

# Human-horse relationships, horse welfare and abuse in Mexico: a social representation approach

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## Abstract

Drawing on social representation theory, this study explored horse handlers' understandings of "good" treatment, abuse, and human-horse relationships in tourism, leisure, and sport events in Mexico to examine the ways in which attitudes toward horse welfare are shaped by both national and cultural discourses and wider norms of the global equestrian community. Based on in-depth interviews, the study revealed that national and subcultural norms of the equestrian social world shape people's attitudes to what is deemed "good treatment" and what is "abuse." It suggests the need to understand better how cultural factors shape different people's attitudes to those standards and look for ways to safeguard horse welfare while valuing local heritage.

## Introduction

Horses have been essential to the development of human societies. They have played key roles in work, industry, transport, agriculture, the military, food and as companions (Gürsoy, 2019; Liljenstolpe, 2009; Tovar, 2019), and they perform a leading role in modern tourism, sport and leisure (Buchmann, 2017; Dashper, 2017a; Kim et al. 2008; McGreevy, 2004; Ollenburg, 2005). While in some cultures human-animals interactions are based on rationality others may be so on emotionality (Rowan, 1995); therefore, meanings attributed to horses and the ways we use and interact with them are expected to be culturally defined.

Involving horses in human sport, leisure and tourism raises ethical questions about how those horses are treated, their status as sentient beings with the capacity to act in ways that may not always match human expectations, and what humans owe to horses we involve in our leisure practices, in terms of care, respect and autonomy (see Dashper, 2017a). The International Equestrian Federation (FEI), in association with the charity World Horse Welfare, states that the 'welfare of the horse has always been and will always be at the core of every aspect of the Federation's work as the international governing body for equestrian sport' (FEI, 2009). However, there is no more specific guidance about what 'good welfare' is in training, competition and leisure. In the same manner, although there are some broad guidelines on nonhuman (hereafter 'animals') animal welfare that have received widespread support, such as the Five Freedoms proposed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), these measures have been subject to critique and may not always be understood, accepted and adopted in the same way by different groups and nations (McCulloch, 2013). There is thus ambiguity around what is meant by animal (horse) welfare, and by extension 'good' treatment and abuse.

In this paper we consider these issues in relation to the equestrian sector in Mexico. In 2020, Mexico had a ranking of 'C' on the Animal Protection Index. Although Mexico has some animal

welfare legislation aimed at encouraging responsible pet ownership, API (2020) notes that the general focus of federal standards is 'aimed at ensuring animal health rather than animal welfare' (p. 1). Drawing on social representation theory (Moscovici, 1998), we explore Mexican horse handlers' understandings of 'good' treatment, abuse and human-horse relationships in order to examine the ways in which attitudes to horse welfare are shaped by both national cultural discourses and wider norms of the global equestrian community.

### **Horses in leisure**

In many countries around the world, horses are used primarily for sport and leisure pursuits (Adelman & Knijnik, 2013; Gilbert & Gillett, 2012). Horses are the most common animals playing a role in human sport (Dashper, 2017a), and horse riding has generated numerous forms of recreational activities including dressage, show jumping, three-day events, cross-country, vaulting, polo, pony clubs, horse driving, racing, endurance and equestrian therapy (Ollenburg, 2005). Therefore, as Dashper (2017b) claims, 'equestrian sport is part of the wider institution of sport that is characterized by competitiveness, notions of fair play, the quest for success, and issues of inclusion and exclusion' (p. 2). In the sporting arena, horses are regarded as both a product of sport as well as a social agent participating in events along with humans; horses are thus defined as athletes in equestrian sports (Gilbert & Gillett, 2012; Deraga, 2007). Horses are acknowledged as essential to successful competition (Wipper, 2000), so sport horses tend to receive special treatment (Dashper, 2014) and relationships with humans are often based on mutual trust, confidence, respect and communication (Wipper, 2000). As a result, human-horse relations in sport and leisure realms tend to become special, intimate, affective, long, deep and collaborative (Carr & Tolls, 2021; Danby et al., 2019). Human-horse interactions, however, will largely depend on the cultural context in question (Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021), and therefore, Carr and Tolls

(2021) argue that further research is needed to explore the role culture plays in how horses are viewed within the equestrian leisure experience.

Although human-horse relationships may lead to 'privileged' treatment for some horses, in some contexts human-recreational horse relationships have become quite transactional and instrumental (Dashper, 2014; Gilbert & Gillett, 2012). For some individuals the horse is objectified; it is regarded as a means for human leisure experiences (Carr & Tolls, 2021). The objectification of horses leads to their slaughter at the end of their productive lives as their meat is consumed in different countries around the world (Miranda-de la Lama et al., 2020). Therefore, in some contexts the affective relationships between humans and horses become relationships where economic and consumer interests end up dominating. As a result, the inclusion of horses in leisure practices raises important ethical questions as it may involve conscious and unconscious abuse and exploitation. To recognise horses as sentient beings deserving of human obligations is necessary not only to ensure harmonious interspecies relations but to consider the welfare of animals in their own right (Carr & Tolls, 2021).

More-than-human or posthumanist perspectives challenge the perceived superiority over non-human animals -including horses- which has led to people treating horses as commodities that serve human interests, stripping away their value as sentient individuals (Fennell, 2012). More-than-human perspectives decentre human priorities, acknowledging humans as but one species of animal and recognising that other animals can and do shape actions, have rich individual lives, and therefore interests and priorities that may not always align with human ones (Dashper & Buchmann, 2020). The inclusion of horses in sport, leisure and tourism can be considered ethically questionable, as horses cannot give their informed consent to become part of humans' recreational activities (Jönsson, 2012). This does not mean that equestrian sport, leisure and tourism are always morally indefensible, however, as horses can exercise some agency in their

actions and interactions with humans and other animals (Carr & Tolls, 2021; Dashper, 2018). Rather, it points to the ongoing need to question horse-human interactions and associated sport, leisure and tourism pursuits in order to try and ensure that the interests of horses are taken into account, at least to some extent. In the pursuit of expanding horse-based recreational businesses and facilities (Kline et al., 2015), pursuing sustainable development based on equine tourism (Evans & Pickel-Chevalier, 2014), and justifying it on the basis of local cultural heritage (Gursoy 2019), horse-based leisure activities place horses under situations of potential direct and indirect mistreatment and abuse, including severe exploitation and even death (Giuffrida 2009). Questions around horse welfare and the development of attentive relationships between humans and horses are thus integral to the ongoing development and sustainability of equestrian sport, leisure and tourism.

### **Animal welfare and abuse**

Animal welfare is to some extent an ambiguous concept and as a result there is no general agreement on what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' welfare. However, some argue that animal welfare is multidimensional as it encompasses concerns on biological function, natural living and feelings (Wigham et al., 2008). Because relationships between humans and animals can have both positive and negative effects on animal welfare (Rault et al., 2020), the protection and improvement of animal welfare has become a growing concern (Alonso et al., 2020).

Animal abuse can be defined as any act that contributes to the pain or death of an animal or that otherwise threatens its physical, psychological or emotional welfare (Agnew, 1998; Sollund, 2011). Agnew (1998) adds that animal abuse may be socially approved or condemned on the basis of being (perceived as) necessary or unnecessary. Fernández (2013) further claims that animal abuse

can be either direct or indirect; while direct abuse takes place intentionally and is carried out through aggressive and violent behaviours such as torture and mutilation that can lead to the death of the animal in an extreme case, indirect abuse is carried out through negligent acts regarding the basic care that animals need, such as provision of food, shelter, adequate veterinary care, and abandonment. Accordingly, animal abuse may take several forms and some of these may not always be recognised as abusive.

Animal abuse is not always a conscious issue. According to Agnew (1998), animal abuse is likely to take place in three situations: 1) when individuals ignore or are unconscious about the abusive consequences of their behaviour for animals, such as when participating in recreational activities; 2) when humans believe that their treatment is justified where there is a compelling human interest, such as the human feels threatened by the animal's behaviour; and 3) when humans believe that the benefits to be accrued outweigh the costs, such as situations in which the abuse of animals provides humans with status, prestige and recognition. In all of these situations, an anthropocentric view is prevalent whereby assessments of what constitutes 'acceptable' levels of abuse are formed on the basis of human-centric outcomes.

Animal abuse may also be dependent on other factors such as individual traits, moral beliefs, social position, gender, and, of course, the specific animal under consideration (Agnew, 1998). With regard to the latter, for example, while cattle have a unique exalted status in some Asian and African communities due to their deeply felt religious and cultural symbolism (Korom, 2000; Reist-Marti et al, 2003), large mammals such as apes, big cats, wolves and bears (McLennan & Hockings, 2016) and even pigeons (Jerolmack, 2008) may be considered problematic and despised species. As Jerolmack (2008) states, while some animals are appreciated because of their beauty, rareness or usefulness, many other become pests and undesirable to humans. For so-called pests, animal abuse in any of its forms is more likely to occur.

In his review of literature on human attitudes towards animals, Serpell (2004) revealed that attitudes towards animals are affected by various modifying factors which include the characteristics of animals, individual human attributes and an array of cultural factors. With regard to cultural factors, he claims that '(a)nimals, both specifically and as a group, are encumbered by quantities and symbolic baggage that greatly influence how people regard them and treat them' (Serpell, 2004, p. 148). Issues such as history, beliefs, values, as well as practices and cultural representations, will influence how individuals value, use, treat and dispose of animals. Therefore, animal treatment -including that of horses- is shaped by different cultural contexts.

### **Social representations**

Social representations are consensual understandings shared between the members of a group (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008). They can be defined as the concepts, statements and explanations originating in the inter-individual communications of everyday life (Moscovici, 1981). Social representation theory is concerned mainly with how individuals understand their world and, importantly, how this guides their actions and decisions. As Sammut et al. (2015) argue, '[t]he social representations approach has thus become a primary method for studying common sense in different social and cultural groups [...] that justifies certain human practices' (p. 6). Social representations are thus viewed as significant properties of social groups; they tend to be grounded in groups and vary from one group to another (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008).

Representations may not only distinguish one group from another, but can also be the source of conflict between them (Duveen, 2007). Social representation theory seeks to address how different meanings are asserted or contested and how different versions of the same phenomenon coexist (Howarth, 2006). Social groups are based on the existence of a shared set of

beliefs among their members, and beliefs can substantially define individuals' social identity, thereby guiding both actions and thoughts (Pearce et al., 1996). Within intersubjectively agreed reality, different representations compete in their claims to reality and in so doing defend, limit and exclude other realities (Howarth, 2006). In this vein, Pivetti (2005) claims that 'sharing a social representation is related to belonging to a group, but it is also a way of defining oneself as not belonging to out-groups that have different representations' (p. 143).

Because social representations comprise cognitive, affective and behaviour and action processes (Wagner et al 2018), social representation theory seeks to show how beliefs and attitudes are formed and derived from social interactions (Potter & Litton, 1985). As Hogg and Vaughan (2008) claim, 'people's beliefs are socially constructed [and as such], their ideas and opinions are moulded by what other people believe and say' (p. 176). Therefore, social representation theory recognises plurality and diversity in terms of how reality is constructed; it further postulates that representations are developed and transformed through conversations and participation in everyday social activities. Social representations are, therefore, not static and may differ considerably across and within cultures (Pearce, 2005). Even within the same cultural context, groups may hold different representations (Pivetti, 2005). In this context, different subcultural norms may lead to different social representations and therefore to different behavioural outcomes (Sammut et al., 2015).

Social representation theory can aid understanding of why humans have certain feelings and attitudes towards animals, and how this may differ by cultural and social context (Pivetti, 2005). The theory has proven useful in a variety of contexts, for instance, in revealing that activists' representations of animals and animal rights largely derive from the love/pain thema (Pivetti 2005); in studying how wolves are perceived and how this can affect attitudes to wolf protection efforts (Figari & Skogen, 2011); and in understanding how representations of different types of



species (e.g., large mammals, garden spiders and non-native plants) affect attitudes towards conservation (Fischer et al 2011).

Within this framework, social representations (in the case of this study, about animal welfare and abuse) are recognised to be social constructions, produced through shared discourse and interaction. While there is emerging consensus about standards of animal welfare in relation to practices such as transport, farming and slaughter, for example (OIE, 2021), there is still wide variance in how different groups understand what constitutes 'good' welfare and respectful human-animal interactions. Cultural differences in relation to how animals are perceived are important within this, and vary by country, social group and, in relation to horses, equestrian subpractice. In this study we draw on social representation theory to explore the ways in which people involved in different equestrian sport and leisure practices in Mexico understand their relationships with horses, and associated issues of abuse and horse welfare.

## **Context and methods**

### ***The context: Equestrian practices in Mexico***

Horses have played an important role in Mexican history. They have been utilized for work, transportation, agriculture, sport and leisure purposes (Monterrubbio & Pérez, 2021). They have played a leading role in Mexican culture and are an important component of Mexican national identity and of symbolic and material power among some riders (Palomar, 2004). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAOSTAT, 2021), there were 6,382,699 horses in Mexico in 2019; the second highest number of horses in the world (after the USA with 10,702,799). Within the sport and leisure arena, horses play a central role in practices such as jumping, dressage, dancing, racing, barrel racing, *charrería* and *escaramuza*. *Charrería*, a horse-

based traditional cultural practice considered a national sport, is popular in Mexico and its cultural value has been recognized as in 2016 it was added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. *Escaramuza* is the only female equestrian practice in *charrería* consisting of a team of women riding horses in a choreographed synchronized movements to music.

### **Methods**

Twelve in-depth interviews were undertaken with horse trainers, coaches, riders and handlers in central Mexico in 2019, in order to examine their understandings of horse welfare and human-horse relationships through sport and leisure events. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling in order to try and reach a range of individuals in terms of gender, age, education and occupation. Unlike previous studies (e.g., Dashper, 2016), in which the number of female participants outweigh the male ones, the larger number of male participants in this research is indicative of male dominance in the Mexican equestrian world. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 62 years old living in semi-rural areas. Their educational level included those with only secondary or high school level, as well as some with a university or postgraduate degree. Participants included students, an equine therapist, a teacher, an accountant, and trainers in general. Some trainers have learnt to train empirically and a few have taken formal courses, such as natural horsemanship clinics, to develop formal knowledge. Although the sample is not representative, this study suggests that horses in Mexico are kept, trained, cared for and handled by people belonging to different social segments.

Taking into account that specific groups may hold different representations of the same phenomenon (Pivetti, 2005), special attention was paid to recruit handlers belonging to different equine disciplines and practices. The sample thus included handlers belonging to *charrería*, *escaramuza*, dressage, equine therapy, jumping and dancing. A semi-structured interview guide

was utilized, consisting of four sections: sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, residence, education and occupation); horse-human relationships (e.g. horse keeping, meanings, type of relations, perceptions of horse treatment); participation in leisure or sport events (e.g. type of events, frequency, benefits); and horse treatment during events. At the end of the interview, participants had the chance to add something that was not yet commented on but considered relevant.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and thematically coded by the first author. Emergent themes were discussed with the other authors and refined in relation to the wider literature on animal welfare, human-horse relationships and social representation theory, as discussed in the previous sections.

## **Findings**

### ***Human-horse relationships***

For some participants, horses have been part of a family tradition, so they have grown up among horses or been around them for a long time. The shortest time a participant has been in contact with horses was six years but for most, horses have been part of their lives for over 20 years; as Imelda claimed, 'I was born among the horses' feet' and Manuel said, "Horses are my life, the truth is they are my life, my whole life, I have been involved with horses since I was three years old, that is, all my life I have been among horses".

For some, horses are regarded as part of their family or as a life partner, for them horses are important in their everyday life and profound affective ties exist between them and their horses. This confirms previous studies reporting that human-horse interactions may become so intimate

and affective that horses can be considered to be honorary members of a family (Dashper, 2014, 2017a,b). For some, horses are an integral part of their being, Imelda, whose young children are now part of *charrería* and feels proud of it being listed as world heritage, claimed:

‘They [ horses] are a part of me, they are like my family, my children. They are something very, very important to me, because they are part of my life, they have been part of my life, because I have been with them since I was born. I have had many horses with whom I have identified a lot, I have also lost many horses, and losing a horse is like losing a family member. For me a horse is like another person’.

Horses are also regarded as partners; for some, horses are companions with which they can go for a ride and get rid of stress and enjoy. In a similar vein, they can become a sport and work partner, and some participants recognise the importance horses have in achieving their sport competition or labour goals. Janeth, who recognises that one of her horses is a special being, reported a horse being her partner this way:

‘In my work, equine therapy, a horse is something that I appreciate very much, he is like my co-therapist ... he does 80-90% of the therapy; thanks to his properties, we have a result, I am just the one who directs and gives the instructions ... but we are a team’

Fabián, who often participates in jumping competition events, reported a similar meaning this way: ‘they are a sports partner and they are important to make a good team so that you can excel in sports; horses are athletes’.

Horses can also be considered an economic resource, especially for some whose occupation depends on horses. These include some trainers but also people who, for example, provide rides at tourism and leisure events in the region. Gerardo, who reported his horse working giving rides at an international fair for about seven hours daily, appreciated the economic benefit he received

from horses at the event. Alejandro stated that he can love the horses he trains but recognises their economic value. He claimed:

‘They mean a lot to me, they are worth a lot to me because I live from them, I support myself from them, with them I support my family, from them I get my money to live, so I do have a high estimate of them’.

This confirms previous research showing that horses can be valued economically (Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021) and therefore commercial and instrumental attitudes may lead to commodification and potentially exploitation of horses (Dashper, 2014). For our participants, human-horse relationships are complex and meaningful, based on deep affective ties but at the same time contributing towards the achievement of human-defined goals (such as therapy, sport competition, or financial reward).

### ***Representations of horse welfare and mistreatment***

This study explored participants’ general ideas about what ‘good treatment’ and ‘mistreatment’ of horses can mean. In order to consider whether horses deserve special consideration as compared with other animal species, we first asked participants if horses should be treated like other animals. In general, participants agreed that all animals should be respected equally on the basis that they are living beings. However, many claimed that horses are more delicate animals and therefore require special care. They demand more time, money, dedication and special diets; as compared with dogs and cats, for example, horses need special food care, since food-related colic may be fatal for a horse. Furthermore, horses, especially those who are part of a sport or a discipline and compete, need to be physically trained and schooled, which does not happen with a

cow, for example, they said. As a result, for our participants, horses should not be regarded as a pet and therefore should be distinguished from other companion animals.

For participants, the idea about what is 'good treatment' of a horse varies. Most participants agreed that good treatment implies meeting horses' everyday basic needs, that is, providing proper food, clean water, and also bathing and grooming. For others, good treatment also involves veterinary care including necessary medications, vaccines and deworming. Foot trimming and shoeing were also considered part of good treatment. For a minority of participants, good treatment also involves providing adequate infrastructure and facilities such as clean and dry stables and bedding

Monterrubio and Pérez (2020) argue that what constitutes horse abuse and mistreatment is a matter of subjectivity in Mexico. Participants' general ideas about horse mistreatment were grouped into two themes; basic needs and training/work. Half the participants claimed that not providing food to horses was clearly a type of abuse, this includes not feeding the horse and also failing to provide proper food or clean water. Not providing horses with medication, veterinary care and deworming when needed was also regarded as horse mistreatment. Only two participants talked about not taking care of the horses' hooves as a form of mistreatment. Three participants considered that having horses in damp or dirty stables or not cleaning their bedding are also forms of horse mistreatment.

Only four participants considered physical, social and emotional dimensions to be part of a horse's welfare. For them, it is not only the physical health needs that should be taken into account; good welfare implies meeting the need for socialisation with other horses, too. To illustrate this, Ramiro, a jumping trainer who has taken professional clinics on natural horsemanship, stated, 'good treatment of a horse means satisfying their physical, physiological and socialisation needs'.

For him, proper physical activity is also necessary for a horse's welfare, and this depends on the horse's age and maturity and needs to consider adequate warming up, stretching, gradual training and days for rest. Additionally, good treatment means not beating horses unjustifiably and fair and appropriate use of aids such as whips, spurs and reins. For some participants, beating can be considered part of good treatment, but only under justifying circumstances. Jimena, claimed 'if the horse does not respond to your commands, we do scold or beat them'.

Horse mistreatment tends to take place during training, working or performing. Most interviewees claimed that beating a horse unjustifiably is a type of horse abuse. As mentioned before, beating a horse is seen to be justifiable when they do not respond to the rider's commands or misbehave. In such cases, participants claimed, beating is a form of correction necessary for effective training and performance. This evidences Agnew's (1998) assertion that one of the situations in which animal abuse can take place is when humans, in this case riders or trainers, are conscious about their treatment but justify it on the basis that animals do something humans do not like, such as disobeying. Twenty-six-year-old Daniel, who as part of his work interacts with 38 horses, claims 'hitting them [horses] for no purpose is abuse. Sometimes they require a strong blow, but it is to correct them for the type of training or schooling they have.'

Similarly, the excessive use of artificial aids was also reported as a form of abuse. According to Hill (2006), an aid is 'the means by which a trainer or rider communicates with the horse. Natural aids are the mind, voice, hands, legs, body (weight, seat, back); artificial aids include the halter, whip, spurs, chain' (p. 175). The type, specific features, number and the particular use of aids depends on the discipline or practice the horse participates in. In *charrería*, for example, the General Official Regulation for Charro Competitions requires the use of only the *charro* type bit and whip (FMCH, 2021). Participants stated that hurting the horse as a consequence of inadequate or excessive use of artificial aids is part of horse abuse. Janeth, who recognises that human beings

are responsible for horses' welfare, claimed that 'there are many forms to abuse a horse, for example, the use of chains for dancing horses or, in *charrería*, the use of bits that are quite aggressive and bleed the horses' mouth or the use of large and aggressive spurs that can bleed the horse'.

According to Fabián, who has taken natural horsemanship clinics, the excessive and inadequate use of artificial aids is due to ignorance and limited knowledge about horses' nature and training methods. He claimed,

'many people are unaware of training methods and believe that horses do not respond because they are rebellious or because they do not want to do things. Many people abuse aids. I have seen many people who use aids heavily. Horses are very sensitive and can therefore respond to aids more gently'.

Demanding too much from a horse or forcing them to do something they do not want was also reported by some as abuse. This included, for example, training horses for long periods or teaching them to 'dance'. Manuel, who justifies beating a horse when they may want to bite or kick you, said, 'abuse is when they are educated with blows ... a horse is mistreated when people want to make him dance or do any exercise that he does not want'. In a similar vein, Roberto, who feels pride that *charrería* has been listed as world heritage and who perceives that the number of *charrería* sympathisers is increasing, stated, 'abuse is when you demand from them in excess or what they cannot do'.

We also aimed to explore participants' ideas about horse mistreatment in various disciplines/practices. Ramiro, who says that in jumping competitions regulations of the International Equestrian Federation and the Mexican Equestrian Federation need to be complied



with, recognised that “in all equestrian disciplines there are cases of good treatment and there are cases of mistreatment too”.

However, seven participants concurred with the idea that horse dancing is an equestrian practice in which horses are most mistreated. They referred to the method and instruments used to teach horses to dance. Alejandro has trained around 150 horses for dancing and, together with Manuel, described the process basically this way: the method is called the pillar or cage method; horses are tied up among two or three pillars and are whipped from behind to start trotting, but they trot in the same place as they are held back by the halter. Once they have learnt to trot on the same spot, horses are hit with a stick on their front and back legs so that they lift them higher; they lift their legs to escape the pain. Chains are often tied to the horses’ legs during dance training so that, once chains are removed for performance, horses lift their legs higher. Words such as abuse, beating, bleeding, aggressive, exploitation, stress, excessive physical demand and exhaustive were used to refer to this equestrian practice. Manuel, who claims that he teaches horses through nonviolent methods, acknowledges that ‘teaching a horse to dance in a traditional way [through the cage method] is abusive, you hurt the horses’.

## **Discussion**

Attitudes to horses and understandings of what constitutes ‘good treatment’ or ‘abuse’ are influenced by a wide range of factors including prior experience, education, cultural beliefs and individual demographics. The majority of previous studies on human-horse relationships and interactions have focused on countries in the Global North with specific equestrian cultures and traditions and attitudes to animals and welfare that effect how people interact with horses, and that may differ to other geographic and cultural contexts (e.g., Maurstad et al., 2013; Dashper,

2017a). Our study examining attitudes of Mexican horse handlers reveals some similarities with these studies, particularly in relation to the importance of horses to participants' lives and sense of self, but also some important differences, most notably in relation to hitting horses. Drawing on social representation theory we suggest that these differences can be explained in part through cultural variance in attitudes to animals and what constitutes 'good treatment' and 'good welfare'.

There appears to be some cross-cultural agreement on general attitudes towards companion animals in particular that may in turn affect perceptions of what is considered to be 'good treatment'. Turner's (2010) study comparing attitudes across 12 countries indicated that, regardless of gender, education level and religious orientation, people generally agree that dogs are likeable animals worthy of humane treatment. In Rusu et al.'s (2018) study, Mexican respondents had broadly positive attitudes towards (companion) animals and recognised some degree of animal subjectivity, but this was lower than among Romanian participants. Estévez-Moreno et al. (2021) found convergence between Mexican and Spanish meat eaters regarding the importance of farm animal welfare, although there was recognition that 'good welfare' remains more of an aspiration than a reality within Mexico.

Participants in our study expressed similar ideas about the importance of horses and the meanings of human-horse relationships to those of UK (Hockenhull et al., 2010; Dashper, 2017b), American and Norwegian (Maurstad et al., 2013) horse handlers. They recognise the value of horses to them and their way of life, providing both an emotional connection and often economic support as well. Participants' responses indicate that they view their horses as valued individuals, sometimes as family, and this will impact how they are treated and what people think are acceptable standards of care. Keeping, caring for and riding horses are extremely resource-intensive activities – in terms of money, time and emotion – and so those involved in equestrian practices are often passionate about horses and their relationships with them (Dashper, 2017a). This passion appears to be

shared across national and cultural contexts, suggesting that the social group of 'horse lovers' share certain norms and attitudes, regardless of locality.

Rollin (2007) suggested that cultural variance in relation to animal welfare may be reducing under a dominant Western notion of animal *telos*, based on animals' biological and psychosocial natures, aiming towards achieving animal 'happiness' and 'quality of life'. To some extent, the participants in our study recognise the importance of catering to horses' biological and psychosocial needs in terms of provision of basic necessities (e.g., food, water, veterinary care) and additional facilities (such as bedding and farriery). They were willing to identify some behaviours as abuse, such as causing physical harm and distress to horses during training and competition. However, contrary to Rollin's (2007) suggestion, the majority of them did not consider the social needs of horses to interact with other horses as a prerequisite of 'good treatment' and instead took a rather mechanistic view based on avoiding harm more than providing fulfilment.

One area where the responses of our participants differ to those reported in many other studies (e.g., Warren-Smith & McGreevy, 2008) was in relation to the use of punishment as a training aid. Whilst most equestrian practices use some form of negative reinforcement – such as pressure and release – our participants talked about hitting horses as a form of punishment for perceived bad behaviour. Some level of physical rebuke – hitting – was deemed acceptable treatment by many of our participants who saw this as an appropriate response to undesired horse behaviour. While some participants, particularly those trained in Western equestrian traditions such as Natural Horsemanship, did identify such behaviour (and the use of punitive aids) as abuse, our study suggests that there is a broad acceptance of such behaviours in Mexican equestrian culture. This is further reinforced by the reported prevalence of strict training regimes in relation to specific practices such as horse dancing. Although many of our participants were critical of such practices,

they acknowledged their widespread prevalence and thus cultural acceptance within the wider equestrian social world.

Drawing on social representation theory we suggest that the cultural norms of the equestrian social world in Mexico shape people's attitudes to what is deemed 'good treatment' and what is 'abuse'. Our participants expressed pride in Mexican equestrian heritage, such as *charrería*, while recognising that such practices may at times encourage harsh training techniques which could be considered poor treatment, if not outright abuse. Their attitudes towards horses thus show some similarities to those reported in different equestrian cultures from the UK (Hockenhull et al., 2010) to the US (Maurstad et al., 2013) but also some important nuances related to Mexican cultural heritage and broader attitudes to animal welfare and interspecies relationships. Some aspects of what is considered 'good treatment' of horses may vary in different national contexts.

International organisations like The World Organisation for Animal Health or, in a sporting context, the International Equestrian Federation, are increasingly proposing universal standards of animal welfare, although these remain poorly defined. Efforts towards improving the lives of horses are much needed, and an (re)assessment of our use and sometimes abuse of horses through sport, leisure and tourism is important for equine well-being and social justice. However, our study suggests that we need to understand better how cultural factors shape different people's attitudes to those standards and look for ways to try to work with people from different groups (whether that is nationality or equestrian discipline) to develop standards and practices that safeguard horse welfare, while valuing local heritage.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have drawn on exploratory interviews with 12 Mexican horse handlers to consider attitudes towards human-horse relationships, 'good treatment', animal welfare and abuse.

Drawing on social representation theory we argue that it is important to recognise how different national and subcultural norms shape these attitudes. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, our findings cannot be generalised to other equestrian practices in Mexico. However, our study provides evidence to suggest that participants were certainly influenced by the specific norms of Mexican horse heritage, which involve some unique equestrian practices which may be based on harsh training techniques. However, at the same time, our participants are also part of a global equestrian culture and their love for horses and passion for equestrian sport and leisure is shared by people around the world (see Adelman and Thompson, 2017). The competing demands of traditional equestrian heritage and contemporary norms of global horsemanship shape their attitudes to and relationships with horses and what people consider 'good treatment'. Based on our findings, more research is needed to examine in depth horses' psychosocial needs.

Furthermore, there is need for further research to explore the cultural specificities of different equestrian subcultures, particularly beyond the Global North, to not only aid understanding of the social and cultural differences between different contexts but also to identify aspects of shared, transnational equestrian cultural norms and behaviours that can be capitalised on to maximise horse welfare.

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