"*Does he not understand?*": Horse behaviour during dressage training and responses from coaches and riders

Gabrielle Doiron, Caroline Ritter, Kathryn Proudfoot, and Megan Ross

Department of Health Management, Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PE

Dressage horses are at high risk of developing physical health issues and displaying behaviours indicating distress. Intrinsic to these welfare concerns is human-horse communication and the way coaches and riders interpret and respond to horse behaviour. This project's objectives were to describe horse behaviour during dressage lessons and to explore how coaches and riders understand and respond to behaviour. Video data were gathered during lessons at four Canadian horse barns with dressage coaches (n=4) and their students (n=11). Drawing from published horse ethograms, a list of descriptions of behaviour during lessons was developed. Video recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with a combination of interaction and thematic analysis. Horse behaviour during lessons included ears held back, tail swishing and head tossing. Participants assigned emotion and meaning to horse behaviour and, in some cases, perceived that their horses were confused. Factors such as the horse's past performance, current horse behaviour, including posture, and the focus of the lesson played a role in how horse behaviour was interpreted. Despite participants' recognition of horse behaviour, they often dismissed it, diminishing the horses' autonomy. Dismissal of behaviour was associated with beliefs that horses did not know what was best for them, that rider and coach desires overshadowed those of the horse, and that the horses were willfully misbehaving. The participants' demand for the horses' compliance raised questions about learned helplessness in horses during lessons. These findings provide a foundation which will help identify future strategies to improve the welfare of dressage horses during training.