“This Sweet Connection”: A Phenomenological Study of Parents’ Stories about the Meaning of Horses in their Children’s Lives

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The Purpose
To better understand the cultural, social, and personal meanings of horses in families’ lives.
To make a social-psychological interpretation of the underlying meaning of the stories parents tell about their children’s connection to horses.

Sample
- 30 families were previously recruited from a boarding and lessons stable and interviewed.
  - Various family dynamics, socioeconomic and demographics, as well as horse-relationships.
  - 10 parent interviews were selected:
    9 individual mother interviews, 1 joint parent interview.
    Focal daughter between the ages of 10-23.

Methods
- I chose parent interviews for their views of the child’s development and personality.
- I open and selective coded the parent interviews from the 30 families.
- This analysis focuses on 10 parent interviews that told pivotal stories of “firsts.”
- I present findings from axial coding of these 10 interviews with a focus on the meanings and types of “firsts.”
- Each parent was asked, “Please tell me one story about your daughter’s life with horses.” and, “What is the meaning of that story to you?”
- A key theme was that parents often told stories of a “first time” event.
- The “first time” stories coded into 4 main sub-themes.

Results
- Overcame Barrier: “Everybody can accomplish, every single person no matter what your disability, you can accomplish something.”
- Her daughter was able to overcome her mental disability and canter around the ring.
- Mother/Daughter Bonding: “All three of us would go out to the barn together and we would share that bonding experience and the horsemanship and our relationship with horses together.”
- First time horse died.
- First time horse rode horse, Harvey
- First time mother saw daughter fall off horse
- First time daughter fell off horse, Lance
- First time horse died
- First time daughter won Versatility award

Four Major Themes
1. Overcame Barrier
2. Achievement
3. Mother/Daughter Bonding
4. Fun/Funny

Conclusion
- These firsts experienced:
  - Love, determination, pride, connection, fear, joy, worrisome, and sadness.
  - The parents described “firsts” as monumental moments within the family.
  - Parents perceive that horses nurture character development in their daughters, often referring to them working hard.

Implications
- “Firsts” are stories about brief moments in the development of a family through their life cycle.
- “Firsts” illuminate the processes by which their daughters mature and the family grows.
- This research will help me become a better therapist in the future. Understanding various family dynamics is important in family counseling. As a therapist, I’ll listen to stories on a daily basis and make sense of their emotional meaning.

Future Research
- Interview more father figures and sons. This study was mostly mothers, except for one father interview, and included no sons.
- Analyze the other 20 families’ interviews.
- Compare parent interviews with their children’s interviews to see if they share the same “firsts” and meaning of those “firsts.”

References