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Autoethnographic insights on family, relationships and resource-intensive leisure

**'Do horses cause divorces?' Autoethnographic insights on family, relationships and resource-intensive leisure**

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**Abstract**

Equestrian leisure is resource-intensive and requires significant investment of time, money, effort and emotion. In this paper we consider these demands within the context of personal and family relationships. Using autoethnographic methods we use our own relationships with horses and with our human partners to explore the issues and tensions that can arise when one person engages in such an intense and demanding leisure pursuit. We argue that support from partners is essential, but may often be underpinned by some resentment towards the horse(s) and the commitment they entail. Framed within the context of gendered family relationships and gendered leisure, we suggest that women's involvement in resource-hungry leisure, such as equestrianism, is filtered through traditional gender power relations and that constant negotiation and compromise is required to enable women to engage in demanding leisure activities.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; equestrian; family; gender; leisure; relationships

## Introduction

In July 2007 an article was published in Britain's leading equestrian magazine, *Horse and Hound*, with the headline asking, 'Do horses cause divorces?' Caring for and riding horses are resource-heavy activities, requiring investment of significant time, money and emotional energy as caretakers develop and sustain close relationships with their equine partners (Dashper, 2015a, 2017). This tongue-in-cheek article, and numerous related discussions on internet forums, considered whether these exhaustive demands put excessive pressure on relationships, particularly when one partner (usually, but not always, male) is uninterested in horses whilst the other (usually female) is passionate about her equine involvement. The horsey partner is represented as 'obsessed' with horses, diverting her attention away from her family and partner (sometimes described as a 'horse widower') in favour of time spent with horses, leading in extreme cases to breakdown in relationships and family units. Whilst that particular article was not meant to be taken too seriously, the view that involvement with horses is incompatible with successful relationships and family life is not uncommon. This view is underpinned by complex gender power relations in which a woman's decision to devote time, money and emotional energy to her own leisure activities is sometimes seen as dereliction of her core duties as wife and/or mother.

This paper is situated within Britain where women now make up 46.5% of the workforce (Catalyst, 2017). Although women are strongly represented within the labour market they still do the majority of unpaid work in the form of caring for others and housework (ONS, 2013). Equestrian culture in the UK is feminised. Approximately 73% of riders are female, and horses and ponies, and most of the practices and products associated with them, are linked predominantly with girls and women (BHS, 2011; Dashper, 2015a). Equestrianism is often described by participants as more of a way of life than a leisure activity, indicative of the high levels of commitment and dedication required (Dashper, 2017). Women who care for and ride horses are subject to a barrage of demands on their time and energies including (but not limited to) paid work, (human) caring responsibilities, homecare and management, and horse care and exercise. While men who care for and ride horses may also be subject to the same time pressures and constraints, wider gender power relations and persistent associations between femininity, (human) caring and home-based responsibilities may make it particularly problematic for many women to balance horse- and non-horse-related responsibilities. Women who choose to do so may suffer varying social sanctions due to a perception that they are 'abandoning' their family commitments in favour of their own leisure pursuits. Men pursuing intensive leisure activities, such as golf, are unlikely to be seen as selfish and lacking commitment to their families in quite the same way.

In this article we use autoethnographic methods to explore some of these issues within the context of our own family relationships and passion for equestrian leisure. Autoethnographic approaches have been used effectively to explore a range of issues within sport and leisure, ranging from the narratives of professional athletes (Douglas, 2014), to embodied experiences in the outdoors (Humberstone, 2011), to sport for development and peace (Chawansky, 2015), and are a popular approach within the emerging field of multispecies leisure (Harmon, 2018; Markwell, 2018; Ford, 2019). This article has taken several years to finish, as our horse/family narratives kept shifting, developing and sometimes falling apart, and our autoethnographic approach reflects the temporal rhythms of family life, relationships between people, and those also including horses. As women engaged in a feminised leisure pursuit and involved in heterosexual relationships, we frame our narratives within gendered accounts of leisure, before moving on to present our stories and to consider the role equestrian leisure plays within our everyday family relationships.

### **Leisure, gender and the family**

Horses are used for a variety of purposes in different places around the world, including as work partners, for transport, breeding, sport and leisure. Within the context of this article we are focusing on relationships between human caretakers and horses based around leisure (i.e. we all see our involvement with horses in terms of a hobby). Stebbins (1992) refers to hobbyists as leisure participants who seek deep self-fulfilment within their everyday leisure lives. This distinction is important because, as we discuss further in this section, leisure itself is a highly gendered practice and there is an abundance of evidence that illustrates various ways in which women's leisure in particular is contingent on a variety of other social and cultural factors, including family, work and children (Such 2009).

Leisure research spanning the last fifty years shows that the idea of women's leisure can itself be problematic. Early leisure research illustrated the vast inequalities in access to leisure, with women's leisure time far more fragmented, limited and confined than that of men (Henderson & Hickerson, 2007). More recent research suggests that although the idea of 'women's leisure' may no longer be seen as an oxymoron, women continue to feel much more time pressured than men and to feel guilt when they spend time on personal leisure rather than family activities (Mattingly & Saya, 2006; Lafrance, 2011). The category 'women' should not be taken as a homogenous group, and women's leisure experiences differ substantially in relation to other factors such as class, ethnicity, age, health, sexuality and religion (Hothschild & Machung, 1989; Brown et al., 2001). However, notwithstanding the importance of viewing identity and experience through an intersectional lens,

women in western societies such as the UK face some common expectations about appropriate female roles and behaviours, particularly within the context of the family, that may impact on their involvement in different leisure opportunities.

Many of the obstacles that women in Britain face in relation to leisure access, time and freedom relate to persisting restrictive gender power relations that position men and women, masculinity and femininity, as complementary and opposite yet inherently unequal (Schippers, 2007). Despite many advances towards greater gender equality on a wide range of measures, cultural associations between femininity and caring continue to associate women with supposedly 'naturally' feminine predilections for caring, tying women to roles as caregivers of children, elderly relatives and, in many cases, men, more than to individualistic, outward facing roles such as involvement in sport and active leisure. This idea of an ethic of care, originally proposed by Gilligan (1982), wherein women are socialised to put the needs and wants of others before their own, has been linked to a lack of sense of entitlement to personal leisure. Many women feel that they do not have a right to leisure for and possibly by themselves (Shaw, 1994). Within the numerous competing demands of their lives, many women feel that their own personal leisure is a low priority, compared to the more pressing needs of family, and paid and unpaid work (Kay, 1998; Shannon & Shaw, 2005).

Leisure research shows that within the context of the family, women are much more likely than men to be responsible for the leisure of others (primarily children, but also leisure as a family unit) and time spent planning, organising and facilitating others' free time can be exhausting and relentless (Shaw, 2008). This contributes to an overall feeling of being time pressured and rushed, and, consequently, the sense that there is little opportunity to engage in personal leisure (Gunthorpe & Lyons, 2004; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006). An outcome of these factors is that many women, and perhaps particularly mothers of young children, deprioritise their own leisure needs and feel guilty if they do indeed spend some time on their own fun and relaxation (Thomsson, 1999). Therefore, when women do invest heavily in sport and leisure activities – be this professionally or on an amateur basis – they are more likely to suffer social sanction for 'abandoning' their families and being 'selfish' in their leisure pursuits than when men engage in the same types of behaviours (see Palmer, 2004). This has implications for our argument in this article as the financial, emotional and time-related investments required for horse care may be seen, by some, as detracting from family life and activities.

Although women's leisure time and activities remain somewhat constrained, this does not mean that women are not using leisure spaces and activities as opportunities for empowerment, liberation and fun. In a whole host of leisure activities ranging from snowboarding (Thorpe, 2005) to sea cadets

(Raisborough, 2006) to roller derby (Finley, 2010), different women perform alternative femininities, challenging stereotypes of women as weak, timid and tied to the home, using leisure as an opportunity for resistance against constraints in their everyday lives and relationships (Shaw, 2001). Research on snowboarding, another resource-intensive sport and leisure practice, illustrates how some women value their hobby as an important aspect of who they are, in addition to their other roles, including those of mother and wife, and fiercely protect their right and opportunity to enjoy their passion (Spowart, Hughson & Shaw, 2008; Spowart, Burrows & Shaw, 2010). Equestrianism is another leisure space in which women are disrupting long-held expectations about what women should be and are capable of doing. As an activity that involves a multitude of physical, mental and emotional skills, equestrianism provides an arena in which women are reworking what it means to be female in British (and other) societies (see Birke & Brandt, 2009; Dashper, 2015a).

A growing body of research explores dog-related leisure, which has some parallels with our discussion of equestrian leisure, as it involves another species which needs to be cared for. Baldwin and Norris (1999) and Gillespie, Leffler and Lerner (2002) were early pioneers in this area, and considered the role of dog agility in people's leisure lives, finding that this form of multispecies leisure involved considerable sacrifice, negotiation and sometimes conflict to 'fit in' with other aspects of (human) participants' lives. Hultsman's (2012) research with couples involved with dog agility is particularly interesting in relation to our discussions below, as she discovered that the exhaustive demands of this leisure pursuit put pressure on relationships and sometimes even led to relationship breakdowns. Participants in dog agility, as with those in equestrian leisure, are predominantly, but not exclusively, female (Farrell et al., 2015), and so some of the pressures of competing priorities and negotiations over time and resources can be understood in relation to ideas about gendered leisure, outlined above. Much of the research on dog agility and related multispecies leisure deploys Stebbins' (1992) serious leisure framework to make sense of these intensive leisure practices (Nottle & Young, 2019), as did Stone (2019) in her consideration of the less well-known world of cat shows. There are clearly parallels with the equestrian contexts we discuss below. However we do not frame our study in relation to the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP). Although equestrian leisure is a form of serious leisure, requiring considerable dedication and forming an important part of participants' sense of self and identity, we do not think the concept goes far enough in explaining the all-encompassing nature of equestrian leisure (Dashper, 2017). As Latimer and Birke (2009: 2, italics in original) argue, "being with horses can itself be performed *as a way of life*" as opposed to just a hobby or enjoyable leisure activity. As our discussion below illustrates, commitment to equestrian leisure is not just about attending horse shows, or even just

riding, but instead encompasses all aspects of day-to-day life, for the participant and often her family as well. We explored some of these issues in the context of our own family relationships.

### **Approach and Methods**

As firmly-established horse lovers, we are all deeply embedded within and committed to the norms of the 'horse world', which include things like acceptance of the exhaustive time demands of equestrianism, and a willingness to place horses firmly in the centre of our day-to-day lives (see Dashper, 2017). Conversations about our horsey experiences and the ways in which our passion affects our everyday family relationships revealed how inseparable 'horses' and 'family' are for each of us, and we decided to embark on an autoethnographic project to consider more fully the intersections between these important aspects of our leisure and family lives.

Autoethnography is a method of incorporating the personal into research and of acknowledging that the researcher herself may have many relevant insights, stories and experiences to tell (Tsang, 2000; Krane, 2009). Research is never truly objective and the researcher is always 'present' within any project, but often this is not acknowledged. Autoethnography makes the role of the researcher explicit and celebrates the insights that can be derived from critical reflection on personal experience. Narrative approaches more generally are based on the premise that we make sense of our worlds, and our positions therein, through stories which are based around shared conventions of story-telling, language and listening (Trahar, 2009). The stories an individual can tell are limited by the dominant discourses that surround them, which delimit what will be considered legitimate, valuable and coherent within a given local context (Sparkes, 1999). Autoethnography is a form of narrative research that begins with the stories the researcher can tell from her own personal experiences, and considers what these personal insights reveal about wider social and cultural issues (Ellis, 2004, 2009).

Dauphinee (2010) is critical of the academic knowledge gaze that characterises many traditional research approaches and methods and is presented as all-encompassing and masterful. Autoethnography attempts to overcome some of these researcher/other distinctions and acknowledges that we as academics can also be active participants in research. Autoethnography begins with the researcher's own personal experiences, which can be messy, incomplete, empowering and unnerving, as can those of any other research participant. Therefore, autoethnography may be particularly well suited for beginning to explore sensitive and emotionally



challenging issues, which may be difficult to approach through more traditional methods that focus on the experiences of 'others' (Jago, 2002; Rambo, 2005; Harmon, 2019).

When thinking through how horses affect our day-to-day family lives we realised that these were not just our stories. Autoethnography is never just about the writer, as our lives involve others and are inseparable from the lives and experiences of other people (Barton, 2011). We wanted to make this explicit within our project and so decided to include our (human) partners within the research, at least to some extent, so we could try to take into account their views on our leisure activities.

We began the process by discussing our varied experiences together in an open and supportive environment, and from there developed an interview guide for us and one for our partners. The intention was that the three of us as horse lovers and researchers would answer a series of questions about our lives with our horses, and how this fits in with our family relationships, at the outset. Following on from this we each interviewed each other's partners, using a set of pre-agreed questions, to gain their insight and perspective on these multispecies family arrangements. Later, we met as a team of three and discussed the answers from our partners, including in comparison to our own preliminary thoughts and expectations, and how this made us feel about the various ways in which horses interact with (or become part of) our family lives.

Then, as happens in family and horsey life, things changed. Families expanded and contracted, relationships evolved, for good and bad. Horses got older, sick, more established in their training, or left or entered our lives. Work exerted increasing pressures, children needed more attention, and this autoethnographic project took a backseat. We continued to meet periodically to discuss horses and academia, and wrote several updates to our horsey stories. Consequently, the excerpts that appear in the following sections of this article reflect this lengthy process (which took more than six years in total), and give a sense of ways in which horsey leisure and family life co-exist, clash, and sometimes work in harmony over an extended period of time. Relationships, whether between people or between people and animals, fluctuate and develop, and have a strong temporal aspect. This is reflected both in our lengthy writing process with this article and the stories we present below.

All research projects involve difficult and ongoing ethical considerations and this may be exacerbated in relation to autoethnography (Ellis, 2007). Introspection and autoethnography differ from more established research methods, and when using this approach researchers go into personal exploration which can be uncomfortable, and this project was no exception (Tamas, 2011; Dashper, 2013, 2015b, 2016). Although we did receive ethical approval from one of our institutions at the outset of the project, and our partners gave consent to take part, this did little to address the

underlying ethical issues and potential tensions within such a project. Discussions with our partners, and between the research team, had the potential to unsettle existing relationships and so we exercised caution and restraint in how we tackled the various issues uncovered. We were aware of the challenges of asking our partners to answer openly and honestly about our equestrian passions, and that they may feel uneasy being openly critical of our much-loved horses and the amount of time and money we spend on them. To try and mitigate this we did not interview our own partners, but each other's, so the partner was being questioned by someone he did not know on a personal level. We explained about issues of trust, and shared our reflections and the writing of this article with our partners at various stages in order to check they were comfortable with how they were being represented and our interpretations of their views and experiences. Consent is an ongoing process, and we were particularly mindful of this within the context of this highly personal project. We recognise that in many ways this is a collaborative effort between the three of us as writers, researchers and horse enthusiasts, our partners and wider families, with our equine companions as silent but important presences in the background. At the same time, it is we who have decided what stories to tell, how to tell them, and what to leave out and so we acknowledge that our stories, as with all stories, can only ever be partial representations of relationships. Although it will be obvious to anyone who knows us personally who we are in the sections below, we have decided to retain some ambiguity – for ourselves, but more for our partners – by referring to our partners as P1, P2 and P3, and ourselves as R1, R2 and R3.

### **Findings: Relationships in multispecies families**

Our interviews and discussions covered various topics and resulted in the identification of several interlinking themes. In this article we focus on the interactions between horse ownership and our personal relationships with our partners. The ways in which horses and our equestrian leisure activities influence our personal relationships can be understood around two themes: evolving relationships; and, compromise and negotiation in relationships.

#### ***Evolving relationships***

All relationships evolve and change over time. The early stages of a romantic relationship are usually characterised by infatuation and idealism, and the other partner represents excitement and mystery, and can often do no wrong, before the relationship develops in different ways. In all of our

relationships, horses play an important role, but this role has evolved alongside the developing human partnerships.

When R1 and her partner first got together she had recently bought her horse, the same horse she still has today. Consequently this horse has been a constant presence in their relationship, as P1 identified:

He [horse] was there first, so I accepted it, it was fine ... My feelings about it were fairly indifferent to start with, but I'm fond of him now, I'll give him a fuss if I go up to the yard, feed him carrots, that sort of thing, my relationship with him is good.

Out of the three partners P1 was the most positive about his partner's horse(s) and was in fact the only one to identify an individual horse by name. In this family relationship the horse features as an individual character to be acknowledged and looked after, but P1 is able to remain detached from the day-to-day demands of horse care as the horse is stabled at livery, a mile from the family house:

I have no intentions to ride at all, but I'm happy to bike alongside on my mountain bike ... I don't want to cramp her [R1] style, though, as she has friends and a nice social life at the yard. It's nice to have your own things, it creates balance.

P1 clearly sees R1's involvement with horses as a hobby, something she does to relax and socialise which he sees as valuable for her and for their relationship. As R1 explained, "riding is just what I do, part of who I am. He [P1] knew that from the beginning." P1 acknowledges that personal leisure time and space is important for both of them and does not seem to resent the time spent away at the yard with the horse. This is facilitated in part by the horse being stabled at livery, which creates a separate social world in which horse activities are clearly differentiated from the relationship between P1 and R1. This enables P1 to remain somewhat detached from the horse and associated tasks and responsibilities and he is able to compartmentalise 'horse' away from his relationship with R1.

For R2 and P2 the situation is somewhat different. R2 has several horses and they live adjacent to the family home, rather than being separated at a livery yard. Horses may not live 'at home' in quite the same way as a dog or a cat might, as they do not enter the home, or sleep on the bed, or eat in the kitchen, along with the human family. However, we argue that they do still live 'at home', when 'home' is understood to be more than just the physical building and encompasses the routine practices and interactions of family members, human and nonhuman. For P2 the horses have become a contentious issue in his relationship with R2:

We were together a while before I realised she was involved [with horses] and wanted to get back to it at the same level ... We have had some testing times, particularly with the move out here, but we get through things. In some ways the horses have impacted things as the main reason for the move was to facilitate a field. This made it challenging as we have a young daughter and we are further from work and childcare so tensions can be brought on by fatigue.

For P2 the horses have prompted changes in their family life and circumstances that he does not see as altogether positive, and he is wary of how these issues will develop in the future:

We'll have to see. A friend said "she thinks more of them than you – it's the same at my house." We'll have to see how things go and as [daughter] grows we will have to see what she wants. We may end up spending more time apart if she rides which I don't relish.

P2's answers suggest underlying tensions which he attributes to the horses, tensions which are exacerbated by their living situation and family commitments, as we discuss further below. These issues have become more prominent over the years and P2 appears to expect them to develop further. R2 is very aware of these tensions:

I think he resents the horses as he sees them disrupting our lives in terms of money, no holidays and childcare ... We are both working and have limited leisure money, no holidays – and he loves travel – and we have children, who require my attention. I really think he harbours resentment towards the horses and sees them as disrupting our life.

Within the context of this relationship, horses are always a source of potential conflict. This is the only relationship within our study in which there are small children, and the pressures and responsibilities of childcare intensify any issues associated with time and availability (and money) that accompany such a resource-hungry leisure activity as caring for and riding horses.

Horses can be a backdrop to a relationship, a source of potential conflict, or even symbolic of deeper problems. When R3 first met her husband she was heavily involved with horses and P3 recognised this from the beginning:

It was quite obvious really, it was like a zoo! ... I always appreciated the horses from the start, but it was just a distant appreciation, if you know what I mean.

P3 acknowledged that at this stage in his relationship with R3 he had limited appreciation of the impacts the horses would have on their lives and relationship:

Right at the very beginning it wasn't a concern, really, I didn't know what amount of time and money it would take.

Over the course of his 12 year relationship with R3, P3 came to understand that horses are expensive in terms of both money and time, and this put pressure on their lives and partnership at different stages. R3 believes that her partner's feelings about her horses became "much more negative as he came to understand the amount of time, work and money that goes into them and the restrictions they cause." P3 was the only one of the three partners to try to join his partner in her equestrian passion, and he had his own horse who he clearly loved, although he resented the commitment needed to care for him on a daily basis. When the horse was severely injured and had to be retired and no longer ridden, P3 was very upset but soon disengaged from the horse's care, leaving this to R3 to manage with her other animals.

The relationship between P3 and R3 broke down over the course of writing this article. Reflecting on this, R3 commented:

Did the horses cause the divorce? Not really, inequality of effort in the relationship did. The horses were a massive contributor, but were the main symptom rather than the underlying problem. He resented having to do things with the horses when I was away working and saw it as my job, along with everything else! As a friend said to me recently, I might be able to spot a decent horse but I made a very bad choice in the man I married.

In all three human partnerships horses have been an important underlying feature. As the human relationships have evolved and developed, so too has the prominence and significance of the female partners' attachment and dedication to horses. For R1 and P1 this is largely unproblematic, as P1 is able to compartmentalise 'horse' as separate from their relationship and day-to-day lives. However, both R2 and R3's horses live 'at home', making this separation more difficult to achieve (Dashper, 2017). This is particularly problematic for P2 and R2, as they have young children, and this puts additional pressures on their relationship which may be aggravated at times by the demands of horse care. For P3 and R3 the horses, and the amount of time, effort and expense they involve, became symbolic of other problems in their relationship. As R3 acknowledges, caring for the horses became 'her job' in the relationship (along with many other things), reflective of wider gender norms associating women more strongly with caring responsibilities, including in this case for an old and sick horse. In all three relationships, the role, importance and symbolism of horses shifts over time, sometimes taking a backseat, sometimes sparking conflict, and occasionally reflecting deeper issues. This illustrates the dynamism of all family relationships, including those involving nonhuman others.

### ***Compromise and negotiation in relationships***

Our partners were broadly supportive of our expensive and time consuming hobby, and expressed their support more vocally within interviews than we had expected. However, the strongest theme to emerge within our data relates to the compromises and negotiations that take place in relation to equine activities and their role within human relationships, showing similarities with research on dog agility enthusiasts (Gillespie et al., 2002). These compromises are usually underpinned by some level of resentment towards the horse(s) and the amount of time, money and emotion they command.

This was particularly evident in relation to R2 and P2's relationship, where additional pressures and responsibilities associated with having small children underpin the relationship between the couple and R2's equestrian leisure. It was apparent from the interview and subsequent discussions that P2 is keen to support his partner's leisure, and recognises how important horses are to her. P2's comments were frequently filled with contradictions between his desire to support R2 and his resentment of the time and effort she spends on her horses:

It's fine as long as there's nothing pressing we or she should be doing. If she has work commitments it concerns me ... Has everyone got everything they need before the horses? ... It isn't just R2's responsibility, it's mine as well, and when I'm working at home I will put on the washing for instance. But it's tricky to get these things done if she's doing a horse-related activity.

For P2 the horses should come lower down on R2's priorities than work, family and house care. Although he was keen to stress that he should (and does) share responsibility for housework, his comments illustrate some of the tensions that can be exacerbated when a resource-intensive leisure activity like equestrianism clashes with domestic responsibilities.

P2 talked about the ways in which caring for horses can soon seep into all areas of life:

It was fine when there was one [horse], but now there's four and I don't object but it is a lifestyle choice. My hobby is football – and all I have to do is turn up and wash the kit but the horses need care when they are not being ridden. She [R2] says that if you have one horse then it is just as easy to look after four but that is not what I observe. It can be intensive if one escapes or is sick. One of them jumped on the fence once and got caught. It isn't a hobby. There's something more intensive about it really.

P2 is right; for most horse people horses are not just a hobby, they become a way of life (Dashper, 2017). Caring for another living creature requires commitment, dedication and compassion and so is more all-consuming than many other leisure activities, and puts additional strain on time-pressured individuals and families:

I'm all for her having her hobby. When we moved here I moved from playing football twice to once a week. But if I had to spend time feeding the team each day in order to play once a week that would be too much.

P2 made numerous comparisons between his own leisure activities – music, running and football – and R2's equine activities that suggest he does not fully understand or accept the commitment needed to care for horses, in addition to riding, that makes equestrianism rather different to other forms of sporting leisure. He is cautiously supportive of his partner's hobby, but there are clearly limits to this support and an undercurrent of resentment of the time and energy equestrian leisure entails. R2 is aware of this, and feels that she has to compromise in all areas of her life:

I compromise all the time. I don't ride that much. I entered equestrian-based research because of my interests but also to provide me with an excuse to spend horsey time with others. Family has to come first and I can see that P2 might feel he supports me in some ways, but now the lighter nights are here I wait until [daughter] is in bed before venturing out to the horses and to ride... Having our own facilities here at home will help and we are planning on building stables here next year.

R2 is frustrated by the compromises she makes that result in restrictions to her equestrian leisure, but she recognises that some level of compromise is necessary within the dynamics of family life. However, horses are extremely important to her and her sense of who she is, and she is firmly committed to retaining her engagement with her leisure activity and community (Spowart et al., 2010). P2 was keen to show that he is willing to compromise in relation to sharing leisure time and opportunities, as long as this can be fitted in around the necessities of caring for their children and the home:

I guess there has to be a negotiation of the time. If I thought it was totally inappropriate there would be tension. There's a lot of work to do on the house and [children] need looking after. We have talked about alternate mornings. I have got up at 6 to go running a few miles but we may alternate this for her to ride.

P2 recognises that compromise and negotiation is necessary to enable all the family's responsibilities (including the horses) to be accounted for, and he clearly takes an active role in home life and childcare. He is, however, somewhat uncomfortable with the amount of time and commitment horses take, and recognises that there is potential for this to escalate and become even more dominant within their family life. R2 finds herself stuck in a difficult position: keen to engage in equestrian leisure and dedicated to caring for her horses, while at the same time being a committed mother and partner (as well as working outside the home). She constantly feels torn between her equestrian passion and her family responsibilities, feeling like she does not devote enough time and attention to either. This is a common experience for many women, especially those with young children, who often report feelings of guilt when focusing on their own leisure, and will instead prioritise family leisure and that of their children before their own. In contrast many men retain their sense of entitlement to personal leisure time, even after they have children (Shaw, 1994; Thomsson, 1999; Brown et al., 2001; Such, 2009).

P2 was keen to stress that he does not see his ambivalence to R2's equestrian leisure as a 'gender issue', but as a 'family issue'. He pointed out that both partners have limited time for leisure, with the commitments required with young children, a house and jobs. However, R2's reflections illustrate the sense of guilt she feels indulging in her own leisure when she 'should' be prioritising family leisure. For her, and for many women in similar situations, guilt underpins her leisure time, and colours her interactions and negotiations with her partner. These feelings of guilt and inadequacy could definitely be seen as a 'gender issue', particularly in relation to mothering (Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Sutherland, 2010).

Compromise, negotiation and undercurrents of resentment were apparent in other relationships as well. R3 was unwilling to discuss compromise when it comes to her involvement in equestrian leisure:

The horses were there before he [P3] was and he knew before I met him that the horses are non-negotiable.

P3 recognised the importance of the horses to his wife and, having taken up riding himself, was sympathetic (to some degree) to the time and commitment they entail:

I think if you're going to have a horse then I feel it's important to spend good quality time with them, if you've got them.

However, his feelings about the horses were rather conflicted and at other times in the interview he expressed ambiguous views about them and the level of care and commitment they require:



I'd say I'm fairly involved with them [the horses] really, throughout the winter anyway. For example, say I get back earlier from work I'll see to the horses in terms of feed and things like that, but it's something I resent an awful lot, I must admit, it's because of the amount of work and the time that's involved.

P3 openly admitted that he resents the work involved with caring for horses, but he also respected his wife's dedication to them and expressed shared admiration for these animals. This illustrates how horses can hold an ambiguous position within family relationships; sources of both joy and animosity.

P1 was the only partner not to express open resentment of his partner's horse(s) and the time involved with equestrian activities, stating:

He [the horse] is part of the family really, and a regular topic of conversation in our home.

This may in part be due to the fact that R1's horse is kept at livery and so separated from day-to-day family life in the home. However, P1 did raise concerns he has about the safety of his partner's chosen leisure activity:

I do worry about it sometimes. She [R1] had an accident show jumping and she got hurt. So I am concerned for her. I try not to worry too much, but I hope it doesn't happen again. I do accept there are risks though. Like I cycle to work and that can be dangerous too, so we both agreed to always wear high-vis when we ride. She is quite vigilant in keeping safe but horses are unpredictable.

Riding is a high risk sport and does result in accidents of relatively high frequency and severity (Dashper, 2013; Papachristos et al., 2014). P1 is clearly concerned about this, and this underpins his feelings towards his partner's leisure choices. Throughout the interview he expressed support for her equestrian leisure, but on several occasions made reference to his worries about the high risk involved, illustrative of the compromises that must be made by both riders and their families. Over the course of writing this article R1 was involved in another riding accident, resulting in a broken leg. P1 was very supportive and did not explicitly 'blame' the horse, or suggest that R1 stop riding afterwards, but did express concern: "This is the sort of thing I worry about happening, or worse. It's a dangerous activity." P1's support of his partner's activity is underpinned by some ambivalence about the risks involved, and the potential consequences of horse-related injuries on their lives.

The examples within this section highlight the ambiguous position of horses within the context of these family relationships. All partners recognise that equestrian leisure is important to their

partners and constitutive of their identity and sense of who they are, and so want to be supportive. However, they all expressed ambivalent attitudes to horses and equestrian leisure, whether this was based around resentment, anxiety or competing responsibilities.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

In this article we have drawn upon our own relationships with our partners and horses in order to reflect on the interplays between horse care, riding, personal relationships and family life. All of our partners were broadly supportive of our horse activities and recognise that this is an important element of who we are, but there are tensions evident in relation to how we prioritise limited resources of time, money and emotion. These tensions are exacerbated when horses are domiciled at the family home, rather than at a geographically separate livery yard, as the horses become more integrated in everyday family life and the time and energy spent on and with them becomes more apparent to the non-horsey partner. Equestrianism is a particularly resource-intensive leisure activity that requires financial, physical, emotional and time input on a daily basis throughout the year. Unlike most other leisure activities it is not possible to have a 'day off' from equestrianism when there are horses that need to be cared for and this can contribute to a sense that this is more than a leisure activity; horses become a way of life (Dashper, 2017). This may be relatively unproblematic for the horse enthusiast who is happy to dedicate time, effort and resources to her equine charge, but, as we have shown in this article, this way of life extends beyond the horse caretaker and encompasses the wider family. Horses can then become a way of life for the whole family, even for those not interested in equestrianism themselves, as the needs of the horses are relentless and far-reaching. As such, the extent to which equestrianism can be described as 'leisure' is questionable when horse care is included alongside activities more easily recognisable as leisure, such as riding.

However, for us, and for most riders and horse caretakers, equestrianism is leisure, albeit a resource-hungry leisure activity. Equestrianism is not usually considered to be a 'lifestyle sport', such as surfing or snow-boarding, as this term is usually reserved for extreme or action sports (Wheaton, 2013). The term 'lifestyle sport' is used to refer to an activity that has a different ethos to "the traditional rulebound, competitive and masculinised dominant sport cultures", and emerged from the countercultural social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Wheaton, 2004: 3). In contrast, equestrian sport has a long history and deep-rooted traditions (Dashper, 2015a). It is an integral part of the traditional sporting infrastructure represented through codified competition and practices, exemplified through the Olympic Games, which equestrianism has been part of since 1904.

Consequently, although it is not usually considered a lifestyle sport in the literature, and has some differences to other lifestyle sports, equestrianism, as with many activities acknowledged to be 'lifestyle sports', acts as an important marker of identity for participants and comes to dictate many ostensibly non-horsey parts of life (De Haan et al., 2016; Dashper, 2017). This makes it perhaps inevitable that horses come to play an important role within (human) family relationships. For many horse people, horses are part of the family, and their needs and wants are considered alongside those of human family members. Yet for non-horsey family members this can be difficult to accept and, as with pets more broadly, the position of horses within family units can be ambiguous (Fox, 2006). In order to engage in resource-intensive leisure, participants need support from others, and this may be especially important for women, and mothers of young children in particular (Thomsson, 1999; Brown et al., 2001). This is certainly the case for equestrianism, and our study illustrates how compromise and negotiation is an unavoidable aspect of incorporating horses, or any all-consuming leisure pursuit, into family dynamics. How this works within the context of different relationships is variable, but some level of resentment, or at least discomfort, with the level of commitment required may be an outcome. However, as with participants in 'lifestyle sports', horse riders will usually find a way to manage competing demands and complex familial relationships in order to continue to engage with their passion.

Our focus here has been on three local examples and, just as there are differences in our three stories, there will be differences for other relationships in different contexts. We recognise that our stories and our relationships are contextually specific and narrow. As white, highly educated and privileged women within heterosexual relationships we are able to draw on varying sources of capital to support our equestrian leisure<sup>2</sup>, with and without the support of our partners, and many others will not be operating from such positions of relative power. However, drawing on autoethnographic traditions we argue that utilising our own experiences and relationships can be informative and rewarding, revealing patterns and details that will resonate with the stories of others, drawing attention to wider themes and issues for consideration. Personally, we have all found the process of researching and writing this paper interesting and sometimes surprising. We expected our partners to be more negative about our horses and equine activities than they were and now feel more comfortable and supported in our leisure pursuits. At times we have also had to have conversations with our partners about their ambiguous feelings towards our leisure activity, as well as our own actions and priorities in relation to horses and family, conversations which we are

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<sup>2</sup> Owning and caring for horses is expensive, and so we recognise that most equestrian participants must have some financial capital. However the common assumption that horse owners are comparatively wealthy only gives a partial picture. As Abbot's (2018) research illustrates, horse owners are diverse in terms of household income (ranging from £11,000-£75,000 p.a in her study), level (or lack) of qualifications, and type of job/work.

otherwise able to avoid in everyday life. Autoethnography is a challenging research approach that can force the researcher to address issues that she otherwise manages to push away (Dashper, 2013, 2015b). Others are always involved in autoethnography, and in this project we have tried to explicitly include our partners in an attempt to make this interconnectivity more apparent, and to overcome some of the critiques of autoethnographic methods and avoid slippage into 'navel gazing' and silencing others within the researcher's story (Delamont, 2008). We have included our partners' voices here, and reflected on their comments and had many interesting conversations with them as a result of the project, but this remains our analysis and our representation of the ways in which horse leisure features in our family lives.

Many other leisure activities that are male-dominated also require significant investment of time, money and/or emotion, such as golf and rally driving, and for men involved in these activities there is a need for negotiation and compromise to fit their leisure activities around other commitments such as work and family. However, we argue that this level of commitment to a leisure pursuit is much more problematic for women than it is for men, and this is manifest most clearly in the guilt many women feel about making such a commitment to their own pleasure. We certainly share this, and all of us have, at times, felt uncomfortable with the greediness of our chosen leisure pursuit, in terms of our time, money, bodies and emotions. This guilt or discomfort in part reflects wider social discourses about suitable roles for women, which continue to suggest that women should prioritise their families and other's interests over their own personal leisure activities. Women have increasing access to leisure opportunities and enjoy fun, friendship, fitness and achievement in ways similar to men in many sport and leisure spaces. However, women's leisure remains problematic in many circumstances as women struggle to negotiate time and space for their own leisure. This is reflected in our stories, reported here, and is a key issue for women involved with horses and riding as such activities require significant investment of time, money and emotion. In Britain, and many other societies in which riding horses for leisure is a popular activity for women, the persistence of normative gender ideals that associate women and femininity with caring creates pressure for women who engage in resource-heavy leisure pursuits like horse riding. Women who ride risk censure – from wider society, their families and from themselves – for seemingly prioritising their own leisure interests over the needs of their families and putting themselves at physical risk. Increasing numbers of women are challenging such normative gender assumptions and demonstrating that women can engage in active equestrian leisure *and* commit to their families, and are thus beginning to slowly rework women's roles and positions. Our stories show some of the tensions that can arise in human relationships as a result of equestrian activities, but also show that non-horsey partners often want to be supportive of the other's passion. Although horses certainly

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can put pressure on human relationships, in many cases negotiation and compromise mean that horses do not have to cause divorces.

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