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The Elusive ‘Feel’: Exploring the Quality of the Rider-Horse Relationship

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how riders perceive and understand the relationship with their horse. Participants included ten elite female riders with a mean age of 40.6 years, five of whom competed in Eventing and five in Dressage with an average of 30.9 years competitive experience, and their chosen horses (mean age: 11.8 years). The average duration for the relationship between horse and rider was 6.8 years. Each rider-horse combination completed a flatwork training session, which was video recorded. Riders were asked to watch their video back and provide a commentary of their direct (their own) and meta (their horse's, as understood by the rider) perceptions of their interaction including descriptions of the characteristics that underpin the relationship. The riders' verbal reports were transcribed in full, and then examined using a thematic analysis. The analysis was both deductive and inductive, a process known as abductive reasoning. The sub-themes were generated inductively through initial coding, and then afforded deductively to the rudimentary framework of the 4Cs model of quality relationships: **Closeness** represents individuals' *feelings*, and sub-themes included respect, trust, appreciation, and emotional bond. **Commitment** represents individuals' *thoughts* and sub-themes included will, attentional focus, motivation, and effort. **Complementarity** represents *behaviors* and sub-themes included cooperation, reciprocity, support, and personality. **Co-orientation** represents *mutual knowledge and understanding*, and sub-themes included self-awareness, shared knowledge, optimal learning, and empathic accuracy. Additionally, sub-themes were induced to new themes outside of the rudimentary framework; **Welfare** with sub-themes of psychological well-being, physical well-being, treatment/therapy, and **Performance** with sub-themes including groundwork, judgement, relaxation, and harmony. The overarching theme of **Rider-Horse Psychophysiological Confidence**

underlined the importance of quality rider-horse relationships to performance and welfare, for both horse and rider. An adaptation of the 4Cs relationship model is offered as an educational framework for the rider-horse relationship and opportunities for future research are highlighted.

Keywords: equestrian, coach-athlete relationship, empathic accuracy, horse-rider relationship, horsemanship, human-animal interaction

The Elusive ‘Feel’: Exploring the Quality of the Rider-Horse Relationship

I could never discern who in their partnership was the pupil and who was the teacher.

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The emotive mantra of #twohearts, advocated by Fédération Equestre Internationale as the worldwide governing body of all equestrian sports, epitomizes the combined effort of two beings, working together as a partnership to deliver “a level of synchronization at which two entities become one, the whole being better than the sum of its parts” (Schinke & Schinke, 1997, p.46). Whilst this unique relationship graced the competition arena in the 33rd Olympics (648 B.C.), the strength of this partnership has been witnessed in war, industrial, and rural pursuits for thousands of years. One of the earliest writings of horsemanship by Xenophon, some 2400 years ago, advocated three fundamental principles of training; the horse must be developed naturally, without force, and with a beautiful outcome (Micklem, 2017), and it highlighted the incomparable bond between a warrior and his steed “absolute refusal on the part of the horse to be mounted by any save his accustomed rider” (Xenophon, 2006, p.99). Indeed, Podhajsky (1967) affirmed that only kindness and mutual understanding between horse and rider will provide the appropriate conditions for the highest achievement, and furthermore the rider must possess the ability to “develop his horse’s mental and physical proficiency so that he will not only obey, but also *want* to obey to the limit of his power” (p.71). Therefore, the “art” in horsemanship is the ability of the rider to use their skill and intellect to create a learning environment that motivates the horse to engage and maximize their potential, without the horse feeling troubled (Brannaman & Reynolds, 2004). The beauty of the performance that

is then created, is simply a by-product of the quality of the relationship between horse and rider. It appears therefore, that the illustration posited of the accomplished rider, is essentially that of an effective coach (Hassler & Baumert, 2015). A coach(rider) that has nothing else in mind but the horse's best interest at heart.

Over the last forty years, documented coaching philosophy and best practice has advanced from leadership and motivational theories (e.g., Chelladurai & Carron, 1978; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Smoll et al., 1978) which have explored a variety of constructs such as motivation, expectation and values from both coach-centered and athlete-centered approaches, to greater focus on the interpersonal dynamics of the coach-athlete dyad via relationship theories (e.g. Jowett & Meek, 2000; La Voi, 2004; Wylleman, 2000). Similarly, modern philosophers of horsemanship practice have recently voiced concern over the connotations of dominance in more traditional leadership theories of horsemanship (Jones, 2017), lending support to a more empathic and reciprocal approach to the partnership (McGreevy, 2006).

Within the context of the coach-athlete relationship, the most prevalent model to date is the 4Cs (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016); closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation. These constructs are the key ingredients which constitute a high-quality relationship (Jowett, 2007, 2017b). Closeness entails feelings such as respect, liking, trust and appreciation and reflects the emotional connection. Commitment incorporates thoughts of willingness to maintain a secure attachment over time despite ups and down and reflects the cognitive connection. Complementarity reflects the

presence of cooperation, rapport, reciprocity, and support and captures the behavioral connection. Co-orientation comprises the common ground established between two individuals and encapsulates their mutual knowledge and understanding developed over time and generated through similarity, self-awareness, and empathy (Jowett, 2007; Lorimer & Jowett, 2013). This construct highlights the importance of a shared understanding, achieved through quality communication, and underpinned by the interdependent elements of empathic understanding and empathic accuracy (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013). Whilst empathic understanding denotes an individuals' insight and perception of the relationship as a whole, empathic accuracy, delineates the moment to moment perceptual intuition of the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of another, with the ability to respond appropriately (cf. Ickes et al., 1990). Both empathic understanding and empathic accuracy enhance the potential of increased congruence within the relationship, and importantly "offer a solution to the confusion surrounding understanding between coaches and athletes" (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013, p.330).

In the equestrian world, empathic accuracy is interpreted as 'feel'. This level of understanding is as important for "the commanding partner, the rider, as it is for the executing one, the horse" (Podhajsky, 1967, p.53). In classical riding, feel has been defined as "a rider's intuitive response to his horse's actions, which unites horse and rider in a harmonious manner" (Marshall, 1998, p.45). This state of almost being in perfect harmony would require a high level of connection, a unit relationship, that is built on knowing and understanding. It has been suggested by a number of accomplished practitioners and philosophers of horsemanship, that feel is a far more reciprocal and layered construct (Brannaman & Reynolds 2005; de Kunffy, 2017; Dorrance, 1994; Hunt, 1978; Radicchi, 2017). Indeed, many of these practitioners

consider feel to be a way of being with a horse, requiring exceptional levels of self-awareness, timing, and empathy. Radicchi (2017) describes this as ‘contact’, not in the literal sense, more “the awareness of feeling and being felt” (p.14). In this respect horses are more attuned to an innate awareness, that we as humans, have somewhat squandered through evolution (Smith, 2002). Importantly, feel is recognized as a two-way conversation (Harvey, 2016; Rashid, 2016), and the rider’s moment-to-moment decisions of action/reaction are led by the “intrinsic sensitivity of each horse”, and not their own sensitivities (Radicchi, 2017, p.21). Horses operate through an embodied cognition (Wilson, 2002), their mental attitude translates 100% to their physical attitude, as for the horse, body and mind are inherently linked, therefore body language and behavioral indicators are an essential medium for communication. Podhajsky (1967) therefore notes that the effective rider will attune to the natural instincts of themselves and their equine partner through awareness and understanding. In equestrian sports, communication between horse and rider is fundamentally psychophysiological (Peters & Black, 2012) and kinesthetic (Schinke & Schinke, 1997). Such aspects of communication inform both the rider and the horse and provide the necessary fuel that keeps their relationship evolving (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016).

Despite some remarkable texts throughout history depicting the finest horsemanship practitioners and their philosophies, the rider-horse relationship has less frequently traversed the academic or indeed scientific world. Researchers in equitation science have identified several factors which influence the relationship including respective previous experiences, emotional states and attachment, and their implications for equine learning (McGreevy et al., 2018). Indeed, the focus of equitation science has

largely oriented learning theory in the training of horses (McGreevy & McLean, 2005). However, equitation science researchers do advocate that effective measures are required for more complex constructs that “transcend scientific analysis” (McGreevy, 2006, p.499), acknowledging that the “horse-human relationship is likely to affect learning outcomes” (McGreevy et al., 2018, p.58). Previously, qualitative researchers have utilized interviews and case studies to understand riders’ perceptions of horse-rider communication (Zetterqvist Blokhuis & Lundgren, 2015), learning theory (Bornmann, 2016), entrainment (Maurstad et al., 2013), mutual understanding (Game, 2001), and equine sentience (Abbey & Randle, 2016) to further knowledge into the dynamics of the rider-horse relationship (Yorke et al., 2008). Given the psychophysiological nature of communication within the relationship however, it seems prudent to conduct a study which incorporates both the rider’s application and interpretation of their interaction with their equine partners.

Ericsson (2006) noted that the “extent to which expertise requires innate gifts versus specialized acquired skills and abilities” (p. 223) has been of great interest to philosophers and scientists alike. In the equestrian world, the most accomplished of horsemanship practitioners are frequently perceived to be *gifted* in the relationship(s) developed with their horses. This study sought to explore how riders perceive and understand the relationship with their horse. Elite riders and their chosen horse were filmed during a typical training session. Subsequently, the rider was requested to view the filmed training session and describe their direct (own) and meta (the horse’s, as understood by the rider) perceptions of the quality of the relationship on a moment to moment basis. The use of a video observation of their psychophysiological communication during the training session facilitated a meaningful commentary of the

riders' experience of the relationship without direction or disruption (Denzin & Lincoln, 1984; Yorke et al., 2008). The focus was on exploring the riders' understanding and application of "feel" or empathic accuracy whilst working with the horse, its implications for achieving unity (harmony) and whether riders' perceptions or experiences of the relationship could be understood through the coach-athlete relationship model. The riders also discussed the determinants which constitute a positive and productive rider-horse relationship. The practical significance of this study is to provide a framework that helps describe the relationship riders and horses develop throughout the course of their partnership, whilst diffusing any illusions that suggest that the rider-horse relationship can only be understood, developed and maintained, by a few gifted horsemanship practitioners. A framework that maps out the main components of the relationship is likely to serve an educational function in training aspiring equestrians and provide the groundwork for further academic inquiry.

Methods

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Loughborough University before the commencement of data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, requirements, and criteria. Furthermore, it was explained that the study was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Participants were given pseudonyms as identification in both the analysis and discussion sections. Participants were de-briefed, and a summary report was supplied informing them of the overall results of the study.

Design

Based upon a constructivist ontology (i.e. beliefs reflect a shared reality, but individual interpretations of reality differ) with an interpretivist epistemology, this study explored elite riders' direct (own) and meta (their horse's, as understood by the rider) perceptions of the rider-horse relationship.

Participants

A criterion-based sample of elite riders was used with a mean age of 40.6 years (*SD* 12.65, range = 27-64 years of age). The sample consisted of ten elite Eventing and Dressage Riders who have competed Nationally and/or Internationally, recruited through advertisements on social media and via equestrian organizational networks. All riders were female (although this was not a specification of the criterion), based in the United Kingdom, coached equestrianism in their respective fields, and had an average of 30.9 years (*SD* 11.79, range 16-60 years) competitive experience. The horses used for this study were two mares, one stallion, and seven geldings, with a mean age of 11.8 years (*SD* 2.65, range = 8-16 years of age). A minimum of one year was required by the study for the duration of the rider-horse relationship, the actual average duration was 6.8 years (*SD* 4.83, range = 2-16 years).

Materials

This study used a handheld video recording device to record the training session, with a 64GB memory card which was transferred to a laptop for playback during the

commentary. A digital hand-held audio-recorder was used to record the rider's commentary and perspectives.

Procedure

The following steps formed part of the procedures for obtaining relevant data.

1. Completion of a brief case history of the horse and rider. The data recorded included but was not limited to; rider age, horse age, duration of relationship, respective competitive experience, and rider's coaching experience.
2. The rider was then asked to conduct a typical flatwork training session with the horse, conducted at a level appropriate to the horse's current ability for a maximum of 40 minutes.
3. The researcher video recorded the training session.
4. Following the training session, the horse's aftercare was prioritized, and then the rider and researcher reviewed the video footage. Throughout the video review, the rider provided a verbal report of their direct (own) and meta (the horse's, as understood by the rider) perceptions of the relationship quality and communication during the training session, which was recorded on an audio recorder. Observations included reflections of when harmony (i.e., the notion of "we") were prevalent (i.e., high or low), actions/behaviors taken to establish/re-establish harmony and reason behind loss/gain harmony from rider and horse's perspective, behavioral indicators of horse, rider and horse personality factors and their influence on the relationship, their horsemanship or horse learning/training philosophies.

Data Analysis

The riders' verbal reports (Ericsson & Simon, 1980) were transcribed in full, and then examined using a thematic analysis. The analysis was both deductive and inductive, a process known as "abductive reasoning" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.27). The raw themes were generated inductively through initial coding and development of low-order sub-themes, and then where applicable afforded either deductively to high-order themes of the 4Cs rudimentary framework; closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation, or inductively to new high-order themes outside of the rudimentary framework. In previous research, the benefits of this novel process of analysis have been described as "a dialectical movement between everyday meanings and theoretical explanations, acknowledging the creative process of interpretation when applying a theoretical framework to participants" (Ryba et al., 2012, p.85). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage system was employed, entailing: 1) immersion - in-depth familiarization of the data via the transcriptions and re-listening to the verbal reports, 2) notation of initial coding and data observations across each transcription, 3) extrapolation of coding to identify low-order sub-themes within and across transcripts, 4) review and confirmation of low-order sub-themes ensuring consistent evidence across all transcripts, 5) deduction of low-order sub-themes where applicable to high-order themes of the 4Cs rudimentary framework and induction of low-order sub-themes to newly defined high-order themes, and 6) compilation of the report.

Through purposeful sampling of knowledgeable and experienced elite riders who had competed at the top level of equestrian sport and the use of a novel and comprehensively reported methodology, this study endeavored good rigor. For

additional validity, six ‘critical friends’ (Camic et al., 2003; Watt, 2007) with diverse backgrounds of expertise including equestrian sport, sport psychology and coaching, were independently recruited to review the researchers’ analysis of the data and provide additional interpretive feedback for consideration (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Results & Discussion

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of elite riders’ direct (own) and meta (their horse’s, as understood by the rider) perceptions of the rider-horse relationship. The data were thematically analyzed using abductive reasoning (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and a summary of the results are presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1

Closeness

This construct represents the *feelings* conveyed by the riders and their horses (cf. Jowett & Meek, 2000; see also, Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). The affection and emotional bond were deeply rooted within these dyads, and for some it was challenging to separate the personal from the professional relationship (Becker, 2009):

I have to mentally with him find a place where I can actually work him, because I adore him I can be far too soft on him and most people spend most of their time telling me I’m too soft with him, and that I don’t demand enough from him. (Isabel)

Jill, too, described a relationship that goes beyond that of a working partnership, having raised many of her horses from foals: “I love my horses, they’re my friends to me, you know, they’re not just there for a job, for my career, they are there because I

enjoy them as a horse too”. Indeed, each rider exhibited adoration for their horse, whether it was doing impressions: “now he’s just mostly admiring himself in the window... ‘everybody tells me I’m very handsome’!” (Fiona), laughing affectionately at their idiosyncrasies “he’s quite funny, isn’t he?! They are funny, they’re great aren’t they horses?” (Jemima), or indeed through dedication and loyalty “people say to me he looks like he’s spitting his dummy out and I say no he just finds it difficult” (Isabel).

A caring, respectful, and trusting relationship provides the groundwork for instilling in the horse, the confidence to do their job (Brannaman & Reynolds, 2004). Indeed, Podhajsky (1967, p.71) asserts there must be “absolute confidence of the horse in his rider”. Harriet protectively described the fragility of her horse’s confidence and the ramifications when another rider broke her trust:

I gave her to one of my students to jump on Sunday and she kind of nearly buried her over an oxer, and I’m thinking do not do that again, because I think it actually rocked her confidence. I jumped her yesterday, and normally she really loves jumping, and I actually had to use my legs.

As de Kunffy (2016) observed, ultimately in no matter what context, the rider is asking the horse to ignore its own innate instincts of self-preservation and put all their trust in them. Trust that is earned in the long-term and nurtured through a quality relationship.

Commitment

This construct represents the *thoughts* of the horse and rider and especially their thoughts for maintaining a close relationship over time (cf. Jowett & Meek, 2000; see also Jowett, 2017b). Through increased knowledge and understanding of the individual, the rider seeks to gain the horse's compliance (Schinke & Schinke, 1997). Jill explained how she nurtures the horse through the learning process:

Knowing your horse, knowing it is a confidence thing with them that they can do it, and you're not forcing them to but you're just encouraging them, especially her if you put too much force on her she'd just say 'go away'.

Because she has that temperament that is you have to explain to her, say to her give it go, and she'll say, 'ok I think I'm feeling a bit better about it'.

Similarly, Sophie acknowledged the effect and importance of a positive mindset towards work for both horse and rider: "I think we both find this bit easy, and he knows that, he's happy and he's willing at this stage". Indeed, a willingness and positive attitude is essential for high performance (Micklem, 2017; Smith, 2002). Sophie also acknowledged, however, that both she and the horse find the dressage phase of Eventing challenging, and showed concern that her attitude towards this phase influenced the horse's experience:

He loves the jumping side, absolutely loves the cross country, a complete machine, just finds the dressage a bit stressful. But I think I do as well so that could also be coming through from me a bit to him.

Frequently, the riders perceived moments of work where the horse was finding an exercise either mentally or physically challenging and observed how this can affect their commitment, motivation and effort: "I'm trying to ride his hind legs not his nose and he's trying to make me ride his nose not his hind legs" (Jemima), "she says 'this

is hard', yeah 'I thought we were gonna have a rest!' but there's a nice swing to her tail and she did come to it again, rather than say let's do it another day" (Harriet), "he's feels like he knows exactly what you want, but that's really hard work" (Isabel).

Complete alignment in focus between horse and rider, or horse and rider's commitment to one another, is tantamount to high quality performance (Schinke & Schinke, 1997), and similarly in training, particularly with a sensitive horse, it is essential to keep them focused and listening; "I can pretty much keep his concentration, he's not one where you would find he'd be really against you, he just has these moments" (Amelia). These are times when the horse's motivations of self-preservation can override their commitment to work (Radicchi, 2017), whether willfully distracted or spooked by something 'scary', the rider therefore must be attentive and ready to respond both physically and psychologically to ensure the horse is in the best frame of mind for work (de Kunffy, 2016).

Complementarity

This construct represents the co-operative acts or *behaviors* of interaction between the horse and rider (cf. Jowett, 2007; see also Jowett 2017a). All riders reported that an enormous boost to the horse's confidence and in turn a productive training session was consistency in their warm-up routine. Be it through the comfort of familiarity; "this would be normally how I'd start him" (Isabel), feelings of competency and leadership: "when he knows something he's a lot more giving and he finds it easier to do then. That's why I really take my time in the warm-up phase just to get him in a

good place mentally” (Sophie), or indeed particularly at competitions, a familiar warm-up can provide psychophysiological benefits:

At competitions he is tense, so I will go and work canter sooner, I’ll literally go walk about and if he’s feeling tight and silly, I’ll go straight into canter stretch and canter for a long time just in that stretched relaxed frame, the fact that you’re letting them go forward seems to make them happier, to me it seems stupid to fight in the trot if actually as soon as you go into canter there’s a certain element of relaxation, and for him that’s definitely the case. (Lydia)

This highlights the supportive role played by the rider (Hassler & Baumert, 2015). Jill observed the balancing act of challenge and compassion: “With her it’s all about her confidence, it really is, she really has to feel quite secure and then she’ll give me a lot more. But if I ask too much too soon, then she just says no”. Similarly, Jennifer acknowledged how she must offer a calming influence: “when he gets something wrong, he gets quite rattled, yeah I’ve got to keep myself relaxed about it”, whereas Fiona described the negotiation often required with her horse: “either he’s tense or he doesn’t know what to do, or he doesn’t like being told off”, she also emphasized the importance of clarity in communication: “I gave him a pat, it’s important for me that I can make a distinction with him, that’s what I wanted”. This supports previous findings, described aptly by Podhajsky (1967, p.21) as “distinguishing between cause and effect”. Interestingly, and perhaps in contrast to human coach-athlete relationships, some of the riders described how the horse at times plays a reciprocal supporting role to them: “He is very forgiving, because obviously I’m not the best rider on the flat, it’s my weakest phase, so there’s been a lot of both of us learning together and both of us having to sharpen up a bit” (Sophie), and “even though he struggles that way, he’s not against me, just tries really hard to help me out” (Amelia).

This sense of teamwork translates throughout the sample, offering the implication that this is very much a collaborative process:

She gets a little bit excitable when I go to take the contact, yes there you go, the rhythm breaks. So, I think to myself I've got to do that again. I use my voice and said steady and think about counting the rhythm and finding the hind legs. (Harriet)

This collaboration is not without its challenges, and the riders must work within the realms of both their own and their horse's capability (Smith, 2002). Sophie described the delicate balancing act of challenging the horse's comfort zone (Black, 2016), whilst trying to build the horse's self-confidence:

He's got some really flashy paces in him, but he doesn't want to give it, so I'm trying to stimulate it into him, yeah just slow down a bit, take your time. I want him to push a little bit more, because there's definitely a passage trot in there one day, but I'm not sure, yeah I've just got to give him self-confidence within his body.

Isabel laughingly described the relationship as like a marriage: "the altercations are fairly mutual", implying that a mutual understanding is necessary to begin working towards greater harmony and feel as Jill posited: "she's really supple now, she's really quiet, the rhythm's really regular, she's swinging along, and that's where you get your best feeling with them". Interestingly, this is also where the character and personality of the horse is evident, and the rider must also have the strength of character and composure to know how to respond (Ickes et al., 1990; Lorimer & Jowett, 2013; Marshall, 1998). At times, it can also be a battle of wills: "I don't believe it's because he doesn't know what to do, I think he knows perfectly well what to do" (Fiona), and

this highlights that while it is important to listen to the horse's feedback (Maurstad et al., 2013), the rider must manage motivational differences for the good of the working relationship (Visser et al., 2008; Wipper, 2000).

Co-orientation

This construct represents the *interdependence* of the horse and rider (cf. Jowett & Meek, 2000). The participants' mandate was to offer their direct and meta perceptions of their training sessions, therefore it is no surprise that empathic accuracy (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013) or feel featured highly in the content of their commentaries, with extensive description of the intricacies of the moment-to-moment interactions where the rider must find the balance between challenge and compassion in the horse's learning process:

Sometimes when they find it hard, or sometimes she'll get a bit cross and start snorting, you have to ride through it sometimes, so she understands actually, I'm not just gonna stop just because you're having a little tantrum, you've gotta carry on, you know, she's an athlete. But there is a limit, there's a moment where you have to know when you have to back off, because you're doing something wrong, they're getting too confused, then I would hope now with my experience, I would know when to stop and think this is not working, but that is the hardest thing to know of the horse. (Jill)

The excerpt above highlights the rider's knowledge and understanding of the horse. Jill knows and understands with a degree of confidence when the horse is cross – she recognizes the horse's behavioral signals of hard effort or frustration (e.g. “snorting”) and knows when it is a fit of temper (e.g. “tantrum”) that can be overcome or indeed a

situation that requires more attention (e.g. "confused"). Clearly, judging how to act and react is not easy, however, the more the rider knows and understands their horse, the more likely they are to act appropriately to the situation. The following excerpt provides another example of rider and horse working in productive harmony (Ritter, 2010) – using the knowledge of one another to make the task work well for both of them:

He just started to feel very tight. We're working on straightening the left canter at the moment, maybe I'm more aware of straightening it, maybe he's positioned himself slightly to make life easier and by me being more on the ball and straightening it, it's harder for him and to me at that point they try and find a different way to evade, but it's not a huge resistance, at the same time I don't feel there's a reason to particularly tell him off for it, just stick with it, riding it differently, if he continued to do it maybe I would have ridden him forward, to see if he would have been happier and taken his nose out a bit more. (Lydia)

Similarly, Sophie described the use of exercises to improve the horse's way of going or technique as opposed to forcing the issue: "I think it depends on how I ask him, so I realized that rather than necessarily being very direct and saying oi, I've got to almost do exercises to stimulate it with him, because he can suck back quite a lot as a horse mentally, and then actually gives you even less", and she went on to add "I've learnt that over time, to be cleverer about it with him and then he's more giving when I do say I want more from you".

Indeed, the fragility of the horse's self-confidence requires complete clarity and reassurance from the rider, that they are making the correct choice or response (Black, 2016). World renowned horse trainer, Buck Brannaman, is frequently quoted as saying that horses learn when you take the pressure off, therefore empathic accuracy or feel is as much about knowing what to do, as it is the exact moment to stop doing it (Radicchi, 2017). The timing in the release of pressure, be it in a global sense through regular stretching breaks following an intense spell of work: "then we have a little rest, and let him think about it and go back to it" (Fiona), or as intimate as the release of rein pressure the moment the horse offers acceptance to the aid: "so the discipline was no I say when we've done enough not you, and to then straight away, reinforce it and give him a pat" (Lydia). Indeed, time without pressure, to process information recently learnt is of increasing interest to practitioners and researchers alike with regard to its effect on equine learning (McGreevy et al., 2018).

As Radicchi (2017, p.24) observes of the horse: "body and mind are so closely linked that his mental attitude always influences his physical attitude and consequently a physical attitude, has a very strong influence on changing a mental attitude", therefore the benefits of the release of pressure are indeed psychophysiological to the horse (Peters & Black, 2012). Throughout their commentaries the riders offered many examples of the reciprocity between mind and body for the horse: "I always try and reward him if he is good, he has his little stretch down, take the pressure off, just to keep him in a good place, mentally with me" (Sophie), "then he goes really tense there...hence why I dropped him down a bit" (Amelia). Both riders here are referring to lowering the head positioning of the horse, this creates a stretch over their backs and helps them relax when they experience tension. In contrast, Amelia also

highlighted how increased physical demands, for example learning a new exercise, can influence the horse psychologically: “when you start to pick him up and put a bit of pressure on him, that’s when he’ll get more excitable in his reactions”. In addition, the riders acknowledged their own influence on the horse’s psychophysiological (Belasik, 1998) state:

Personality wise I’m quite a laid-back person, so stress doesn’t come into it too much, it’s so much easier with other people’s horses rather than your own, I have to say, but we can all still get frustrated. (Lydia)

Consistently however, each rider was always searching for and endeavoring to improve their connection with the horse, as Jill poetically described:

But every step of the way, I’m always feeling you know, where is she? I have to feel for her, when she gives in the back then I can ask a bit more and I can give.

A key avenue in achieving this, is the absorption and entrainment by the rider, of the horse’s rhythm. Leading international dressage trainer, Charles de Kunffy, stated “every horse has a signature rhythm, a certain footfall that’s like a fingerprint in a human” (2017, para.8). Harriet observed this idea of connecting with the horse’s natural rhythm: “if they learn to connect the leg with the horse’s stifle, right-leg-left-leg-right-leg-left-leg you’ve then got a really good walk” and shows impeccable timing of the aids: “as she offers the front leg, right leg, left leg, right leg, left leg. Good girl.”. This is a fascinating construct, particularly in terms of the evolving concept of relational coaching and leadership (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016), as it recognizes the interdependence of the process (Crevani, 2015). Only when you have

fully absorbed the horse's rhythm through feel, can you then begin to wield influence over it to achieve a harmonious performance (Dorrance, 1994; Hunt, 1978).

Welfare

Across the sample, the commentaries provided by the riders left little doubt of their respect for the horse, particularly as an athlete. This was illustrated through the prioritization of welfare over performance (Xenophon, 2006), whether physical or psychological:

Trying to keep him positive about dressage, I don't necessarily push him as much as I probably should, I just don't want him to ever feel too negative with it, because it's been such a confidence, mental thing for him this phase.

(Sophie)

Or as in one particular case, accepting limitations in the horse's ability (Podhajsky, 1967), and allowing the horse to remain at a suitable level of competition: "I feel with him I've sort of taken his training as far as I can" (Charlotte). Indeed, each rider showed great appreciation, acute awareness, and concern for the psychophysiological exertion endured, particularly during the learning process:

I don't think the tension within his mouth or anything is ever skeletal or he can't do it or is ever in pain or stressed about it, I genuinely think most of the time it's a concentration thing, because I find that he would do it all the time if it was a stress thing, but he's not stressed. (Amelia)

Indeed, all riders acknowledged the need for constant monitoring and assessment of the horse with regard to physical wellness and readiness to work. For example, throughout her commentary, Jemima was somewhat preoccupied and concerned for how comfortable the horse was with the bit she was currently using: “I’m already drawn to his mouth and the fussing he does in that bit, which has got to be sorted out”. She makes small adjustments in her rein contact to try to make it as comfortable as possible: “Ok, take his nose a bit left, get him more through but don’t take the curb because he doesn’t like it at all, so I’m just making him softer”, whilst recognizing that she will need to refer the problem to a biting expert in the very near future. Similarly, Harriet was conscious of her horse’s physical well-being having just been shod prior to work: “I just wondered whether she was a little tight in her withers when she went around that turn”, showing she is highly attuned to the horse’s way of going, and mindful of any abnormalities that the horse might exhibit.

Whilst striving for quality training and performance, the importance of work-life balance for these equine athletes was also highlighted by Jill: “she’s better when she’s worked days in a row, but then she has to have her days, just hacking, or grazing, or having a little lunge, so she’s not in the school all the time”. Jennifer also noted the importance of time spent outside of the school to relax: “he hacks a lot, he goes to the gallops too”, and Lydia reflected upon the importance of flexibility in post-competition training schedules to allow the horse to recover:

There is a point just after we evented the last time when we felt we had far more resistance than we normally have, and the lengthening wasn’t there, he wasn’t lame but he didn’t seem comfortable or right, and so we stopped, I

gave him a couple of weeks where I didn't stop him, we kept ticking over, but I didn't work him hard, and then we went back and reassessed and we didn't have the same resistance we had before. So it wasn't particularly a lameness issue, but he didn't seem happy compared to how he normally is.

This advocated the riders' conscientious priority of a healthy and happy equine athlete (de Kunffy, 2016), which will ultimately be reflected in their performance.

Performance

This construct represents the *driver* of these rider-horse relationships. Interestingly, whilst all the riders' motivations reflected a desire for improving the horse's way of going, few directly referred to the implications for competitive performance. Often, a rider may have commented on the importance of the scales of training: "all the time just thinking, rhythm, relaxation, looseness, supple contact" (Jemima) or indeed discussing creative ways to help their riding pupils remember them: "I explain to especially the younger ones that if you think of the word RRIBSS, a double R to begin with, Relaxation, Rhythm, Impulsion, Balance, Straightness, Suppleness then you've got Contact and Collection" (Harriet), conveying their importance in the progressive and holistic development of the horse for performance.

Other riders commented more on the psychophysiological differences that they experience with their horses when they change from a training to competition environment (cf. Lorimer & Jowett, 2013). Jennifer suggested her horse could be a little too laid back at home whereas: "at a show, I just practice it a bit in the warm up and he's so easy I barely have to do anything, because he's lively and it gets a bit

frustrating at home”. In contrast, Amelia discussed the effects of tension in a dressage test:

When we get problems in a test I can’t rectify it, I just have to sit there and let it happen really, because when we’ve had our problems, if I reprimand him, I might as well not finish the test, because he won’t do anything then.

The net result of incidents like Amelia described is loss of marks, and as Isabel discussed at length, sometimes the smallest of changes can have the biggest impact, observing how a change in bridle has impacted not only their training, but also the marks received in competition as they both learn to adapt to how this has affected their working relationship:

The marks have been more consistent as we go through, where sometimes with the other bridle he was getting 9s and 3s in the same test” ...“I’ve lost the wow factors but I’ve gained the softness, so my submission marks have gone up but my impulsion and wow factor marks have gone down” ...“he would feel very different in himself compared to how he has felt, so in his world he would feel very different in his own body.

This highlights that whilst top level performance is the overall motivation for these riders: “we all want to be in the top three after dressage!” (Sophie), all acknowledged that exceptional levels of performance are only achieved when a quality rider-horse relationship is established.

Conclusion

Overall, riders' perceptions of the relationship with their horse suggest that Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity, Co-orientation (4Cs) are key descriptors of its quality. Welfare and Performance are also important outcomes of that unique relationship. The quality of the rider-horse relationship may reflect the ability of the rider as a coach, to inspire and achieve (psychophysiological) confidence in the horse (McDonald, 2016). Indeed, what separates humans and animals is the capacity for abstract thought and reason, however when forming and maintaining a working relationship with a horse, successful practitioners draw upon the more innate sensorimotor processes of embodied cognition (Wilson, 2002) to align themselves with that of their equine counterpart. Thus, while the relationship contains and can be described along the 4Cs just like the coach-athlete relationship, the "communication" used to develop and maintain a quality rider-horse relationship can be found in the "feel" that is obtained over time and through experience working with the horse.

Based on the results of this study, an adaptation of the 4Cs coach-athlete relationship model (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) for equestrian partnerships is offered (see Figure 1). This model seeks to provide an empirically-based educational framework within which the importance of developing quality rider-horse relationships is underlined for the benefit of the riders' and their equine partners' welfare and performance. While Figure 1 presents the 4Cs as descriptors of quality relationships, there are a couple of important threads within the 4Cs that are noted. Firstly, the timely application of two balancing elements of Challenge (*pressure*) and Compassion (*release*) throughout the horse's education. Secondly, the achievement of Psychophysiological Confidence in both horse and rider, which ultimately delivers high performance. Each of these additional elements featured strongly across all themes extrapolated from the riders'

verbal reports. Indeed, the themes presented in this study resonate strongly with effective sports coaching practices and Jowett's (2017a) call for coach-athlete-centered leadership.

INSERT FIGURE 1

The riders' commentaries provided a rich source of data, with the video playback providing an especially useful tool to aid discussion on such an intuitive subject. However, there is some deliberation as to "the extent to which experts are capable of explaining the nature and structure of their exceptional performance" (Ericsson, 2006, p.223). While the focus was on the riders' perceptions and experiences of a personal relationship established with their horse, future research may seek to include independent appraisals of the relationship through, for example, a coach. A coach could supply additional information or affirmation of riders' perceptions and how they relate to the quality of the partnership developed between the rider and their horse. Exploring the triadic relationship (i.e., rider-horse-coach) may be another insightful avenue that helps generate knowledge and understanding of the ebb and flow of key relationships. Furthermore, exploring similar notions through the eyes of less experienced or accomplished riders may provide distinct insights. An intervention study is warranted with the aim to assist riders to identify basic steps for the development of good quality relationships with their horses, which may be useful for learning, performance, and satisfaction for both the rider and horse. Additionally, the investigation of psychophysiological reciprocity both as an internal construct for the horse, and between horse and rider in order to examine the rider's self (other)-awareness (Belasik, 1998), or indeed expansion of the research on riders' perceptions of the rider-horse relationship through larger scale studies involving varying levels of rider competency and other individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender, culture),

and/or case studies of riders with multiple horses, would contribute strongly to this area of research.

To summarize, this study has highlighted the potential application of the 4Cs coach-athlete relationship model (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) across a distinct type of sport relationship, namely, the rider-horse relationship. Theoretical and conceptual models that can readily be applied often capture what is already known, however they are empirically substantiated and accessibly presented for everyone to understand and eventually use in their practices. The 8Cs model presented in this study echoes the sentiments of every great horsemanship practitioner in history – if you work on the relationship the performance will be beautiful.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that the author(s) have no potential conflicts of interest with regard to the enclosed paper.

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