

Mutual corporeality: Gender and human/horse relationships

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Synopsis

In this article, we explore how gender is enacted within human/animal relationships – specifically, between people and horses. Horse cultures can be gendered in several ways, from little girls and their ponies to modern versions of the cowboy. Here, we examine two specific horse/human cultures – traditional “English” riding, and the rise of what is often termed “natural horsemanship” (despite the preponderance of women within it).

Horses themselves, however, play an important role in the way that horsey cultures become experienced as gendered. We examine this in relation to Paechter's [Paechter, Carrie (2003). Masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. *Women's Studies International Forum* 26, 69–77] idea of “communities of practice”, arguing that the presence and meanings of the animal within particular communities – as well as the human practices – together shape how people experience gender. The presence of horses enables a subversion of dominant gender practices particularly at the localized (private) level, while at the same time enables a reinscription of traditional gender ideals at the global (public) level.

Gender is experienced and expressed through the body; but, in human–horse relationships it is also expressed in conjunction with the body and character of the horse. Horses are not mere props, but rather they are companions who have a profound impact on people's lived experience of gender and how it is expressed corporeally. Continuing to explore the multiple ways gender is experienced within the context of human/animal relationships promises to offer greater insight into the complex workings of gender.