

Naturalness and the Legitimacy of Thoroughbred Racing: A Photo-Elicitation Study with Industry and Animal Advocacy Informants

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Executive Summary

Background

The international thoroughbred racing industry is concerned about the public's perception of the welfare of thoroughbreds in racing. Accordingly, the industry's focus is on those aspects that have been centred in the public discourse to date: The use of drugs on raceday, injuries and death on the racetrack, and retirement from racing. However, many common racing practices outside this focus also have a significant impact on welfare. This is discussed in the general equine welfare literature referring, for example, to the impact of riding and other activities on equine behaviour and welfare, the application of equipment, equine learning, human handling, and the horse-human relationship. It also refers to people's ability and inability to recognise behavioural signs of equine distress and pain. Yet, there seems to be a lack of industry interest in engaging with the impact of common racing practices on thoroughbred welfare.

Instead, participants in racing mostly claim that thoroughbreds love to race and that it is natural for them. The idea of what is natural plays a significant role in the thoroughbred racing and breeding discourse. Recently, the concept of naturalness has also gained attention in the animal welfare literature. Moreover, the idea of what is natural is important for the general public when thinking about what a good animal life is. Therefore, there is a need to further explore the role that notions of naturalness and what is natural play in the thoroughbred welfare discourse.

Research Aims

The aims of this study were to explore how key stakeholders in the thoroughbred industry

- conceptualise naturalness and what is natural for the thoroughbred in racing,
- how this impacts their perceptions of common racing practices which potentially impact the horses' welfare on raceday,
- what implications this has for thoroughbred welfare,
- how the industry is positioned to respond to society's evolving attitudes to animal welfare.

Methods

Participants included nine thoroughbred industry informants with background in executive, administrative and governance roles from Australia (3), the US (5) and an international body (1), and seven animal advocacy informants from Australia (3), the UK (2) and the US (2). This is an exploratory (qualitative) study that involved semi-structured interviewing and photo-elicitation. For photo-elicitation, four images of common scenes on raceday that potentially attract interest due to welfare concerns were presented to the informants, asking them to describe what they see (for example, see Figure 1). Naturalness was used as a lens for discourse analysis of the responses, and Bergmann's framework of Layers of Engagement with Animal Protection was applied to deepen the analysis.



Figure 1: Example of image used for photo-elicitation interview.

Key Findings

Trends in responses by group of informants emerged clearly. Where there are variations to those trends, they are explained carefully in the full article.

Thoroughbred Industry Informants

The industry informants tended to naturalise and normalise the thoroughbreds' responses to racing practices shown in the images. They tended to normalise and downplay the impact of tack, humans and other factors. They also mostly

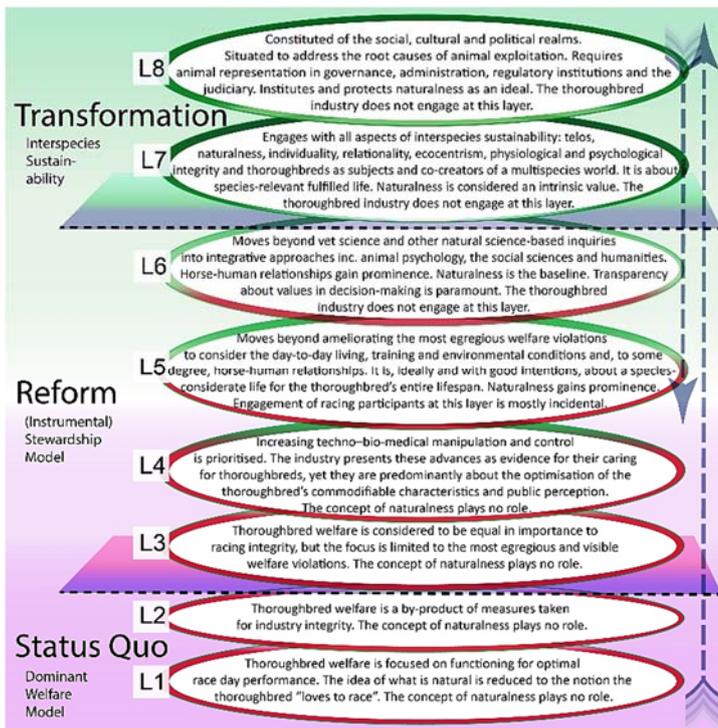


Figure 2: Layers of Engagement with Thoroughbred Protection. Indicates the status of the notion of naturalness within the discourse as described by Layer 1 to Layer 8 (L1–L8). The status of the thoroughbred industry discourse is situated within each layer. A discourse can take place at several layers concurrently.

saw the thoroughbred as a willing participant. They tended to see the expressions of the thoroughbreds as a result of the thoroughbreds' nature. This nature was then used to justify and defend the depicted practices.

Some saw a visual problem rather than a welfare problem and the need to educate the public about the practices not impacting welfare, or being in the interest of welfare. However, what is considered natural in this discourse is not consistent with research perspectives for example in ethology (perspectives based on scientific studies of animal behaviour).

Animal Advocacy Informants

Animal advocacy informants mostly noticed a wide range of factors and conditions they considered unnatural and impacting horse welfare. They saw the depicted practices, that is the tack used and the human handling, as causing the horse to respond in the depicted ways, and impacting the horse in a way that compromises their welfare. The nature of the horse was used as an explanation for why racing practices are not in the interest of welfare. Some advocates also saw a need to educate the public but their interest lies in educating about the existence of certain practices and their negative welfare impact.

Discussion: Layers of Engagement with Thoroughbred Protection

Most of the industry discourse took place at Layers 1–4 (see Figure 2). The industry informants and the thoroughbred industry at large see nature as a limiting factor to be overcome through invasive means such as the use of drugs, surgery, tack and breeding. Concern for naturalness is reduced to the trope thoroughbreds "love to race".

While welfare overall gains more weight in the industry discourse at Layer 3, the focus there is on the visible and most egregious welfare violations. The notion of naturalness is irrelevant for welfare and for industry integrity from the industry's perspective. Mostly, industry informants did not consider the common racing practices depicted in the images as a matter of concern for welfare.

Layer 5 offers opportunities for significant engagement with what is natural and with common racing practices. The discourse at this layer is interested in the training and environmental conditions, the day-to-day living, husbandry practices, the consideration of the horse's entire lifespan and, to some degree, horse-human relationships. Where Layers 5 and 6 meet, the horse-human relationship gains relevance. At Layer 6, the discourse moves beyond veterinary science and others based in the natural sciences. Some industry informants engaged at Layer 5, in particular with thoroughbred retirement. Generally however, at the systemic level, the discourse at Layers 5-6 had limited relevance for the industry informants and the racing industry at large.

The advocacy informants had a strong interest in engaging at Layer 5, in particular, with aspects of naturalness. They identified a variety of aspects relevant for thoroughbred welfare. Mostly, the advocates saw what is natural as a guide for thoroughbred welfare and protection. At the same time, they often demonstrated a holistic view of naturalness, a view that was consistent within itself and with ethological perspectives. They also included in this view the horse-human relationship, and recognised its link to welfare. While much of the advocates' thinking was placed in the reform area around Layers 5-6, some transformative ideas (Layer 7) were also present. They were interested in safeguarding the nature of the horse, their physiological and psychological integrity. Interest was largely focused on naturalness as a baseline and, to some degree, as an ideal to be protected.

Conclusion

This study brings into the spotlight the impact of some common racing practices on thoroughbreds and the consequence of the industry's non-recognition of these impacts. It also highlights the need to define naturalness as a holistic notion. The study has further developed a diagnostic tool that can be used to interrogate a welfare discourse in terms of whose interests it serves. This is important in particular for policy settings because often, the lines are being blurred.

The challenges for thoroughbred welfare are much broader than the industry currently considers attention-worthy. The non-recognition of compromised health and welfare of the thoroughbred in racing resulting from some common racing practices poses significant threats to thoroughbred welfare. These are amplified by industry misrepresentations of what is natural. The study concludes that the legitimacy of thoroughbred racing will be increasingly questioned as the discourse on common racing practices and animal protection advances in society at large.