

“I prefer working with mares, like women, difficult in character but go the extra mile”: A study of multiple inequalities in equine (sports) business

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Abstract

The idea that a “single category”—focus in the study of workplace inequality leads to oversimplification and obscures its complex nature is now generally accepted. Yet few concerns have been raised with regard to the “single species”—focus of inequalities in the context of management and organization studies. In this paper, we shed light on the interplay of multiple inequalities in the multispecies, sex-integrated setting of equine (sports) business in the Belgian context, and paying particular attention to show jumping activities. An Ackerian analysis reveals the persistence of gendered inequalities despite women's “theoretically” improved chances of identifying with the ideal rider construct, following changed breeding preferences and an organizational logic of “passion-merit.” Popular imageries of horses paradoxically reveal the lack of agency awarded to animals and the instrumental nature of the human–horse bond. This study opens the debate on how nonhuman animals may be integrated into core feminist organizational concepts, looking at organizational logic through a multispecies lens. We initiate a claim to knowledge about overlapping and intersecting forms of inequality in a posthumanist spirit whilst reflexively acknowledging our human-centered approach to data collection. Finally, we ponder upon the question of what

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ontological and methodological shifts would be required to convincingly speak of multispecies inequality regimes.

KEYWORDS

Acker, animal organization studies, equine (sports) business, ideal worker, multiple inequalities, multispecies inequality regimes

1 | INTRODUCTION

Joan Acker's work (1990, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2012) is celebrated as some of the most influential gender analyses in management and organization studies. Through her main conceptual tools of the "gendered organization" and its "substructure" as well as the idea of "inequality regimes," she managed to paint a clearer picture of the integrative processes at play when women seek professional advancement in different organizational contexts with firm beliefs of equity. Although originally focused on traditional bureaucratic organizational contexts where it proved highly valuable (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998), her framework has proven to be relevant at the occupational level too (Berry & Bell, 2012) and even in the new economy (Sargent et al., 2021). Rather than considering one axis of difference at a time, Ackerians believe studying workplace inequality requires an intersectional approach (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012, p. 250). Originally centered around gender, race, and class, Acker "left the door open" for other forms of differences to become seen as meaningful contributors to inequality regimes (Healy et al., 2019).

Building on Joan Acker's influential work on the gendered organization, inequality regimes, and the ideal worker, this paper critically examines "equine (sports) business" as an important yet neglected context of workplace inequality in management and organization studies. Equine (sports) business refers to the cycle of activities undertaken for humans' professional gain¹ related to the breeding, upbringing, and training of young horses that are taken out on competition from the age of five onward to practice an equine sport, increasing their commercial value, and finally to be sold on the international market for the highest bid. Equestrian sports offer a unique setting of sex-integration as all genders compete together in the same classes. The domains of dressage, show jumping, and eventing—all Olympic sports—are "not subjected to the dominant binary sex segregation of most sports," offering unique opportunities to construct a "gender neutral" identity as an athlete for professional riders (De Haan et al., 2016, p. 1249). Consequently, a high perception of equality persists in Euro-American settings (FEI, 2018), despite strong indications of gender segregation. The latter is especially rampant in the subdiscipline of show jumping, the most profitable one (Equenews, 2021), where the 80% participation rate of women at the amateur level (Adelman & Thompson, 2017) reverses rather extremely to the 80% participation rate of men at the highest Olympic level (Tokyo, 2020). Earlier studies about the equestrian sector point out how important stakeholders, such as horse owners, sponsors, and selection committees, have a tendency to privilege male riders (Clayton-Hathway & Fasbender, 2019; Coulter, 2016a). Moreover, the increasing value of elite sports horses has changed business logic from being centered on durable horse-human bonds to privileging "quick wins" to the detriment of the horse's well-being (Dashper, 2014). Still, it remains unclear how different axes of identity come together to produce a complex interplay of privilege and disadvantage or how multiple—even multispecies—inequalities play out in this context for horses and humans. To date, no study has considered inequality regimes as processes in which sexism, racism, and classism interlink with anthropocentrism—the human-centered worldview that comes with a dominant focus on human interests, practices, and perspectives (Dashper, 2020) and the belief that all other animals are to be treated as means to human ends—to produce complex organizational logics that are multispecies. We aim to open the debate on how nonhuman animals (animals hereafter) may be integrated into core feminist organizational concepts, looking at organizational logic through a multispecies lens.

To achieve this aim, this study builds on 46 interviews with equestrian professionals in Belgium,² who shed light on their experiences of the equine (sports) business and horse-human relationality in nuanced ways. It seeks to answer the following research questions: "Which forms do inequality take in the equine (sports) business, specifically

in show jumping-related activities in the Belgian context? To what extent are these inequalities visible and legitimised?" Theoretically, we, hereby, add to the ongoing debate on multiple inequalities in the equine sector (Adelman & Thompson, 2017). Perhaps more importantly, we contribute to recent calls to reshape scholarly concepts for multispecies organization studies (Tallberg et al., 2022) and reflect on new analytical concepts that "recognize the realities of animals" labor and interspecies workplace relations (Coulter, 2022, p. 18). By extending Ackers' (2006c) framework of inequality regimes to include animals, this study strives to take animal labor in multispecies work more seriously (Coulter, 2016b; Sayers et al., 2019).

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | The gendered organization and inequality regimes

Organizations are not gender-neutral entities but gendered structures that privilege masculine norms. This knowledge was brought to us by Acker (1990) some 30 years ago. Moving away from reductive, individualistic interpretations of women's work experiences, her work gave rise to explanations for gender inequality at the structural level (Britton & Logan, 2008) and contributed to the view that are not only organizations rife with societally produced inequalities but are also at the very origins of such inequality (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2019). Her framework has helped researchers all over the world to disentangle the complexities of gender in organizations through an integrative, multilevel approach (Benschop & van den Brink, 2019).

Joan Acker's earlier work focused specifically on the gendering of organizations (Acker, 1990, 1992), and as part of this framework, Acker developed the notion of the "ideal worker" (1990, 1992), a worker for whom jobs are designed. Researchers have empirically explored the manifestation and expectations of an "ideal worker" in a specific occupation, organization, or sector (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). Oftentimes, the focus has been on the masculine embodiment and underpinnings of this norm (ibid), showing how women are disadvantaged in relation to it (e.g., Butler & Charles, 2012). Notably, Acker's later work around "inequality regimes" (Acker, 2006c, 2009) extended theorizing to consider how other processes of inequalities, including class and race, are entwined in complex but meaningful ways (Sayce, 2019). Acker defines inequality regimes as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker, 2006c, p. 443). Yet she also points out (Acker, 2006b, 2012) that these are not the only historical differences through which workers are pushed to the margins. Rather, what constitutes a meaningful difference is being historically and culturally defined as well as being context-specific and may thus extend well beyond traditional categories of privilege (e.g., age, sexual orientation, disability, appearance, manners, and accent) (Healy et al., 2019; Scholz & Ingold, 2021). An important characteristic of these differences is that they are systematic and pertain to various power disparities, which may become visible through occupational segregation or wage gaps. However, inequality is often more subtle and complicated, "inscribed in the day-to-day organizational practice" (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012, p. 228) and persists even in contexts where a dominant perception of equality exists. Indeed, a widespread belief that equality is already achieved may even cover up inequality practices (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998).

A key to the framework of "Ackerians" is the idea of the "substructure," which helps explain how underneath the appearing identity-neutral and disembodied organizational structures and work relations lies a "deeply embedded substructure of gender [and other, gender^{plus} hereafter] difference" (Acker, 1990, p. 139). Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) elaborate on four of five³ components of such a substructure, studying the *structure* and *culture* of organizations in relation to the *interactions* and *identities* of organizational members. Empirically they document how the presence of a few women in senior positions was used as "proof" of gender equity, how informal social relations and "being asked" became essential for career progress, and how mothers were segregated into inferior career trajectories. These gendered everyday practices were legitimized and "taken for granted" (Acker, 1990) to the extent that organizations could make a claim to gender-neutral processes, explaining different career outcomes as inevitably linked to preference, skills, or the type of work suited for those with family responsibilities.

Moreover, the lens of inequality regimes has been extended far beyond its original unit of analysis—the single organization—to include occupational and sectoral level analyses (Berry & Bell, 2012; Healy et al., 2019; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Scholars also refute that Acker's work is outdated in the new economy (Benschop & van den Brink, 2019), where traditional organizations offering long-term security diminish in favor of precarious gig-like contracts. For instance, some recent studies reflect on how coworking spaces (Sargent et al., 2021) and activity-based working (Klinksiek et al., 2023), which are no longer tied to traditional bureaucratic practices but rely on flatter, self-managed teams and social networking, both reduce and reproduce inequality for different groups of women and disabled persons. Other studies in the cultural arts sector demonstrate how women are disproportionately affected by cultural norms about domestic responsibilities and industry norms of total flexibility and commitment (Handy & Rowlands, 2014; Johansson & Lindström Sol, 2022). Next, we present inequalities in the equine (sports) business along Ackers' substructure framework. Despite the numerous interesting stretches made by Ackerians, analyses so far have remained "single-species" and anthropocentric, ignoring the important work animals do everyday side by side with humans. Consequently, here, we also consider relevant work in "animal organization studies" (Tallberg & Hamilton, 2022).

2.2 | Inequalities in the equine (sports) business along Acker's substructure

An important element to consider in an Ackerian substructure analysis of the equine (sports) business in a Western European context is the *culture* or the symbols, images, and artifacts that serve to justify inequalities (Dye & Mills, 2012). Historically, horses have been essential for agricultural development, warfare, and transport (Dashper, 2020). Today, their "usefulness" to humans is situated almost exclusively in leisure, tourism, and sports (Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021). Although this switch from a utility to consumption-based relationship, in general, benefitted horses' well-being and moral status (Dashper, 2014; Zamir, 2006), it did not signify the end of horse misuse and abuse. In fact, the lack of multispecies solidarity and respect in modern-day equine activities is more and more under critique, both by researchers (Coulter, 2017; Huopala, 2022a) and in the media, as evidenced, for instance, by bans on horse-drawn carriages in city tourism. Concerns have also been raised with regard to the sports business, where an additional shift in organizational logic (Acker, 1992) is noticeable from horses as a trusted partner with a focus on durable horse–human relationships to a commodity-based business model. This is driven by the increasing value of sports horses (Equine, 2021), which leads to pressure for quick results. In such a "microwave culture," the well-being of horses becomes secondary to the business of horse sales (Dashper, 2014; Hogg & Hodgins, 2021). Horses, of course, cannot consent to human-initiated activities and remain vulnerable to human will as "property." Human mastery over the horse, therefore, needs to be problematized in research, and possibilities for mutual benefit require investigation (Karkulehto & Schuurman, 2021; Zamir, 2006), instead of taking for granted horse–human relations as beautifully "centaured" and equal (Linghede, 2019).

Apart from speciesism-informed assumptions, the equine (sports) business logic is entrenched with gendered^{plus} assumptions (Dye & Mills, 2012). There is the idea that equestrianism is no longer an exclusively elite sport which may, in fact, be practiced equally by men and women of any age as "skill, timing and feel" are more important than "force, flexibility and resilience" (Adelman & Knijnik, 2013; Adelman & Thompson, 2017). Nevertheless, it is clear that those who strive to build a lifelong career in equestrianism will benefit from the high-class background, as "money facilitates access to better education, better horses, more child-minding, more time to ride and so on" (Thompson & Adelman, 2013, p. 197). Moreover, an ideal rider construct that foregrounds strength and endurance of injury and pain persists (Butler & Charles, 2012; Schuurman & Sireni, 2016) in equestrian narratives despite the rhetoric that "anyone can make it," while the whiteness of equestrian (sports) business in developed countries remains largely unacknowledged (Knijnik, 2013). Yet access to sports horses and equestrian technologies remain "exclusive to upper or middle class white people" (Adelman & Thompson, 2017, p. 8), and minority riders usually ride for other purposes (e.g., ranch work and leisure) leading to a racial marking in equestrianism.

Indeed, zooming in on the substructure element of *structures and practices*, we uncover more gender^{plus} patterns. A bifurcation of the ideal worker becomes noticeable through horizontal and vertical gender-based segregation. Firstly, the 80% dominance of girls and women at the amateur level, typically found in the Euro-American and

Anglophone world, disappears when moving up to the professional echelons, both as riders and as managers/leaders in jobs like team selectors or committee members (Clayton-Hathway & Fasbender, 2019). This results in selection practices for international competitions (e.g., “Nations Cup”) being performed almost exclusively by men who prefer appointing male riders (Thompson, 2016). Secondly, male dominance becomes especially striking in the subdiscipline of professional show jumping (Adelman & Knijnik, 2013; Thompson, 2016). This is part of a wider pattern whereby men dominate the profitable equestrian disciplines (e.g., racing and show jumping) where revenues are higher due to higher risk perceptions and subsequent mediatization (Hedenborg & White, 2012). Women are overrepresented in feminized equestrian fields such as dressage despite the growing number of men competing here and wider acceptance of fluid masculinities such as gay and effeminate men (Dashper, 2012; Knijnik, 2013).

In Acker's substructure framework, the formal and informal patterns of *interaction* between individuals or groups “while doing the work” also require consideration (Healy et al., 2019). In the equine sector, men find it easier to attract high-level sponsors (like Land Rover, Longines, Rolex, or Hermès) which increases the social and cultural capital necessary to further their equestrian jumping careers (Coulter, 2016a). Being in regular contact with sponsors and (potential) investors/owners is important since show jumpers especially need a string of top-quality horses to compete successfully on the international stage. These horses come at a high commercial value, unaffordable for most professional riders who instead rely on the goodwill of owners who have all the decision power (Dashper et al., 2018). Riders are thus dependent on these owners who have a history of favoring male riders (Dashper, 2012) and who can decide at any given point to assign the horses to a different rider or sell them, putting riders in a precarious position (Clayton-Hathway & Fasbender, 2019). This also explains the importance of networking, interacting, and being asked to ride the top-quality horses that remain “out of reach” to many.

Finally, the *identity* element in Acker's substructure framework directs researchers' attention toward how appropriate behaviors and attitudes in the sector are constructed along gender^{plus} divisions (Acker, 1992). Indeed, men in the equestrian field continue to be designated “expert positions” more easily. This is also true in the non-Western contexts (Rahbari, 2017; Talley, 2020) and in “newer” disciplines like the “horsemanship movement” (Birke & Brandt, 2009). Moreover, stereotypical ideas around men's preferred use of horses “to exhibit their power” and women's derived pleasures from “engaging in intimate relations with the horses” are still omnipresent. They result in men identifying themselves and/or being identified as better in valorization work—taking horses out on competition—and women as being more naturally suited to undertake groom work (Thompson & Adelman, 2013). Women's assumed “natural” caring qualities cause many women riders to give up on their riding career in favor of assisting their horsey spouse or caring for young children (Thompson, 2016).

Despite these interesting insights and the few problems raised with regard to animal welfare, research on inequalities in the equine (sports) business remains predominantly human-centric. Yet scholars in gender, work, and organization are increasingly moving away from single-species research (Clarke & Knights, 2019; Coulter & Fitzgerald, 2019; Finkel & Danby, 2019). The foundational work on *animal organization studies* (Tallberg & Hamilton, 2022) explores the complex entanglements and interactions that constitute multispecies encounters (Connolly, 2022; Dashper, 2014). Largely written from a posthumanist perspective, this literature further problematizes human/animal dualisms and unequal power relations, seeking to move beyond anthropocentrism. This literature inspires us to acknowledge sensate nonhuman individuals better and rethink the world from an animal perspective while remaining self-reflexive regarding the challenges of doing so.

3 | METHOD SECTION

3.1 | Context and design of the study

To study multiple inequalities in a multispecies business context, we aimed for a research field that was characterized by a high perception of gender equality, despite strong indications of segregation, with a fair proportion of animal

labor. The equine sector, especially the show jumping scene, suited these requirements. The equine (sports) business is a “booming business” in Belgium, with growing foreign trade and investments given the worldwide prestige of local breeds (Sporza, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2021). The empirical method of qualitative, semistructured interviews was chosen as it allowed for a fairly quick understanding of how humans, professionally active in this business, assessed the equality of their field. It is important to acknowledge up front the shortcomings of such a choice, as it remains a human-centered method prioritizing human experiences (Dashper & Brymer, 2019; Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021) and failing to fully include nonhuman animals as sentient social actors in the research design (Wels, 2020).

A call for respondents was circulated by the first author, with the help of three student researchers through personal networks (e.g., local riding clubs) and snowballing, advertising “a study on gender equality in showjumping.” At the same time, high-level show jumping riders were contacted directly through their social media accounts, with information about the study and an invitation to share their experience with the researchers. Although the primary target respondent group for the study were show jumping riders who self-identified as women and undertook show jumping as their main profession, we later expanded the sampling criteria. Also included were professional show jumping riders who self-identified as men, professional riders in other disciplines (eventing or dressage), and former professional show jumping riders as long as they were still (self)employed in the broader equine sector (e.g., riding school owners, breeder–trainers, equine equipment sales, and health services for horses). This choice was made both out of practical reasons, because the initial response rate was disappointing, and out of theoretical reasons, following the argument that different related stakeholders can shed light on the complex phenomena of (women's) inequality in show jumping. This particular strategy of advertising, the expanded selection criteria, and the sampling techniques used may have come with their own (un)intended side effects, such as socially desirable answers, an underexposing of racial and classed inequalities, and a sociodemographic composition that overly resembled that of the privileged, young, white researchers (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). It is very likely that the collected narratives would be different if other choices were made (e.g., including stable cleaners, referring to “horse well-being” in the ad).

In total, 46 equestrian professionals responded to the call, defined as part-time or full-time waged or self-employed people active within the broad equine sector. Since the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic (from January to March 2021), when social distancing regulations quickly changed, most interviews were conducted through video conference while some remained face to face. For an overview of respondent characteristics, see Table 1.

The interviews lasted between 25 min and 2 h, with an average of 47 min, and all followed a similar structure containing five main parts. After explaining in detail how the collected data would be used, anonymized, and stored, 22 interview questions were asked to respondents in a predefined order, leaving the possibility to take the interview in the desired direction. The first part of the guideline contained questions about the nature of their equestrian job, the second part, about the origins of respondents' passion for horses, and the third part asked questions about the combination of work and private life. Next, there was a section on the horse–human relationship. The guideline ended with subtle and more direct questions about gender differences in the equestrian world. Apart from human gender differences, this last section also inquired about sex-based differences in horses.

3.2 | Data analysis

Despite the anthropocentric approach to data collection, the data analysis is conducted in a posthumanist spirit, aiming to examine horses as “participants in organizations in more ethically grounded terms” (Satama & Huopala, 2019, p. 362) and staying critical of the grading of animals in terms of their capacity to serve humans (Clarke & Knights, 2021). In that sense, it is important to clarify that the authors' childhood experiences with horses at the amateur level have formed their understanding of horses' uses (Birke & Brandt, 2009; Birke & Thompson, 2018; Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021), while their later professional careers as critical management scholars urged them to rethink formerly engaged-in practices of riding and owning horses, through the eyes of both horses and humans,

TABLE 1 Overview of respondents.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Type of job	Jumping as the main discipline	Highest degree	From a horse family	Has a horse partner	Employs other workers	Works full time in the equine sector
Adriaan	M	43	seR + I	x	g			x	x
Andrew	M	18	wR	x	g		x		x
Arnaud	M	42	BT	x	h		x	x	x
Basile	M	22	wR	x	e				x
Benny	M	30	seR	x	g	x	x	x	x
Camille	F	19	seR		h	x			
Chantal	F	56	RSO	x	g		x	x	
Charlise	F	31	seR	x	g	x			
Chelsey	F	30	RSO	x	h	x		x	
Cilou	F	50	RSO + BT	x	g			x	x
Clarice	F	60	RSO + I	x	h			x	x
Denise	F	24	wR	x	e				x
Edward	M	34	wR		h	x			
Elise	F	30	seHC		h				x
Ella	F	21	seR	x	h	x			x
Elodie	F	29	seR + BT + I	x	h	x	x	x	x
Estelle	F	24	wR	x	e	x			
Eva	F	25	seR + RSO + I	x	g			x	x
Fabienne	F	51	BT	x	g	x		x	x
Fanny	F	53	seR + I		g		x		x
Felice	F	20	wR	x	g	x			x
Gilles	M	33	seR + BT	x	h	x	x		x
Guy	M	60	se R + BT	x	g	x		x	x
Hermine	F	37	I		g			x	x
Hortense	F	30	seHC		h				x
Igor	M	27	Former seR now wS	x	e				
Ina	F	21	wR + I	x	g	x			
Isa	F	23	seR	x	g	x	x	x	x
Julie	F	23	wR	x	h	x			x
Laurianne	F	24	wR	x	g	x	x		x
Laurie	F	29	seR + BT	x	h		x	x	x
Liévine	F	22	wR		h				
Lisa	F	21	wR		g				x
Loic	M	56	wR + I	x	g				x
Louise	F	28	seR	x	g	x	x	x	x
Lucas	M	28	wG	x	h				x
Marie	F	21	wR + I	x	g	x			x

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Type of job	Jumping as the main discipline	Highest degree	From a horse family	Has a horse partner	Employs other workers	Works full time in the equine sector
Marine	F	27	Former wR now wS	x	e				
Natalie	F	52	RSO + I		e	x	x	x	x
Nora	F	32	wR		h	x	x		x
Pauline	F	41	seR + BT + I		g	x		x	x
Rania	F	49	RSO	x	h		x	x	x
Roland	M	61	BT	x	g			x	x
Silke	F	27	wG	x	e				x
Valentine	F	27	wR	x	g	x	x		x
Valère	M	40	seR + BT	x	g	x	x		x

Abbreviations: BT, breeder and trainer; e, specialized equine secondary education; g, general secondary education; h, higher education; I, instructor; RSO, riding school owner; seHC, self-employed equine health care; seR, self-employed rider; wG, waged show groom; wR, waged rider; wS, waged sales of equine equipment.

making a conscious attempt to erase the strong human/animal divide, and recognize the existence of animal subjectivity (Huopalaïnen, 2022b; Jammaers, 2023).

In order to get a good feel for the data and as a first step of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the data analysis commenced with an open coding of all interview transcripts using NVivo12 Pro software. This step involved a mixture of sensitizing concepts drawn from the literature review and coding in a “grounded theory” fashion, giving rise to new concepts that had not been identified as meaningful in earlier work. This led to a codebook of 72 different nodes and 1966 coded fragments. In the second step, only relevant information needed to reconstruct different elements of the substructure was selected, paying particular attention to the gendered aspects but remaining open to other relevant axis of historical difference in the particular context of show jumping (referred to as gender^{plus} substructure, Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). Neatly categorizing relevant data in an exhaustive manner according to the various elements of the substructure (*culture, practices/policies/structures, organizational logic, interactions, and identities*, see Table 2 for a summary), avoiding overlap, proved to be a difficult task given the interrelatedness of many of the elements in practice. For instance, some of the interviewees revealed a culturally shared, now more and more outdated, belief that “there are horses for men and horses for women,” which was coded under *culture*. However, when a respondent recalls being told she “rides like a girl” this cultural belief is coded as an *interaction*. Despite the artificial nature of organizing, documenting, and summarizing a complex multifaceted process, this analytical exercise helped make more clear what the different bases of inequality (gender, class, age, ability, and species) in this context were. This allowed us to answer RQ1—“Which forms do inequality take in the equine (sports) business, specifically in showjumping-related activities in Belgium?”.

After making clear what the role of each category of difference was in causing power disparities, a third reflective step followed in which the (in)visibility of inequalities and (il)legitimacy of inequality regimes were mapped out (Acker, 2006b). This exercise consisted of creating and debating among authors a two-by-two table of inequalities with four categories which were as follows: visible and legitimated, visible and illegitimated, invisible and illegitimated, and visible and legitimated (to and by some/most/all respondents). For instance human-based gender inequality in the sector was deemed unacceptable to a large part of the sample. At the same time, gender inequality was invisible to most of the sample as respondents believed men and women were treated equally in equine (sports) business but, nevertheless, visible to some respondents. This exercise was repeated for all axes of difference and led to answering RQ2—“To what extent are inequalities visible and legitimised?”.

We build up the finding section by selecting and combining the surprising or unique insights from the sub-“structure element coding” (step 2) and “the (in)visibility and (il)legitimacy of inequalities mapping” (step 3) into

TABLE 2 Example themes and quotes of the “selective coding” along the substructure elements.

Structures, policies, and practices in equine (sports) business
Riding up to 12 horses/day— <i>Riding horses all day requires a certain morphology, which falls within certain norms.</i> (Arnaud)
Absence of regular pay— <i>You can't get out of costs just from renting out stables or prize money earnings. It would be a zero-sum operation. We need to train and sell horses to earn a living.</i> (Laurie)
Demonstration by women versus training by men— <i>Pay doesn't dependent on gender. You just negotiate a price with the owners of each horse [...] I have no idea what others make; it's not something we ever discuss.</i> (Andrew)
Horse “career paths”— <i>Mares who become too old for high-level competition are still very useful for breeding, while geldings retire, and stallions usually have very short jumping experience. They just have to prove their skills a couple of times and are then taken out of the competition and used only for the semen.</i> (Isa)
Culture in equine (sports) business
Popular sectoral beliefs (e.g., horse quality trumps rider quality; a pretty girl on a horse sells better; women forge more emotional bonds with horses; two types of horses: Those for men and those for women; the importance of horse-rider fit; and few showpiece women become “the proof” for gender equality)— <i>Men pay less attention to detail in taking care of horses, women are very precise about the care, and they communicate much more with the horse in general.</i> (Elise)
Recurring metaphors for describing “the special horse”— <i>My mare with whom I did my equine school education, she had a lot of character, not always easy [laughs], she taught me a lot. And then another, is one I had the chance to ride for a client for five years, and I brought it to the highest 5*level.</i> (Nathalie)
Logic in equine (sports) business
Meritocracy logic— <i>In our profession, the harder you work, the better you get, and the more big competitions you do, the more [training] offers [from investors] you will attract.</i> (Benny)
Passion profession— <i>There is no such thing as life outside horses, it is all-consuming, and the pay is low, you do it purely out of passion.</i> (Estelle)
Care versus commerce tension— <i>I don't want to have to sell the horses I love. I want a stable income through my university degree and to ride my own horses just for pleasure. I want to stay as far away as possible from horse commerce.</i> (Camille)
Changing breeding habits and preferences— <i>It is now smaller, technical horses that are in demand, those that are flexible rather than muscular and large.</i> (Cilou)
Interactions in equine (sports) business
Old boys network referral— <i>You have to be well-networked, well-known within the community to get jobs. Investors often talk to investor-friends to see if they know any available riders. So you have to make sure you are part of their conversation.</i> (Igor)
Explicit/direct gendered comments— <i>I've been told I ride like a girl, and I'm not sure if I should take it as a compliment or not.</i> (Laurianne)
Identities in equine (sports) business
Reflexive fragments about career aspirations— <i>I don't run the risk of investors bypassing me when I get pregnant because I can rely on my partner, to ride the horses for me when I'm indisposed, so I don't have to be afraid other riders will come and 'steal them away'. But it may be riskier for other women riders.</i> (Louise)
Reflexive fragments on the status of horses— <i>To me, they are not commodities to sell or bring good rankings. To me, they are like a family member, much like dogs. And when you lose them, it's an immense loss, but life goes on, and you keep small memories and photos.</i> (Chelsey)
Reflexive fragments on the human–horse bond— <i>I don't think horses get attached to their riders, no, to their caretakers yes, the ones who feed them, but not riders. That's an instrumental bond the horse will not engage in fully.</i> (Denise)

three chronologically sensible themes, keeping in mind the research questions. We start with outlining the paradoxical logic and ideal (non)human workers of equestrian show jumping and then present some overt and more covert gendered patterns, ending with a section on anthropocentrism and other -ism intersections.

4 | FINDINGS

In the findings, we first present the paradoxical logic of the equestrian show jumping field and shine a light on its ideal (non)human workers through an Ackerian framework. Next, we focus on gendered patterns through overt incidences and covert role segregation. We end with the role of anthropocentrism and -ism intersections by discussing

the dominant image of “rider-savior” and reflecting on the (in)visibility and (il)legitimacy of documented inequalities in the context of professional show jumping.

4.1 | A paradoxical logic and ideal (non-)human worker

The interviewees share a passion or even “madness” (Birke & Thompson, 2018) for horses, which often began from a very young age, making statements like “*I learned to ride horses before I learned how to walk*” (Hermine) common. This discourse of passion worked as a strong motivator to accept sometimes harsh labor conditions and fueled beliefs in the meritocratic nature of the equestrian business. Interviewees were convinced that especially the discipline of show jumping was fair and equal as “*four [penalty] points are four points*” unlike in the more subjectively judged discipline of dressage, where they “*give a lower score because your pink saddle cloth and orange blazer don't match together well*” (Ina). Dressage, where both humans and horses are measured against esthetic and athletic ideals (Birke & Thompson, 2018), was referred to numerously ascertaining the fairness of show jumping. Even if it was acknowledged that the real athletes in both sports were the horses, very few interviewees spontaneously brought up the role of financial resources or of “*meeting the right people [investors] at the right time*” (Gilles), allowing to purchase or keep the best horses. A belief that hard work could level outcomes persisted, which reflects the broader masculine tradition of equestrian sports (Schuurman & Sireni, 2016):

Sure, when you're born into it [a horse family] or have money, you will succeed faster. It's cruel, but it's the way the world works. But you and me, we can still get what we want, through hard work. Yes, it will take us longer, the path might not be the same, but in the end we will have accomplished our goals just as well.

(Eva)

Above, an idolization of hard, physical work constructs a persistent, goal-oriented ideal human worker (compare Acker, 1990, 1992; Butler & Charles, 2012). Winning was integral to horse commerce, as a good performance was necessary to make horses stand out to potential buyers, increasing their selling price. Winning also brought personal prestige to riders, whose next assignments depended on being “seen” to perform well. Perhaps logically, then, the competition aspect was the most often cited “best thing” about interviewees' jobs, and this was so even for nonriders like show grooms who enjoyed “*the adrenaline you get*” (Lucas). The positive sensations experienced during competition were not only reserved to humans but were also part of the “ideal” nonhuman worker construct, where the ideal, happy horse “loves” the competition buzz as the following interviewee makes clear:

There are some horses, you take them on competition and they are just super excited, super happy. They jump all the way, they go all out on all the jumps! My groom told me, ‘you need to let her [referring to a mare] come with more often’, she just loves to shine and be the star, really.

(Elodie)

Like humans, sports horses are also subject to specific ideals as they need to perform like stars who work “correctly” (as defined by humans), be fast and excellent at judging the spatial distances between obstacles, and thus “produce a performance” (Birke & Thompson, 2018, p. 24). To “stay in the rankings,” a continuous, uninterrupted training (initiated by the riders) was necessary as “*You can't interrupt a career when you are riding good horses, or even when you have good younger horses*” and this meant “*you have to forget about your family life*” (Julien). This expectation of full commitment reflects the “ideal worker norm” (Acker, 1992), which is incompatible with care or other responsibilities. The equine career required extensive travel for international riders and their show grooms. Again, the “unencumbered worker” norm (Acker, 1992) favored (male) workers who were child-minding free and could outsource

household chores: “A dad can be gone on competition for the entire weekend, no one will care, but it's not accepted for moms,” leading Chantal to conclude that “it's not a question of talent, it's just that women are less free.”

Paradoxically, what got equestrian professionals excited about building a career in proximity to horses—bonding with animals—is what they were repeatedly forced to leave behind as horses needed to be sold in order to make a profit and survive. The nature of the business favored a calculated, distanced attitude since the ideal horse, “the one you succeeded most with and have the strongest connection with, becomes the one that is worth the most [money]” led Marie to reflect on how she did not handle the parting very well in the beginning, as she “got really emotional” but now has “learned to be more rational, ... I had to because they come and go in horse business.” The pressure to sell rendered visible the horse as a commodity with commercial value and was experienced by many as challenging. Constructions of “us” horse caretakers (often grooms and riders) versus “them” horse business folk (often owners and breeders) served to deal with tensions in the narratives. It was, for instance, explained how breeders were “playing poker” as “getting foals up to the age of 4–5 costs a great deal of money, and so they take a bet hoping at least one will be quite the star” to recuperate all the investments “whilst limiting [healthcare] costs as much as they possibly can.” (Elise). Still, interviewees realized how their own (prior) logic of operation too, which required staying profitable endangered horse well-being:

To bond with horses requires time. When you only ride the horse on competition, there could still be a certain bond there... but not... a ‘real bond’, there is no other way, it requires time spent together, time spent observing, entering the horses’ world, understanding their boundaries. In showjumping, it's all about pushing the horses to be the fastest, jump the highest. Because that is what brings in the cash, basically. I've reached the point where I want to distance myself from that world really.

(Rania)

Lastly, it was pointed out that the breeding practice for horses changed over time, following the changing market needs for horses that are “more technical and warm-blooded rather than muscular, large and cold” (Roland). In theory, this meant that the stereotypical ideas of there being “horses for men” (strong, muscular, and difficult) and “horses for women” (smaller, technical, and flexible) became tempered. Modern beliefs of horse riding being about bonding and creating a centaur (Maurstad et al., 2013) instead of enforcing horses to do things, leave open more possibilities in the future for women to become recognized as ideal workers. Such change in ideal (non)human workers was also noticeable in the subdiscipline of dressage where “there is now a preference from jury for less coercive and more harmonious riding” which in practice “means there is more room on the stage for younger riders, who are sensitized more to these new, more horse-friendly ways of training.” (Nora). These views build on embodied mutuality between horse and human (Birke, 2014) and are less about human “control over” the horse. At the same time, they demonstrate a “humanimal” entanglement (Huopainen, 2022a) of the ideal worker construct.

4.2 | Gendered patterns through overt incidences and covert role segregation

Most respondents who were interviewed found it hard to come up with examples in which their gender had played a role in their professional lives, showing the persistence of equity beliefs. Indeed, instances of clear gender discrimination were rare, yet occasionally incidences came up. Marine, for instance, recalls her employer explaining to her “it's much like luxury cars, in general, people prefer talking to a man who knows his way around the technical details” and asking her if she “planned on having children.” Similarly, the following interviewee was a target for discriminatory, gendered doubt:

Someone had called the Belgian team trainer, to tell him I would not have what it takes mentally to win the [Olympic] games. I was absolutely flabbergasted to hear this! I've been national champion over

ten times, I participated in the World Championships, you name it. [...] It's pure jealousy, they say 'oh well look at the misses, just because she's a woman she gets to go'. [...] I was back in competition, on horse, only three weeks after my husband passed away. So I won't let anyone tell me I don't have the mentality, you know!

(Pauline)

As the quote illustrates, even for senior women in dressage, their professionalism was questioned. It becomes clear through these interactions that women needed to position themselves explicitly as "competitive," "masculine" and "careerist" in line with the "ideal worker" norm, unlike the traditional femininity they were assumed to have. Nora noted she was "surprised" when a national TV channel "*went to shoot an entire video reportage of my partner at home to congratulate him and get his reaction to my medal*," assigning - at least for a part - responsibility for the victory to a male spouse.

Two other outspoken gendered practices came through in the interviews. On the one hand, many interviewees acknowledged that the occupational role of demonstrating the horses to potential clients was assigned predominantly to female riders which Elodie found "*really crazy because there are all these other riders here, but still they always ask me to be in the videos*." Despite some interviewees describing this as a female advantage, others were more reflexive of how it was based in giving "*the impression of 'an easy ride' or the horse needing less pushing*" (Basile). The following respondents explain it rather well:

It is a macho world. When riders see a girl on a horse they will say 'Well, if she can ride him, we will certainly be able to ride him too'. [...] there is also the idea that a horse ridden by a girl is more spoiled, more treated like a doll in a sense. So clients will make the assumption that 'if ridden correctly or seriously', the horse could even do better.

(Fabienne)

In this case, the "ideal" worker (for demonstrating the horses) is attached to feminine gender stereotypes. Indeed, rather than an "advantage," women's attractiveness for this aspect of the job was based on stereotypical notions of women as inferior riders, making the horses seem easy to manage and control. The fact that this was such a persistent gendered practice (Acker, 1992) was surprising, given that almost all interviewees agreed that physical strength played a minor role in their business, which was more about bonding with the horses. Although this stereotypical belief held by prospective clients provided job opportunities to some extent for women riders (demonstrating the horses), it brought more damage in terms of getting assigned the more profitable and durable role of training the horses. Laurie, who trains and sells horses together with her male spouse, observes how "*investors will be more at ease with putting their horses through training with him [Didier, partner]*" reasoning that "*maybe they were afraid I would not have the strength, even if strength is not what counts*."

4.3 | The role of anthropocentrism and -ism intersections

The construction of horse hierarchies became very evident when interviewees were asked about their "one special horse" they would always remember. The most commonly depicted image was that of the difficult horse no one believed in except the rider, who then single-handedly was turned into a winning horse against all odds. Such narratives allowed the rider to construct themselves as heroic "connoisseur" of horses, deeply bonding with "difficult" horses (Maurstad et al., 2013). Consider the following example:

The mare with whom I'm currently doing Grand Prix, I have the biggest bond with her, she is very special. Well she's catastrophic, actually. She has a lot of anxiety. We can't shower her, put her in the grooming room or on the trailer. She's a nightmare because she can't be tied up, she get anxious even

when holding her. I'm the only one who manages to ride her, others have never taken the time to see her, to bond with her. She doesn't trust anyone, the smallest things put her in great distress. After a year and a half of intense work, we are starting to do well. When she is not feeling well, she'll stop eating for weeks and weeks. She really needs to be understood. It took a long time to find her stables where she felt comfortable, she gets her own private trailer to go to shows, she has a massage therapist, osteopath, and a horse whisperer. I've created such a bond with her, if I'm not there, she'll panic... [...] She's really... I carry her deep in my heart.

(Andrew)

Above, the interviewee explains horse acceptance and being a "safe haven" (Birke & Thompson, 2018) to a "catastrophic" horse. The very special (but also extremely expensive) Grand Prix horse is constructed as a "high-status" animal that receives the best possible care. Also, this popular imagery included a reference to the strong mutual bond (Birke, 2014) and assigned agency not only to the rider-savior but also to the horse who first refused to take part yet later brought victory and reputation for the rider. Nevertheless, in the narratives, horses are always treated instrumentally, taking part in the human world and serving human needs. Very rare were imageries where horses had different uses. Consider the quote by Pauline, which exemplifies the rare teacher/therapist imagery (Zamir, 2006), constructing the rider, not as savior, but as saved when as she explains *"I had to ride to stay alive. That horse saved my life. It gave me a reason to get up in the morning,"* and *"gradually, I got through the day"* later stressing again *"I honestly don't see how I would still be here, if it wasn't for him [horse]."* In this case, horse agency becomes acknowledged at a deeper level, although still framed in terms of functionality to humans.

When interviewees were asked whether there was ever any abuse taking place in the showjumping business, many were able to point out forms of abuse they "had heard of," though never witnessed taking place such as extensive use of whipping, refusal to give horse to eat/drink after bad performance, doping horses so they do not feel injuries during competition, use of heavy bars or products that warm up under gaiters or carpet. Interviewees were quick to condemn such practices as *"this type of people ruin it for everyone because one day PETA will manage to shut everything down if those bad apples keep getting away with it so easily"* (Lisa). It is clear the interviewees were against animal violence and in fact spent most of their time ensuring horses were well looked after by making sure they were walked regularly, had appropriate medical care, or even *"two-hour spa treatments every day"* (Silke). And yet, there was little to no questioning of human's right to own and ride horses. In fact, the question "whether they believed horses were equal to men?", a question aimed at giving space to horse agency and individuality in a post-humanist spirit (Tallberg & Hamilton, 2022), surprised and confused many of the interviewees. Denise explains how *"we ride them, we use them, we have fun with them, whereas with humans, say with a friend, I wouldn't be able to use them to my own benefit, would I?"* Again, an instrumental and anthropocentric approach is present here. Many others replicated it was "normal" that humans pulled the strings since *"just like with little children, you shouldn't let them run over you, they need to be taught, and domesticated"* (Liévine) and *"animals have to work for their meal, just like we do"* (Hermine). All agreed horses deserve a great deal of respect, even if they did not consider the horse to have the right to its "own choice" of engaging in a showjumping career or not.

Related to such anthropocentrism was the interesting finding that, although sex-based differentiation in human riders was deemed unacceptable by most interviewees, such sensitivity disappeared when discussing horses' sexes. Many interviewees expressed a clear preference for working with geldings as these were described as *"more polyvalent due to their regularity"* (Loïc). The practical management of stallions, on the other hand, was difficult as they were considered *"dangerous and untrustworthy"* (Felice) for *"boys will be boys when testosterone kicks in"* (Guy) while mares *"they have their cycles, like all women do. They are more... crazy."* (Chelsey). These are all generalizing and gender-stereotypical comments (Dashper et al., 2018). Consider the following interviewees' denial of human sex differences, made just minutes before an unapologetic claim about animal sex differences, strangely now reaffirming human-based sex differences:

The business of buying and selling horses, well it can be done as good by women as by men. It's true that there are more men, yes of course, but there is absolutely no reason why women would not be as

successful. It's the same as with any other professional context really! [...] I prefer working with mares! Like women, mares, might have a difficult character but at the same time will go the extra mile, bite through.'

(Gilles)

In sum, despite most interviewees' awareness of the need to stay away from sex-based generalization and stereotyping in humans, such carefulness is thrown overboard when describing animals. Sex-based sensitivity was reserved for the human world, showcasing persistent anthropocentrism within equestrians' narratives. The last remarkable and complex intersection pertained to class and gender. As stated earlier, class was mostly absent from the interviews, despite a clear agreement that staying in the rankings of elite jumping required access to not one but "a series of good, expensive horses" (Valentine). When class privilege did become visible, it was in relation to women who were expressed in a denigrating tone. Consider the following excerpt:

There are not that many women at the top, and the ones who are there, well, Judy-Ann [Melchior], [Jessica] Springsteen, [Eve] Jobs, [Jennifer] Gates, [Athena] Onassis... they were often born in very fortunate families. Or for instance Edwina [Tops-Alexander] she has her [business magnate] husband behind her.

(Cilou)

Here, the interviewee uses several "show pieces" to raise the point that women need exceptional forms of capital to be able to compete with men at high levels. This was not only construed as problematic by women but also by men from a lower class, albeit for different reasons:

We need the rich amateurs to make a living and sell our horses to, but in the end it's them who profit from all our hard work. They usually don't ride too well, so after two years of bad riding, they injure the horse and simply come and find you, to buy the next one. [...] I don't want to be too hard on them, because it is because of them that I get to be a professional rider... but 'the daughter of this', 'the daughter of that'... And then you don't get to go to a certain competition because they [the daughters] have paid for all the VIP tables to get a slot [in the jumping competition] and you're told all slots are filled.

(Adriaan)

The quote makes it clear how rich daughters are blamed for endangering the so-believed "meritocratic" nature of the field, and at the same time, it is them—or at least their fathers—who are given credit for keeping the horse training and selling business afloat. Next, we turn to the discussion and conclusions.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research set out to expand the single-species focus of Ackerians, building on the critique that many organizational scholars neglect to take animal agency and labor seriously. Indeed, despite the numerous applications of (parts) of Acker's integrative framework to uncover gender^{plus} substructures, in various sectors and employment types, little is known about how human structures of historical difference interfere with oppression of nonhuman animals. Drawing on insights, especially from the equine business profession of show jumping, a sector praised for its equality and merit-based logic, we outline the complex coming together of different -isms, creating unique patterns of privilege and disadvantage that remain largely invisible to its actors. In this way, we analyze and expose the complex interplay of multiple inequalities in this intriguing sector.

First, this study zoomed in on the paradoxical logic of the field through which passion for animals draws people in but, at the same time, puts both humans and animals at risk of harm. Despite evidence of a changing ideal human worker due to smaller and more technical horses, which in theory holds more room for women riders, they continued to be doubted for their professionalism and assigned more demonstration but not training work. These gendered patterns evidence an incomplete acceptance of women and femininity in show jumping practice, where the ideal worker is still an “unencumbered” man. Furthermore, we extend Acker’s (1990, 1992) ideal worker to include animals by showing how horses are also subject to subtle athletic and esthetic ideals, albeit defined by humans. Meanwhile, the positions ascribed to horses and the meaning assigned to “horse wellbeing” within the interviews did not come with a sincere questioning of the intrinsically instrumentalized views in which horses serve (wo)men. Rather the narratives revealed deeply rooted and invisible anthropocentrism and anthropomorphic views of horses’ sex differences (Dashper et al., 2018). For most interviewees, sex/gender-based discrimination was seen only as problematic when it pertained to humans. In a similarly complex way, class-based discrimination was seen only as problematic when it favored women. Here, a few “showpiece” women riders—“daughters of” Jobs, Springsteen, and Gates—were regularly used not only as proof that “yes they exist, women in showjumping” thereby negating the issue of gender (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998) but also to challenge the unfair impact of class for lower class men. As such, this study brings more empirical evidence to the idea that rather than a “cumulative view” or additive approach, different forms of inequality overlap and interact with each other producing often-surprising outcomes (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012, p. 251).

Like other sports studies (Karacam & Koca, 2015), this study replicates how women need exceptional forms of capital to make it to the top, even in sex-integrated sporting domains (Talley, 2017). Despite the hopeful setting of equestrianism, in which women are capable of freeing themselves from conventional gender scripts (Birke & Brandt, 2009; Rahbari, 2017; Thompson & Adelman, 2013), women’s bodies remain socially constructed as more appropriate for caring and reproductive roles (Schuurman & Sireni, 2016). Certain body usages (e.g., engaging in dangerous sports) continue to be less socially accepted, even in an era marked by gender equality sensitivity. The “open defiance to cultural norms and social legacies of inequality” (Adelman & Thompson, 2017, p. 195) that women riders were able to perform through their embodied work remained curbed by expectations to leave behind traditional femininity and assimilate into masculine logic that dominated the field (Acker, 2006c). The horse as a perfect mediator of performance and leveler of chances appeared to be little more than an illusion. Different from other male-dominated business contexts (like academia or boards of directors) in which women’s struggle to reach the higher echelons has been politically contested (Roos et al., 2020), the extreme statistical reversal of women’s participation from amateur equine level to elite show jumping goes by almost unnoticed in our society. Yet women’s disappearance from this scene deserves to be treated as conspicuous. More research is needed to investigate whether “opting out” explanations that bear connotations of free choice, as seen among elite top businesswomen who exit corporate life to focus on child care (Kossek et al., 2017), are especially prone to appropriation in sports-related fields where competitive qualities become intrinsically linked to hegemonic masculinity, turning gender into “an invisible nonissue” that belongs to the private rather than the organizational realm (Johansson et al., 2019, p. 182).

This study advances the literature on inequality regimes and related ideas of workplace intersectionality by discussing the multiple inequalities faced not only by humans (especially women) but also by horses in horse–human relations, while reflexively acknowledging that we built on human-centered methods. In this way, we do “bring in” animals to the discussion of inequality regimes, although animal inclusion remains limited. “Bringing in” animal voice, agency, and resistance in even more nuance than we achieved requires deeper engagement with posthumanist thought and multispecies methodology (e.g., Hamilton & Taylor, 2012, 2017; Maurstad et al., 2013). Studying multispecies inequality regimes remains theoretically and methodologically challenging, yet we encourage researchers to move in this direction of seriously rethinking the ontological and epistemological premises of inequality regimes. Following Acker (2006b), we also believe in the importance of examining the silenced work lives of a wide range of workers in various contexts through a sensitivity to multiple and simultaneous intersectional (dis)advantages (Healy et al., 2019). Acker expressed a clear wish for future feminist researchers to extend the explanatory power of the gender substructure toward a fully intersectional focus in order to include other forms of inequalities that make up

social reality (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012; Sayce, 2019). By expanding this “range of workers” to include nonhuman animals, we join the debate started by other researchers who have combined the study of workplace human diversity with that of nonhumans (Jammaers, 2023; Sayers et al., 2019). Coulter (2017) makes a call for more humane jobs, as in jobs that are both good for people and animals. She condemns animal advocates who call for “closure of animal-harming industries without concern for the working class and poor people who must labor therein,” often under dangerous conditions with little other alternatives (e.g., slaughter houses) (33). This begs the question, can equine sporting jobs ever be good for all parties involved?

Although this study, through its focus on human experiences and predominantly professional show jumping riders, presumably led to a selection bias of higher-class individuals, the few respondents in salaried and groom positions revealed the precarious and harsh conditions they occasionally faced. Yet, their daily labor practices do not involve animal killing or cruelty, even if breaking in young horses can involve dangerous and forceful aspects and even if abuse in the sector is revealed occasionally. Indeed, much of the daily work described here involved bonding with horses and caring for them and was marked by “empathy, dignity and reciprocity” or “multispecies respect” (Coulter, 2017, p. 33). But to what purposes were they so caring? Can the consumption-based model of equine sports ever be truly human- or animal-centered? Is the breeding of horses for the enjoyment of (wo)men not always and inherently problematic, like Critical Animal Studies-scholars would largely argue? Like Ackerians, who express much concern about whether equality is ever possible at all in a capitalist imperative of profit making (Acker, 2012; Sayce, 2019) or climate scientists who agree regenerative growth models are unreconcilable with capitalist-based consumption logic (Hickel & Kallis, 2020), it is highly uncertain if the equine business model studied here can ever be “just caring” toward animals. Even if equine sports and commerce are fundamentally at odds with pursuing a genuine multispecies equality project, the FEI and states can together take more measures to ameliorate the negative consequences for horses and humans. As critical management scholars, we also have a responsibility to be responsive and proactive in contributing to the political and societal debate, thinking of what implications our study might have for the real world of multispecies work and animals' well-being (Coulter, 2022).

It is clear that even more needs to be done in management and organization studies to take animal labor and agency seriously, by furthering ethical, caring, and solidaristic co-being whilst acknowledging how our relations with other animals are always complex and changing, where we impose upon animals our categories, and frequently get animal communication wrong (Birke, 2014). Through an examination of dominant horse imagery, we showed how agency was paradoxically denied to horses, as they were the ones in need of saving rather than being the savior. Horse hierarchies followed sex lines and changing breeding demands, mostly favoring the stable character of geldings and flexible smaller horses with technical abilities. Self-questioning around the instrumentalization of horses was rare if not inexistent. This may be unsurprising, given the predominant sampling of riders who built a business around the human use of horses. Since inequality regimes are not static but fluid and dynamic, likely to vary across different branches of a sector (Acker, 2012), a comparative strategy would be useful to reveal if more or less instrumentalized views exist in, for instance, commercial horse owners, amateur horse lovers, horsemanship professionals, equine health practitioners, and other economic contexts where horses are laboring (e.g., mounted police, fisheries, and palliative caregiving). In addition, a focus on riders who exited the business is likely to bring different views. Yet perhaps more urgent are methodological innovations that bring the viewpoint and actions of animals more to the fore. Methodologically, this study remains flawed as it relies on human voices (Maurstad et al., 2013). A horse's “point of view” is not amenable to simple or structured forms of qualitative enquiry as language loses its primacy in human–animal relations (Hamilton & Taylor, 2017; Huopala, 2022a). Alternative approaches, such as affective ethnography (Gherardi, 2019) and the use of photo- or videography to systematically observe and document different cues and physiological markers (Haanpää et al., 2021; Jammaers, 2023; Lansade et al., 2018; Wels, 2020) that can tell a more complete story of horse well-being during labor need to be examined in the future. This will require close collaboration within interdisciplinary research teams in posthumanist perspectives, where questions of power, ethics, and mutuality are thoroughly considered.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Different from amateur equestrian sports, the equine (sports) business is dominated by riders who "earn their primary income from riding and competing horses" and third-party sponsors and owners "who are financially invested in a horse-rider combination" (Hogg & Hodgins, 2021, p. 1352).
- ² We ask the reader to bear in mind that equine practices and related inequalities differ significantly across geographies and cultures (Adelman & Thompson, 2017). The context of this study is Belgium, an affluent "Western" country with a reputation of being a leading global horse nation with a high percentage of top-level riders and renowned sport-horse breeding stables. Different contexts (e.g., Global South, but even other European countries) likely result in different findings.
- ³ Ackers' substructure has five elements: culture, practices/policies/structure, interactions, identities, and organizational logic. The latter is seen as the "glue" that ties the four other elements together.

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