to humans, but animals too are response-able (Haraway 2008, 71); thus the concept reaches ‘beyond simplistic framings of responsibility as a question of human agency in a passive and inert world’ (van Dooren and Rose 2016, 89). Within the everyday, the active nurturing of response-abilities is achieved in many ways, including through doing together, being together, through touch, through gaze and by listening to each other. More symbolically, caring with is about being curious (Haraway 2008). It is about becoming situationally response-able to each other’s processes of meaning-making, understanding and needs, in a way which enables and sustains the practicing of a mutually rewarding relationship of care both now and in the future.

Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) writes that ‘[r]elations of otherness are more than about accommodating “difference”, co-existing or tolerating’, because ‘relations of significant otherness transform those who relate and the worlds they live in’ (p. 207). This applies to the relational process of becoming with a significant other in inter-species relationships, in which animals and humans, through their actions and interactions, co-constitute each other through time (Haraway 2008; Rutherford and Wilcox 2018). Here, the agency of animals can be understood to include their subjective

experiences and intentional actions, with which they convey to others (humans and animals) their feelings, emotions, and perceptions in ways that are characteristic to them as individuals (McFarland and Hediger 2009). Following Despret (2013), agency does not appear in isolation but is always situational and relational, asking, inspiring, or making others do, move, or be inspired (see Wadham 2021). Thus, animals with their agency shape human action and the relationship between them, albeit often within limits set by humans (Birke, Bryld, and Lykke 2004; Schuurman 2021). A human–horse relationship is always also an asymmetrical one, with humans having ultimate power over the lives of horses. Asymmetrical does not, however, necessarily equal unethical. Power relationships based on interspecies interaction can often be productive of new and unexpected ways of being and relating (Redmalm 2021; Schuurman et al. 2023). In practice, the experience of becoming with an animal other, situated in time and space, consists of embodied communication, shared encounters and experiences, being affected by each other, and a feeling of togetherness, of being ‘us’ (Thompson 2011). Through this process the two are eventually transformed – in Haraway’s (2008) words, ‘[p]artners do not preexist their relating; the partners are precisely what come out of the inter- and intra-relating of fleshy, significant, semiotic-material being’ (p.165).

For the process of becoming to result in mutual transformation in a manner supportive of good care, both human and animal need first to be willing and able to make themselves available to the other (Despret 2004). In the context of achieving an interspecies relation of care, Despret’s notion of making-available can be thought of as denoting a starting point for becoming response-able to caring with. As we will show, by exploring the willingness of individual rescue horses to make themselves available to rescue yard staff we may better understand the role of animal agency in the practicing of an interspecies ethics of care.

Regarding knowledge production in the embodied interaction between humans and animals on a daily level, it can be compared to individual human care relationships. That is, as relationships in which ‘hands-on carers, often lay family members, have the particularized knowledge of one individual’ (Kittay 2019, 858). Kittay describes the acquisition of this knowledge as a ‘deliberative process, allowing for the contextuality, particularity, and multifarious considerations that go into the knowing and acting that we do as carers’ (ibid.) Similarly, in relationships between humans and animals, knowledge of the other involves and generates care, and care creates knowledge (Despret 2004). This is not to suggest, however, that interspecies care relationships are restricted to being ‘naturally’ individualistic or dyadic – instead, they have social, political and cultural dimensions (Tronto 1993), contributing to accepted norms, practices and rou-

tines of care. Care relations between humans and animals are thus never equal, but always to some extent asymmetrical (Haraway 2008). As Lawson (2007, 7) points out, 'we are challenged [...] to think about how caring, bestowing love, affection, or stewardship in places and upon animals (and indeed of subordinated people) also involves relations of power and domination'.

As a response to this challenge, Donovan (2006), calls for a dialogue in interspecies care relationships. Specifically, she urges for humans 'listening to animals, paying emotional attention, taking seriously – *caring about* – what they are telling us' (p. 305, emphasis original). By extending feminist standpoint theory to animals, Donovan argues, it would be possible to 'construct a human ethic in conversation with the animals rather than imposing on them a rationalistic, calculative grid of humans' own monological construction' (Donovan 2006, 306). Thus, for an interspecies care relationship to be ethical it would allow animals themselves, with their agency, to co-produce care with humans through everyday interaction and routines. Integral to achieving this is the maintenance of sufficient space and time for learning to know and becoming with one another. As is noted by Puig de la Bellacasa (2012), however, 'we must be careful not to become nostalgic for an idealised caring world: caring or being cared for is not necessarily rewarding or comforting' (pp. 198–199). Rather, care:

is concomitant to life – not something forced upon living beings by a moral order; yet it obliges in that for life to be liveable it needs being fostered. This means that care is somehow unavoidable: although not all relations can be defined as caring, none would subsist without care. (p. 198)

What this distinction between caring relations and the provision of care means for human–animal relations, is particularly pertinent to the case of equine rescue and rehabilitation. In this context, as we will show, caring with response-ably is central to the maintenance of a care-full interspecies relationship. Here the practicing of a response-able ethic of care involves situated, embodied encounters through which intimate knowledge of the other is reflexively gained and care-fully acted upon.

### **The case of equine rescue and rehabilitation**

Animal rescue centres – in this instance equine rescue yards – are particularly illuminating for understanding new relational beginnings between two or more individuals set within particular carescapes. This includes the prioritisation given within these spaces to getting to know as a basis for attempting successful rescue and rehabilitation; the

fact that becoming with for the purpose of rehabilitation commonly depends on consciously adapting or transforming the way in which the animal relates to the human and to the lifeworld that they encounter through the human; the need to get to know an animal within a given, individually flexible time frame; and, the (potential) centrality of practicing a response-able ethics of care in order to achieve a desirable outcome in both the present and the future. It also includes the willingness and ability of research respondents to critically reflect on getting to know for the purposes of practicing response-able care, the depth of experience and care-multiples which they are collectively able to draw upon, and also the breadth of this experience. By breadth, we refer here to the involvement of rescue yard professionals in multiple new beginnings and in numerous endings. In the case of the latter, where a mutually beneficial becoming with is found to be unattainable, this includes euthanasia. As a whole the purpose of getting to know a horse in the context of rescue and rehabilitation is about nothing less than changing the whole life course of the animal.

In the remainder of this paper, we contribute to understandings of becoming with and the practicing of a response-able ethic of interspecies care by drawing on the above sources of knowledge and experience. The evidence which we refer to was collected in autumn 2019 via semi-structured interviews conducted in person with nineteen rescue yard professionals, including welfare officers, grooms, managers and directors, from nine separate yards, run by seven different charitable organisations. The vast majority of respondents were female and all had considerable experience of working with rescue horses. All of the yards are located in England. The procedure for selecting the yards began with an online search of UK horse rescue charities via Google and Facebook, with the aim of securing the participation of a range of yards in terms of size and years of operation, and models of operation (including rehoming and those with capacity to act as lifetime sanctuaries). Eleven yards were then approached; of these nine responded positively to the request to participate in the study. All of the participating yards rehomed horses after rehabilitation, whereas only two could be formally classified as sanctuaries offering permanent stay for non-rehomeable horses.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over three hours with both authors present on all occasions. Respondents were asked to share in-depth accounts of the everyday practices of care and decision-making at all stages of rescue, rehabilitation and rehoming, euthanasia or lifetime sanctuary (where applicable), with regular encouragement that they give specific examples of individual cases. As supporting context interviewees were also asked to share their own background, experience and role at the yard as well as the governance and history of the yard. In all cases

the interviews were combined with detailed yard tours, resulting in each visit lasting between 1.5 and 4.5 hours. During the yard tours we were shown around the different spaces making up the yards (including isolation units, stabling, turn-out paddocks and training arenas) and introduced along the way to a number of the equine residents as well as other members of staff. Both authors were involved in all the interviews and site visits. For both authors, our positionality includes a lifetime of experience with horses. This experience, in turn, also makes us familiar with much of the practice and terminology in circulation within the horse industry. Neither of us have, however, previously had any direct experience with rescue horses.

Ethical approval for the empirical research was secured from the funding body for the project. All respondents consented to the formal interviews being digitally recorded and also permitted us to take photographs during the yard tours. The interview material was transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and analysed thematically. The latter was approached in conformity with the principles of Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative multi-staged method of thematic analysis. We first spent time re-familiarising ourselves with the data by way of reading and re-reading through the transcripts in full. We then each inductively coded the transcripts, initially by topic and subsequently by theme. At this point we compared and critically reflected on the emerging themes that we had each respectively identified. As part of this stage of the process we re-organised the data in accordance with the tagged themes (whilst also keeping close-to-hand the original full transcripts should the need arise to revisit the original context of selected quotations). Having identified and established (where applicable) conceptual connections between themes, we then generated guiding research questions (see above) with which to further analyse, interrogate and iteratively write-up the data, in a manner conducive of advancing current gaps in knowledge.

We now present the analysis of the material according to the themes: beginning to know the horse, response-able care as a relational accomplishment, and mutual response-ability as a basis for becoming with well. The interview quotes are coded according to yard number and respondent at that particular yard.

### **Beginning to know – stories-so-far and early assessments as a basis for practicing response-able care**

A definition of care by Tronto and Fisher (1990) which has frequently been used is: 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (p.19). This definition aptly



describes the practices of rescuing, rehabilitating, and rehoming vulnerable horses in need of care.<sup>1</sup>

There are many reasons why horses end up in rescue centres. Most of them have been subjected to sustained physical and mental abuse at the hands of previous owners. Others have only very limited or infrequent experience of being handled by humans, due to abandonment or being left as feral. Not all rescue horses, however, have a background of complete absence or wilful abuse of care. New arrivals can, for example, include horses with a history of good care, bequeathed to rescue yards in the wills of wealthy benefactors. All these diverse life histories serve only to further reinforce the fact that each new arrival brings with them, their own particular traits, needs and relational characteristics. All will (potentially) have a bearing on how they will be encountered and come to be known, and how their agencies will be considered and included in how they are cared for and with.

Depending on the size of the rescue yard, it can be as common to receive multiple new arrivals simultaneously – sometimes even “twenty at a time” (R5:1) – as individual ones. In all cases, the initial task for the yard staff is to begin getting to know each new horse that has been placed in their care individually, including their physical condition and how they respond to human interaction. It is only by beginning to get to know an individual horse that staff can then begin to more accurately plan how – or whether – to begin their rehabilitation, in a manner which responds to their perceived needs. This is commonly initiated through a fixed period of universal assessment to which all new arrivals are subjected, in a stabling unit isolated from the rest of the yard. In addition to establishing the characteristics and associated care needs of each new arrival, this concentrated period of observation is undertaken in order to protect both the well-being of the yard staff and that of all existing equine residents. Regarding the latter, attention is directed towards determining the presence or absence of any possible herd level health risks, including bacterial or viral diseases or microbial infestations.

They'll come into the [isolation] unit [...] whilst they're in there, we'll see if we can handle them, we'll get a vet's assessment [...] the, heart lungs eyes, the way they move, if they're in an area we think there may be strangles or anything like that [...] We'll do as much of an assessment as we can while we're up there. (R9:3)<sup>2</sup>

As well as allowing sufficient time for any contagious diseases to surface, the isolation

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1 Rehabilitation of a horse at a rescue yard is centred around supporting or improving their ability to cope within the social and physical environment of horse-human relationships.

2 Strangles is a highly contagious bacterial, respiratory infection.

unit creates opportunity for new arrivals to begin adapting to the change of environment. As they begin to settle and become more confident, so too do they begin to display a wider range of behaviours and dimensions of their personality. As they begin to show greater agency in their interaction with humans, other horses, and their environment, this offers further insight for the yard staff into who they are as an individual. This potentially alters the ways in which the horses begin to act and respond to particular approaches and requests of the yard staff.

For example, we had ten arrive [the day before] yesterday [...] the following day I had a case [meeting] with the grooms to start doing their assessments with them and that all gets recorded and they do that over a period of a week at least three or four times each pony. Then we've got an idea actually of what we're dealing with. Plus, it gives them time to settle in and get to know the grooms and the behaviour they might display on the first day, it might be different by the sixth day. (R5:1)

One of the first tasks for the yard staff is to form an opinion on whether or not new arrivals are well enough to even be capable of co-engaging in the most basic of care tasks. Where they are assessed to be capable, the yard staff attempt to enrol them in a series of basic tasks, all elemental to care delivery. Their response to being handled and approach to undertaking the tasks are used to further inform their overall assessment:

On arrival we generally leave them to settle in for a day or two and just sort of check them and feed them, and then every new horse has a handling assessment. So we have a form that we do, to see how much handling the horse can have and if you encounter any problems. That starts with very simply, can you approach the horse, and then can you catch the horse, put head collar on, then it goes to touching it all over the body and picking up feet and then the horse's leading responses, and that's done during their initial four weeks admissions, when they come to the centre. (R3:1)

A major part of the practice of caring for and with horses crucially involves *handling*, doing things by touching: putting on tack, leading, palpating, injecting, holding during procedures, and caressing. The centrality of touch reveals the extent to which care is embodied, especially in interspecies care relationships where verbal communication is limited. Touch is a prerequisite of care, without which the rehabilitation of vulnerable animals such as rescue horses would be impossible. Listening to the animal requires ensuring that the animal trusts the human to the extent that any touching for the purpose of care can be done without force (Despret 2004). Yet, touch is often taken for granted in interspecies care practices with trained and healthy animals that agree to

being touched. The importance of touch becomes visible in its absence, when a horse is afraid to let humans come close:

There was one called Kestrel. We couldn't get near her for months. She was in isolation. She had done her isolation process. We couldn't get near her then. She came over to the main yard. She had to be stabled. That didn't help. We still couldn't get anywhere near her. She eventually needed to get darted so we could actually get near her and get the feeding and stuff done and veterinary into weaning and stuff like that. But after then once you had all the bad pushed out of the way it was then easier to get the positive through to her and she was one of those that I saw right through from the beginning to rehoming her to a nice lovely lady that doesn't expect too much of her because of her past but she can still be a companion in the field. (R2:2)

Willingness on the part of the horse to be touched by humans is an example of collaboration between human and horse that is not visible as observable moments of action. Despret (2013) notes how the agency of animals is often reported as their resistance to human action or a refusal to collaborate with humans – yet, collaboration itself should also be understood as agency. As Despret writes, 'when they do what they must so that everything happens as it is supposed to, we do not see this as testimony to their willingness to do what is expected of them' (p. 43). Despret calls this *secret agency*, as it is not openly demonstrated but appears in the routines of collaboration and mutual dependency.

As part of the process of getting to know new arrivals the yard staff often begin surmising probable elements of a horse's history. Sometimes the only information that they have to go on is their current demeanor and responsiveness: 'You can tell the difference between the ones who are petrified of you because they have never been handled and the ones that have had that bad handling' (R5:1). For rescue horses, their future is often dependent on their individual and situational abilities to become with humans (and other horses) and create relationships of trust. Yet, whether recognising, knowing, and supporting these abilities, as part of the practice of becoming with and caring with the horse, necessitates knowledge of the horse's past – and to what extent – is an interesting question. Bowlby (2012) suggests that care is experienced in relation to different timescales, including memories of past experiences of caring and receiving care as well as learned habits of care, spanning the whole lifetime. The rhythms and routines of actual care practices are further affected by embodied temporalities such as sleeping, waking, and eating (Holmberg 2019). These timescales of care become visible in the ways in which the life histories of the horses can be imagined. They also become

visible (as we will show in the discussion on care as a relational accomplishment), in the multiple becomings between the grooms and the horses.

The process of constructing a life history for an animal, to be able to care well for them, can be understood in Massey's (2005) words as a way to 'imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far' (p. 9). This conceptual idea serves to give 'a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell' (p. 11). It is a relational, temporal and spatial process of becoming with, creating an opportunity for other, previously unknown lives to be imagined and become known. Whilst stories-so-far can be surmised as probable, because of the embodied nature of human–horse communication there is, a limit to the extent that the past life of a horse can be known from their present behaviour, i.e. their actions, expressions and ways of communicating with humans and with other horses since entering the rescue yard. Yet, for the purposes of caring with, the accounts provided by the rescue yard staff suggest that this is not necessarily a hindrance. Following Habran and Battard (2019), there is a difference in temporal orientation between caring-for and caring with. The former, based on predetermined rules and practices, is oriented to the past and the present, with a risk of closing the future for the care recipient. In the latter, the recipient of care is given a chance to engage in the process of caring, keeping it flexible and open to experimenting. Thus, caring with is not necessarily based on what was known beforehand but what is suggested to be possible; therefore, it is oriented towards the future.

Beginning to get to know an individual horse can be as much a task of understanding – or anticipating – how their imagined past may continue to haunt their present or future selves, as one of a fresh attempt at nurturing a positive relationship between horse and human. That is, how malleable and responsive they may be to acts of care giving, or how much of a hold previously established fear, lack of trust and ways of interacting with humans appear to have over them. This something which comes to be known individually through the embodied practices and situated, physical encounters of interspecies care giving.

Even where past experiences, persistent fear, mistrust, and learned behaviours prove unmalleable to invitations for making oneself available to becoming with humans differently, for yard staff this does not constitute a failure of rehabilitation. Rather, the response of a rescue horse to certain conditions or ways of being approached and handled, becomes part of who that horse is understood – and accepted – to be and become. Consequently, associated rules and strategies are put in place to avoid placing them in situations where the precarious trust that has been achieved may be lost once more

and previous behaviour resurface. This extends to the ability of others, including future owners, to safely respond to their needs, in moments which threaten to derail even the best of care plans. Even with such rules, strategies and plans in place, there remains an on-going need for horse and human to continue fine tuning their situated response-abilities to one another and the not always predictable interventions of others besides.

Any horse, whether bought or rescued, could have had a bad history. You might find that one day you're out riding and a cat comes in front of you and the horse goes on its back legs because that's the trigger for that horse. (R1:1)

Overall, the respondents were generally very positive about the potential for full rehabilitation being achieved. In the following example, a critical moment is perceived where the horse's attitude towards humans and the relationship shifts towards collaboration:

Others literally just need time. Time, consistency, and gentleness and calmness. Then they soon come around. We soon find that, they always take a deep breath and go 'okay, this is fine'. Then you can progress. (R5:1)

The horse agreeing to accept trust, after overcoming initial, persistent fear, is the turning point in this relationship after a lengthy period of patient caring with. The example illustrates the relationality of agency and its significance in the process of becoming with: as Despret (2013) points out, '[t]here is no agency that is not interagency' (p. 44). In the next section, we will discuss this further by focusing on interspecies care as an intimate relational accomplishment.

### **Caring well: Response-able care as an intimate relational accomplishment**

Response-able care of rescue horses requires getting to know them as individuals and as relational beings. This means that who a horse is, and how they behave, including their response-ability to even the most caring of encounters, can depend as much on *what* they are being asked to encounter and become with, as by *whom*. The significance of this relational dimension, particularly during the early stages of rehabilitating rescue horses, is something which is widely appreciated by the staff of rescue yards. The common approach taken to care and rehabilitation on rescue yards is by assigning a primary carer(s) to each individual horse. Accordingly, assessing the response-ability of a rescue horse to a rehabilitation care plan requires an understanding of how individual yard staff are themselves likely to respond to the various forms of horse-human encounter and

interaction around which such care plans are centred. For yard managers, this involves creating relationships on both interspecies and intraspecies levels; that is, attempting to make successful matches between individual horses and individual grooms, as well as between horses. In the rehoming process, similar practices of match-making take place, involving the humans and horses in the new home.

Assessments undertaken upon arrival and during their time spent in admissions are used to construct basic care and training plans for each individual horse, with specific yard staff then assigned to them. Sometimes this staffing allocation is based on the level of experience held by individual staff members: 'if they're quite high-risk ones I'll tend to work with more experienced staff, they work with them one-to-one' (R9:3); upon other occasions the designation may be made based on the mannerisms and attributes of the staff member. Of primary relevance here are attitudinal attributes, but bodies themselves can also have a bearing, in terms of matching the physical characteristics of both human and horse, as in the case of small ponies:

Obviously some people are a lot taller. They can't do the Shetlands because they're just terrified of someone massive. We're all tall to them anyway but someone a bit smaller and quieter works better with the Shetlands. (R2:2)

Where applicable, though, specific requests from grooms to be paired up with particular individuals will also be accommodated, on the basis that the process of becoming with has already begun:

It's all about gaining trust. [...] I assign different grooms to different horses. I usually find they'll tell me which one they want and I always go with that because that means that they're developing a relationship with that horse. (R5:1)

Once a groom has been allocated to an individual horse, they are then responsible for providing daily care for the next stage of the horse's rehabilitation. Although this is often guided by a pre-agreed care plan, both the care plan and the pairing of human–animal remain open to re-assessment, as dependent on the response-ability of each to the other and both to the task in-hand. Here what matters is the in-practice experience of becoming with – something which can be as dependent on a matching of personality types or characters, as it can on individual competences. The success of the matching is to a large extent based on previous multiple becomings in the cases of both human and horse, in a network of relational life histories of care, to which humans and horses bring their past experiences, memories, learned habits, and embodied rhythms (Bowlby 2012):

Initially they would be given to somebody that we felt really comfortable, knowing the horse's history. But not every member of staff takes to a horse so it's like with the riders, we will say if you feel that, the horse doesn't settle, is more sensitive with you, the other rider will try it out and see. Because obviously we want a good experience, we want the horse to get going first, and then it will accept, being sort of mixed around a bit more, rather than, you're pushing something that's clearly not working. So we've always got to have that flexibility to notice the subtle signs and, sort of step back and then, restart it. (R6:1)

This quote illustrates the flexible ways of developing a care-full relationship with a horse in which interagency between horse and human is acknowledged and supported. As Lynda Birke and Kirrilly Thompson (2018) note, animals living with humans are often flexible with their agency, including creativity and ability to surprise their human companions. The agency of horses in everyday practices of care can be approached through de Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics (de Certeau [1984] 2008). According to de Certeau, those with no official power do not simply succumb to regulations and aspirations, that is, strategies, of those in power. Instead, they use tactics in active and creative ways to find their own space. What is interesting here is that the use of tactics does not necessarily come in the form of opposition or rebellion. As 'an art of the weak' (de Certeau [1984] 2008, 37), the use of tactics is more subtle, thus reflecting Despret's (2013) idea of secret agency. Such use of tactics by animals may indicate a willingness to collaborate with humans, but in a way that requires an attentiveness and responsiveness on the part of the human to the animal's needs and capabilities.

Rehabilitating a rescue horse with the aim of rehoming them is not only about getting to know them as a basis for informing care in the present. For rescue horses at the yards learning to know them, to become with them, is in most cases only temporary, as most horses will eventually be rehomed. Becoming with them is therefore a 'trial run'. The task for the groom is to find out what the horse may have potential to become, including with a future owner, family and equine companions. Such knowledge is needed in order to plan how best to safeguard the continuance of care-full interspecies relations in the future. Central here is identifying what factors are likely to contribute towards a care-full relationship through which both horse and human are able to flourish, or to destabilize and erode such flourishing. However, whilst particular emphasis is placed on getting to know the capabilities and caring-disposition of rehoming applicants, this is only one part of the carescape which the yard staff need to be satisfied with in order to trust that they are making the right decision. Also directly relevant is the physical space to which a horse will be rehomed, the care routines to which

they will need to become accustomed, and the other equine residents cohabiting that space, who will become part of their new care collective.

We had one that was really bad if he had to stay in a stable for an extended period of time, something like two days, who would be quite naughty. So he had to go somewhere where he would have a lot of [field] turnout. We find out as much as we can about the horses, so that we can line them up to the correct home that will suit them as much as we possibly can. Cause some people want horses that will be left on their own, while they go and hack out on their horse, we actually do struggle with that because a lot of horses obviously don't like that, but we'll try our best to figure out if they would possibly do that. (R9:3)

The staff at rescue yards, strive to get to know the horses as well as they can, imagining possible future scenarios and preparing the horses for these. Knowledge, especially in interspecies relationships, is always relative and incomplete. In the mutual becomings which constitute human–animal relations, the answer to the question of who the animal (or human) is, is in constant transformation. Upon rehoming, rescue horses are exposed to new social and physical environments, the effect of which cannot be predicted beforehand. The multi-layered relationality of rehoming a rescue animal is thus not only a possibility for successful becomings and care-full relationships, but a tangible risk of failure. In large part it will remain dependent upon the response-ability of both horse and human to learn to become with each other, as informed by their respective other becomings which serve to make up their individual stories thus far.

For the staff of rescue yards, caring with horses that they may never be sure of knowing well enough gives rise to a *relational humility*, a term coined by Vrinda Dalmiya (2016) as 'the bridge between caring and knowing' (p. 2). Relational humility is discussed by Kittay (2019) as an epistemological stance to individual care relationships: 'I cannot act ethically unless I acknowledge my ignorance of the other and my own need to learn from the cared-for, as well as from others who are related to us in various forms' (p. 860). The term thus acknowledges the knowledge possessed by vulnerable others about the possibilities of successful or unsuccessful becomings in a particular relationship. For rescue yard staff, such an acknowledgement of the horses' knowledges is embedded in how they care with the horses.



## **Mutual Response-ability as a Basis for Becoming with Well: Transformative Endings (and New Beginnings)**

As Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 204) reminds us, ‘affirming that beings do not pre-exist their relatings means that our relatings have consequences’. In the case of rescue horses particularly, their experience of becoming with humans prior to arrival at a rescue yard may have already shaped them in such a way as to substantially restrict their possibility of becoming with humans otherwise. In cases where the physical or mental condition of the horse is judged to be such that a future free from suffering is deemed unattainable, the practicing of care proceeds in a different direction. In this section we look at how this is determined and with what consequence. That is, how it comes to be known and decided upon that an individual horse is no longer capable of becoming with humans well.

In an earlier section of this paper, we noted that one of the first tasks for the staff of rescue yards is to ascertain whether or not new arrivals are well enough to even be capable of co-engaging in the most basic of care tasks. In some cases, the physical condition of the horse makes it immediately apparent that they possess little or no capacity to care with the staff member. In such cases, the experience of staff members is that their interventions, however extreme, may ultimately prove futile in sustaining the life of the horse:

If there’s anything that’s collapsing, needs a little bit of help for that support, we’ll go in with [the] sling. Quite often when they’re at that point, not a lot of them really make it. (R9:3)

Very often with rescue horses, physical injury and illness are only part of the overall picture of what a horse has become by the time they arrive at a rescue yard. Whilst physical ailments can often be resolved with the right medical interventions, behavioural problems and emotional trauma can ultimately be far more debilitating:

What we don’t want is somebody comes in to see Freddy and say ‘I love him. I want him’ and ringing us up every week. ‘How are you getting on with Freddy? How is he getting on?’ and then we say that actually we had to put him to sleep because his behaviour was so bad. ‘Cause sometimes it’s not fair on the horse. If they are so terrified and they continue to be so, what kind of life is that for them. (R5:1)

Where a decision is made to euthanise an individual horse, it is usually based on a perceived lack of realistic prospect that the continuation of care will restore a horse’s ability

to live well. It is seldom based on the cost of continuing to administer care (through medical intervention or otherwise), or the utility value of the horse. As a respondent explained, expressing a sentiment shared (if not always an affordable possibility) by many other equine rescue professionals:

Every single animal that we have here gets a chance at life, and sometimes that costs us multiple thousands of pounds for horses that from a value point of view are worth, 50 pounds. (R4:1)

A similar care logic is also found with respect to age. Whilst age (where it is known) may inform decisions regarding how a horse might be best cared-for and what future care scenarios are appropriate for them, in and of itself the age of a horse (or indeed the longevity of their life that remains) is but one factor. This is illustrated in the following extract where the staff member refers to two elderly ponies, one of which was rehomed at 31 years of age:

We're very flexible and we look at all the horses on a one-to-one basis because he [the 31-year-old] came in with another pony [...] who was a similar age, who we put to sleep, because he was, not happy at all and not in good health at all. But I, just like that, we looked at that on a very one-to-one basis, like an individual basis. (R3:1)

However, when age is taken into account alongside the life history of a horse, there is no guarantee that simply because they are aged and unwanted by their current owner they will be accepted into a rescue yard. Because of their varied backgrounds the care-scape of a rescue yard is recognised by respondents as not being universally befitting for all horses and humans to become with one another well.

That the end point of a process of getting to know an individual animal may prove highly transformative for the humans most closely involved in their care up until that point, will depend in part on the way in which the relationship, in its current form, is brought to a close. Where the condition of the horse is such that their suffering cannot be abated, or that their overall wellbeing is likely only to decline, the focus then shifts to providing palliative care and the effort of achieving a good death.

The Greek word 'euthanasia' literally translates into 'good death', but as an act of care, a good death can be conceptualised in an Aristotelian sense, focusing not only on the actual moment of death but including the last phases of life (Rollin 2009; Schuurman and Franklin 2018). In determining the need for euthanasia a major challenge is the difficulty of communicating it to the horse and giving them the possibility to respond. For some horses the decision to practice care by way of euthanasia may be immediately apparent

from the initial visual and hands-on inspection. For others, the next stage of their becoming with will remain dependent on what becomes knowable through observation and handling over an extended period of time. Ultimately, where rescue yard workers see no prospect of improving the response-ability of a rescue horse to become with humans well, the question of whether or not to practice care by way of euthanasia resurfaces. At this point, practicing response-able care is not determinable by mutual consent. However, its reappearance signifies not a failure of care, but rather an appreciation that euthanasia forms an integral part of interspecies care (Schuurman and Franklin 2018):

We do euthanize if we have to. There's two reasons for that. One would be medical and one would be behavioural. If we've tried absolutely everything and that horse is still standing up and boxing at you, we cannot rehome them. (R5:1)

By knowing when to stop trying to become with for the purposes of achieving good care (inclusive of protecting the safety of the staff), this in turn opens up a space for attempting to rehabilitate another horse in need of rescue. Nevertheless, the effect of each unsuccessful attempt at rehabilitating a rescue horse often lingers with the staff members who have been most intimately involved.

It's disheartening when we're here to help and we're here to find them a home ultimately. When you see a horse so terrified because it's been beaten in the past you just know that there's no future where it's gonna be comfortable living with any human because it's just had such a bad experience. But at least we know we've got it here and it's had a semi-nice end. (R2:2)

Kittay (2019, 860) notes that 'a failure of relational humility can have dire consequences for either or both the carer and the cared-for'. The rescue yard staff are very aware of the vulnerability of the horses in their care and their role in caring well and response-ably with them.

## Conclusions

A focus on daily, ongoing practices such as care, reveals the complexity of becoming with animals, with attentiveness and responsiveness to the others' messages and agencies. In the case of rescue horses, we have shown how their successful rehabilitation and rehoming is dependent upon the relational ability of animal and human to respond to and become with one another in a manner supportive of establishing and sustaining a mutually rewarding interspecies relationship. It is by advancing our understanding of

and attentiveness to animal agency as it features in the narratives of practitioners, that we are in turn able to better understand what it means to become response-able to the needs and desires of the other in the daily relational practicing of an interspecies ethic of care (Haraway 2008).

Through exploring the process of learning to know each other, striving to become response-able and making one's self available to the other at a rescue yard we can understand the nuances of interagency in care-full interspecies relationships. Following Haraway, we can understand these mutual becomings as 'a dance of relating' (2008, 25). In the context of a rescue yard, this is clearly a dance where steps are care-fully taken and re-taken for as long as is necessary (or possible) to enhance becoming with well. As such, the care practices studied resemble what de Certeau ([1984] 2008) calls 'tireless but quiet activity' (p. 31). Our study shows that by exploring the willingness of animals and humans to make themselves available to each other we are able to better understand the role of interagency in care-full relationships.

The process of becoming with can bring about transformative changes within and between two or more individuals. At the same time, affording greater recognition to the role of interagency helps to explain why, the nature of these changes, or the extent to which an individual is able or willing to change their way of being with another, is never certain. Whether changes in ways of being and relating to others cause a coming-together or a growing-apart of relational proximities is also not pre-determined. This is dependent at least on the learned response-ability of each to the other. As this study of equine rescue demonstrates, central to how this relational response-ability comes to be learned and performed are both the situational contexts of encounter (including the influence and involvement of others), and the active practicing (or absence thereof) of an ethic of care. Directly relevant here, are the embodied learnings drawn from past and parallel becomings with others, in a network of mutual interspecies becomings. That becoming with is defined by an on-going process of relational change, should not, however, be assumed to mean that all involved individuals will be equally, or even similarly, affected by the relationships. For some the degree of change may be merely an incremental process accrued over a lifetime of participating in similar relationships. For others the experiences created by a particular relational encounter may prove to be entirely transformative to their way of being and becoming with another individual, and therefore, with many others besides. Furthermore, despite the fundamental openness of becoming with, however, this does not automatically mean that transformative changes induced through former relationships can be destabilised through subsequent ones. Nor, indeed, can changes achieved within current relationships be protected from future change.

## FUNDING DETAILS

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant 316856.

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