Identity, Gender, and Tracking

Vermilya, Jenny R.

Published by Purdue University Press

Vermilya, Jenny R.
Identity, Gender, and Tracking: The Reality of Boundaries for Veterinary Students.
Purdue University Press, 2022.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94379.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94379

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3030503
As described previously, tracking systems within veterinary medical education differentiate between large and small animal medicine. Students focus primarily on their choice of animal medicine once they have completed the same core curriculum. This chapter argues that because the categories of large and small animals are socially created, they can change. Some species do not necessarily fit into one or the other category. This generates new discourses surrounding emerging border tracks; these unofficial tracks focus on species whose social definitions make their placement in veterinary medical education’s tracking system a site of contestation. For example, horses currently occupy a liminal status. The equine track, neither large nor small, constitutes a border between the dominant areas of veterinary medicine. As with other metaphorical borders, there exists an ongoing struggle to define it. Thus, animal medicine operates not solely on biology but on social meaning, too. Using the equine concentration as an illustrative case, this chapter analyzes the ambiguity of borders, as well as their potential to serve as communicative sites for social change.

In what follows, I first provide a brief history of horses in veterinary medicine to illustrate their shifting status. Then, drawing on interviews with veterinary

students, I examine how they create and maintain discourses around horses as a species. Finally, I discuss the influence of these discourses on equine medicine and their potential to elicit social change.

HORSES AND VETERINARY MEDICINE: A CO-CONSTITUTIVE RELATIONSHIP

Horses constituted the original focus of veterinary medicine. Joanna Swabe (1999) traces the origin and rise of veterinary medicine, noting that it began with the treatment of horses. In ancient Greece and Rome, animal doctors treated horses because they had such important roles in the military and in the sport of chariot racing. Horse racing later moved to other parts of the world and currently still thrives as a sector in which horses have a status similar to production animals; in racing, horses are regarded differently from animals in other production arenas, but they represent an investment and must bring eventual economic profit.

The first official veterinary college, established in 1762 in France, was devoted to more than just the study of horses, which had been the only focus of animal health for centuries. Indeed, the incorporation of animals other than horses is relatively recent. In the early 1700s, cattle plagues in western Europe called attention to the need to treat other species. Further, with the invention of the internal combustion engine in the early 20th century, the importance of horses rapidly declined. Technology replaced their role as work animals and providers of transportation. The veterinary profession altered accordingly, shifting its focus to animals used for food.

While veterinary patients were valued, however, the profession was not. It is important to note the significance of categorization regarding animal species. For instance, although companion animals readily receive veterinary care now, horses received it initially because they were not companion animals. In American veterinary colleges, as in Europe, the curriculum focused on horses as they were the most valuable animals of the time. Thus, graduates were primarily equine veterinarians. When innovations like the automobile replaced horsepower, horse value fell (Greene, 2009; McShane & Tarr, 2007). Veterinarians campaigned to promote the endurance of a horse economy to preserve the profession. They realized that a large portion of their work depended on the usability of the horse and were intent on trying to maintain its status as a valuable animal in need of veterinary services (Jones, 2003).
Jones (2003) explains that until replaced by technological advances, horses were markers of prosperity and enterprise. Not only were they expensive animals to maintain, but they worked in many sectors—similar to today’s standards of a successful business possessing the latest computer technology (Greene, 2009; McShane & Tarr, 2007). With the introduction of motor vehicles, horses became less essential and, instead, became more of a status symbol. This transition happened in cities but also on farms (although more slowly), where horsepower was replaced with mechanical power. This changeover saw the increased incidence of horse slaughter. With decreased profitability of horses as workers, slaughter became a viable option for horse owners to recover money by selling their horses to processors who turned the horses into glue, leather, and dog food. As Jones (2003) states, “Throughout the 1920s more than 200,000 horses were killed yearly on farms and in packing plants” (p. 47). In response, to salvage their usefulness veterinarians urged Americans to eat horsemeat, previously a cultural taboo, during the meat shortage of the early 1900s; consequently, the American horse population decreased by 40% between 1910 and 1930. Recently, the United States Congress banned horse slaughter and, in 2007, closed the last American horse slaughter plants (Cowan, 2013). The ban was, in reality, a ban on federal funding for the required inspections of horse slaughterhouses. Activist support for the ban influenced the legislation. This legislation reflects another change that currently affects the definition of horses. Their status shifted from an animal who could go to a slaughterhouse in the U.S. to one who could not, effectively removing their potential label of food animal completely.

After the introduction of motorized vehicles, with few working horses left, most were in recreational or companion roles (Jones, 2003). Obviously, this affected the veterinary profession; veterinarians felt the threat to their careers. They tried to promote uses of horses and find new niches for them in a motorized society. Additionally, the profession began focusing on other species to broaden their services, thus redefining the role of veterinary medicine and shifting its focus to farm animals. Public health concerns over meat and milk production influenced this shift. Small animal medicine also compensated for the decline in equine practice. The humane movement was gaining power in the U.S. by the 1920s, and petkeeping was becoming more normalized (DeMello, 2012; Irvine, 2004). Therefore, in the cities, companion animal veterinary practices emerged. Jones (2003) explains that “veterinarians found ways to translate pet owners’ regard for their animals into specialized care—and expanded their role as mediators of Americans’ relationships with their domestic animals” (p. 140). Amazingly,
during the Great Depression citizens were still able to scrape together money to take the family pet to the veterinarian. With small animal practice, veterinarians experienced little competition. Farmers and animal scientists could treat large animals, but small animal practitioners cornered the market regarding companion animals. Initially, companion animal medicine had the smallest patient base and was the least profitable; however, currently it constitutes the largest and most profitable area of veterinary medicine.

In sum, horses in Western society shifted from being the focus of veterinary medicine to having a less significant place in the profession’s purview, from being workers to companions, and from being abundant and necessary to being a limited luxury. As my research revealed, today, veterinary medicine is once again adjusting to changing values around horses.

**CONSTRUCTING HORSES AS A BORDER SPECIES**

I did not initially ask questions about horses in my conversations with veterinary students, but the students continuously brought them up as a topic for discussion. Consequently, I began to pay attention to the species as it seemed essential to understanding the tracking system. Horses are a difficult species to place within the tracks. The students’ discourses around horses showed their border status. Four areas emerged as significant themes in the interviews. These themes represent border sites for negotiating the meaning and value of horses: purpose and place, medical practices, economics, and the horse slaughter ban.

**PURPOSE AND PLACE**

Purpose and place themes concern the related issues of how horses are used and where they live—the “what for” and “where” matters for how students regard horses. Jessica, a first-year student considering the large animal track, said, “When we talk about small animals, we talk about them in a cute way. When we talk about large animals, we don’t talk about them in the same sense. Horses are on the fence; you kind of talk about them in the context that you think about them.” The purpose of horses varies because they can be pets, like companion animals, or a source of income, like production animals. Alexis, a first-year student considering the mixed track, explained: “There are some people that just have pet horses, and there are some people where the horses are a means of income for
showing or breeding or whatnot.” Some students recognized that horses’ initial role in the U.S. centered on production, as workhorses or used for meat or other product. Katie, a third-year large animal student focusing on equine medicine, noted, “Even in the ’70s I would say, even in the last 30 years, horses were . . . their value was strictly production oriented.” The students also acknowledged that horses exited the production arena and now occupy, at least partly, the companion arena. Horses also exist now as pets. For instance, Abby, a second-year student considering the small animal track and focusing on exotic animals, stated, “Horses can be just as much a part of the family as a dog and a cat can.” Abby, like many, attributed family member status to pets, allowing for horses to be a part of the family system in the same way other companion animals, like dogs and cats, are.

One noticeable change contributing to this shift is the geographic space that horses now occupy. Horses were present in cities at the beginning of the 20th century, but as work animals. With the invention of the automobile and other technological advances, they largely left the urban scene and existed primarily in rural settings. However, now, with horses used in petkeeping, they live in diverse environments. They reside on farms, in suburban backyards, and in cities. Recognizing this, Katie remarked that “the equine people,” referring to students in that concentration, “are from a scattered background because horses can be an urban thing now.” Scattered background references the different geographic areas from which students come. She sees a tendency for veterinary students to stick with what they know. Prior experience sways the decision of which track to declare. Many students identified the trend of urban students declaring the small animal track and rural students declaring the large animal track. Equine students represent diverse backgrounds. Because horses now reside in varied geographic spaces, students interested in them come from all over. A student with an urban, suburban, or rural background could have horse experience before coming to veterinary school. In this way, equine students do not have a standardized history because horses do not have a standardized place. Moreover, the students pointed out that regional perspectives differ regarding horses. Jessica said:

I think it really depends a lot on where you come from, too. Like on the east coast, they’re [horses] pets. Then I moved out to Montana and they’re looked at much more like livestock. You have to look at people’s priorities and realities and they’re very different for some people.
Horses live on farms and ranches in a production-based capacity, they live in suburban areas and are used for competitive sports but also used as companions in showing or racing, and horses live in backyards as pets.

In addition to geographic space, social space matters, too. Social space refers to physical places that have social meaning attached. For instance, students pointed out the social meaning of the home versus the outdoors. The private sphere, or home, has the social meanings of family bonds, closeness, safety, and comfort. Although horses have achieved the status of companion or family member, they do not live in the social space labeled the home. “[Horses are] sort of like an extended family, but I think the real big difference is they don’t live in a house,” explained Sarah, a second-year student considering the small animal track. “So they’re removed from where you and your family are.”

The interviews revealed that place is significant for the meaning of horses. This could relate to the practicalities of animal size. Horses are physically large animals, which makes living in a house with them difficult. However, Sarah talked about the home with its associated social meanings, not as simply a physical structure. Therefore, whether or not size is the causal factor, horses are in a particular social space. Purpose and place go hand in hand because, when it comes to species, what one is defined influences where one is found, and vice versa.

**MEDICAL PRACTICES**

At the veterinary college I primarily researched, equine medicine fell within the large animal track. Students could claim their intent to study equine medicine, but it did not constitute an official track. While their program considered them large animal students, they found ways to distinguish themselves as equine students. The equine students I met used their freedom to choose their own upper division courses to select equine-focused classes. Some students from other programs had the option to declare equine medicine as their intended field of study. However, those students still described that in many ways horses are often grouped with other large animals, such as cattle. This typically had to do with the fact that the size of these animals required them to be in close proximity to one another in the teaching hospital barns.

After students continuously spoke of horses as different and not fitting into the large animal track, I asked why the veterinary school still placed them in that
Students relied on the explanation that their pairing was simply an old habit. Katie explained:

Now, we don’t even have that many ranches so it’s not like everywhere there’s a horse, there’s cattle. There are a lot of places where there’s little urban farms and a lot of horses, but no cattle. I think just historically they’ve been linked.

For her, the past association with horses and cattle, both as production animals, left a residual connection. Students told me that veterinarians were used to grouping these species together and so they continued to do so. The students also told me, however, that this grouping did not make sense in today’s practice. For them, equine medicine is now too different from large animal medicine. Jenna, a first-year student considering the mixed track, pointed out a difference in the medicine:

I do have to take a step back and tell you that I think that equine medicine I look at just a little bit differently from large animal. And that is considered a large animal. There are some real specialties starting to evolve in equine as well. You can be an equine surgeon, specifically for equine.

For these students, equine medicine no longer fits in the area of production. Yet the historic ties of horses and production animals continue to bind them. For example, Katie and I discussed the expectations of the two kinds of practice. She told me, “There are expectations that you do know how to work on ruminants [e.g., cattle]. If I want to go to Lexington and work in an equine practice, they don’t give a crap if I don’t know how to test a cow or handle a cow.” To which I asked, “But your average farmer . . . ?” “Yeah,” she replied, “like you might have to see a cow every now and again. They might ask you. I think there’s just an expectation out there. ‘What you’re a horse vet? You don’t know what a cow is?’”

Even the concept of horse has become problematic in veterinary medicine. Katie described, “And that’s where the horse [issue] is a problem. Because [it] is now more individual [based], there are not many herds of horses.” Katie overlooked the reality that herds of horses still exist in the United States, particularly in the West. Some consider these animals bad animals on the sociozoologic scale since we can define them as vermin encroaching on human spaces (Arluke & Sanders, 1996). Others consider them good animals as they bring forth the iconic images of majestic, beautiful creatures running wild and free on the open
range. Regardless, these contrasting ideas still place wild horses as a contested species, along with domesticated horses. The point Katie tried to make was to emphasize the shift of horses to a status that more closely resembles a companion animal’s status. Lately, seeing individual horses as animals owned for pleasure is more common than seeing herds of wild horses. Additionally, with the spread of human settlements in the U.S., open ranges for wild horses are not as prevalent, and so while herds of wild horses still exist, they are decreasing in numbers. This shift surrounding horses has led to their decreased association with production animals, which places them in a collective herd, and their increased association with companion animals, which places them as individuals. Nathan, a fourth-year small animal student, explained: “Equine is definitely making that transition. So they’re still dealing with a herd issue, but equine is the mix between the large animals and the small animals.” Anna, a first-year student considering the mixed track, confirmed: “I think that the general public has the strongest ties to dogs, followed by cats, and then horses.” According to the sociozoologic scale, horses are rising in the ranks as more individualized companions. This transition ultimately impacts the medical practices veterinarians direct toward them.

**ECONOMICS**

Horses now possess a status close to companion animals, which affects the economics surrounding them. Horses were the most economically productive species at the beginning of the veterinary medical profession. Now that they have transitioned from primarily workhorses to pleasure horses, their economic value varies. Alexis, who had horses of her own, stated, “Anyone with horses will tell you they are not economical to have. You spend way too much money and they do way too little for you.” Alexis is expressing what many horse owners experience. According to the most recent estimates from the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance (CUHA, 2021), the annual cost of caring for one recreational horse for one year can amount to over $10,000. The total estimate depends on whether one already has tack and equipment and/or needs a place to board the horse. Based on the costs of hay, grain, and supplements and electrolytes, a horse owner could easily pay over $2,000 a year just for feed. By adding the additional expenses of bedding, a farrier to maintain the horse’s hooves, deworming, vaccines, veterinary care, insurance, riding lessons, and other horse care products, one begins to see the expense of owning a horse as a companion. Travel back a hundred years and what Alexis told me would be considered humorous. As previously mentioned,
at that time horses certainly did not “do way too little for you.” This is no longer the case. Today they are an unnecessary expense, as Jessica briefly described: “Cows, food. Horses, luxury. Dogs and cats, pets.” To be sure, her words represent a simplistic categorization of animals. Dogs and cats can also be luxuries, and they can require expensive veterinary care; however, their maintenance costs are less than those for horses.

Although horses themselves are no longer profitable, what is profitable is becoming an equine veterinarian. Even though horses’ economic value has declined, their social value has increased. As Anna explained, “Horses are companion animals, too, and that’s why there’s more money if you do large animal equine versus production animal.” Katie agreed: “I think equine medicine is actually more like small animal medicine now, and people are willing to spend a lot on individual horses because they have this human-animal bond.” Seeing horses as individual animals with whom humans can bond has led to a consequential increase in their worth—based not on their productivity but on their social status as companions. Further, horses help produce status for humans. As expensive animals, they can serve as living trophies for their human owners. If one is able to care for a horse, then one is assumed to have excessive disposable income.

Nevertheless, a cultural lag exists regarding the value of horses because they are not universally seen as companions (Ogburn, 1957). Katie pointed out the different equine sectors and the different human-animal relationships within those areas. “I would say there’s some human-animal bond in showing,” she explained. “There is some in racing but it’s less so. I think it’s more economics.” While seeing horses as pets is more and more common, they still exist as work animals or animals who serve as economic investments. Katie later noted:

The horse thing is so crazy because you can have the owner who doesn’t want to spend any money on the horse and wants you to put it down right then as if it were a food animal or just a totally dispensable creature. You can have another one that wants to go spend 300 grand or more.

As previous chapters have described, small animal veterinarians also experience these varied encounters with clients. While this wide range of feelings toward the same species exists in small animal medicine, too, equine practitioners more routinely expect it due to the more pronounced border status of horses. They straddle the line between production animals and companion animals, and the economics surrounding them reflects this. Joanne, a second-year student considering the
mixed track, stated, “They’re more of a commodity than a companion, for some people. And then [for] others, they’re more of a companion.” What this border status means is that horses are “in between companion animal, in between cows to slaughter,” according to Sarah. The bounded areas of companion animals and production animals are so drastically different, which complicates the border that emerges around their boundaries. Students situate horses within this border. But residing in a border space has consequences for horses, such as the issue of horse slaughter.

THE HORSE SLAUGHTER BAN

Legislation also reflects the shift in cultural conceptions of horses. Many of the veterinary students I spoke with mentioned the recent horse slaughter ban in the U.S. As previously described, horse slaughter existed earlier in American history, and Americans have had cultural taboos before around consuming horsemeat. Therefore, this issue is not entirely a new one. However, in the past couple of decades there has been a great amount of fluctuation regarding horse slaughter, and in such a short amount of time. This fluctuation is represented in people’s perceptions of horse slaughter, but also in laws at the state and federal levels that have either permitted or prohibited it. Horse slaughter is currently in a state of flux because of the variability of our definitions of horses themselves.

Nearly 105,000 horses were slaughtered for human consumption in the U.S. during 2006 (Cowan, 2013). The horsemeat was primarily for European and Asian customers. Present-day American consumers liken the consumption of horsemeat to eating one’s pet dog or cat. While we do not currently eat horsemeat in the U.S., we were, quite recently, producing it here. According to Cowan (2013) in a Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, court action effectively closed the last remaining U.S. horse slaughter plants in 2007. This action existed at the state and federal levels. Several states had laws against horse slaughter prior to 2006 (Vestal et al., 2015). In 2007, it was the passing of an Illinois state ban on horse processing that closed the last horse slaughter facility. At the federal level, a ban on horse slaughter was enforced from 2006 to 2011 by preventing federal funding for horsemeat inspections. This effectively kept slaughterhouses from opening and operating until 2011, when President Obama approved a congressional spending bill (Cowan, 2013) that authorized the U.S. Department of Agriculture to inspect horsemeat processing facilities. The lift of the ban was even more short-lived than the previous ban itself, for in 2014, just three short years
later, the ban was reinstated because the spending budget signed by President Obama withheld funding yet again. Not long after, in 2017 under the Trump administration, the ban was lifted once again, although the USDA was quick to remind the public that the lift would not be reflected as quickly in practice, as there were no facilities that met all the required benchmarks to obtain a federal grant of inspection (Derfler, 2017). Currently, in part due to continuous indecision around government spending and inspections, there is no operational horse slaughter plant in the U.S. The social, and legal, debate over horse slaughter has become an annual one, with the executive and legislative branches of government deciding to include or exclude funding in spending bills each year. Although for now horse slaughter has ceased, proponents of animal welfare, animal rights activists, and others in support of a permanent solution continue to support the passing of a federal ban. Most recently, in May of 2021, H.R. 3355, or the Save America’s Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act of 2021, was introduced in the House of Representatives in the 117th Congress of the United States. “This bill prohibits the transporting, receiving, possessing, purchasing, selling, or donation by a person of an equine (e.g., horse) that the person has reason to believe will be slaughtered for human consumption” (SAFE Act of 2021, 2021). Time will tell if we see a more consistent stance on horse slaughter in this country.

The issue of horse slaughter is a complicated one. The legal codes, which seem unstable and wavering, represent the cultural contestation that occurs regarding horses. Horse slaughter is a contentious topic for the public. The veterinary students I interviewed, attempting to emerge from their training as animal experts, often debated this topic in their classes. These students overwhelmingly supported it. Some noted how it led to a decrease in horse abuse and neglect. The closing of horse slaughter plants did indeed lead to the rise in instances of equine neglect, abuse, and abandonment (Vestal et al., 2015). Therefore, this concern is a valid one. Alexis explained: “Well, we had a discussion in one of our classes last semester about horse slaughter, and overwhelmingly horse people are for it because since it stopped, there’s been an increase in horse neglect.” Other students who considered the decisions they will make in their future practice also brought up the ethical dilemmas around horse slaughter. For instance, Angie, a fourth-year large animal student focusing on equine, grappled with the idea of performing “convenience euthanasias.” “I’ll have a hard time with it,” she said, “and I think I’d try to encourage the owner to explore other options, but if that’s what they want to do, I’d do it because it’s better than having them then decide to stop feeding the horse or something like that and have it be neglected.” The ban on slaughter has
not effectively removed slaughter as a potential outcome for American horses. Many horses are shipped to Canada or Mexico, where slaughter is legal (Cowan, 2013). The horses make this journey in, oftentimes, deplorable conditions. They are transported long distances, exposed to bad weather, and provided with inadequate access to food, water, and rest. Many students felt that this was a complex issue about which the public was misinformed. Amy, a fourth-year mixed student, commented:

Most people made that decision [to end slaughter] based on an uninformed opinion of “Oh, I don’t want to see horses go for food. That sounds horrible, like a horrible end for a horse.” However, because there is not that option to send a horse to slaughter in this country anymore, they’re either being sent to Mexico to be slaughtered or turned loose to starve or just neglected and abused.

Their reasoning behind the link between the end of horse slaughter and the rise in horse abuse and neglect is largely economic. Anna predicted the ban will not last:

Horse slaughter is illegal, although we used to have horse slaughter and we probably will again because it’s not in the American budget to be able to maintain that many wild mustangs and burros, not to mention the families who can’t feed that extra mouth and are just turning them out. The American economy is not going to be able to support the horse slaughter ban.

Although horses are increasingly regarded more as individualized companion animals instead of production animals, they still exist in the production world on farms that require them to provide an income. In this setting, horses are considered work animals who bring in further money when they age and are sold and processed into a product such as meat. This creates a complicated situation where horse owners, by necessity, cannot maintain these animals without horse slaughter. When horses aged and were no longer viable workers on the farm, slaughter was a means to dispose of the body and to provide additional income for the farm. Euthanasia of horses costs more than that of small animals because of their size and the equipment needed to bury the body. Nathan explained this process:

There are no more horse slaughter plants in the states so you have all these people with these old decrepit horses that you can’t do anything with. I mean, if
you use euthanasia solution, you just can’t leave them out there because that’s a toxin that wildlife will get into and that will start a cascade of death. And burying it, it’s more than six feet down to have it be contained, so now with that it’s more troublesome to do euthanasia so, I mean, there’s still humane ways to go about it. And . . . a bullet to the head under the proper supervision. I mean, you can’t just go out there and aim and shoot. There’s a specific location that you look for so there’s no pain involved. It’s quick, it’s easy, it’s as painless as it can be because it’s instant—is the goal.

Nathan’s “cascade of death” description carries some merit. The disposal of more horses each year could create environmental problems, such as soil and groundwater contamination (Cowan, 2013). With the option of slaughter taken away, and the inability of horse owners to maintain their aging horses, abuse and neglect has followed. Michael, a first-year student considering the mixed track, explained: “These are working horses, and if they have one that doesn’t need to be alive anymore, they can’t take that horse and get some money out of it.” The price of horses has also been affected by the ban. Vestal et al. (2015) found that the horse slaughter ban reduced horse prices, on average, by approximately 13%. This resulted in a profit loss of about 14%. Lower-valued horses were more affected, consequently financially harming the lower classes with working horses more than the upper classes.

For these veterinary students, a cared-for life ending in slaughter offers a better scenario than a neglected life saved from the slaughterhouse. They consider themselves having a larger perspective on this particular issue of animal welfare. Katie noted, “You have to look at the issue on a big scale. Like a big, big scale. You can’t just say, ‘Slaughter is bad, therefore no slaughter plants,’ and have all these neglected horses.” The students often pointed out that those in favor of the ban were typically small animal students and that this debate constitutes a dividing line between large animal, including equine, and small animal students. Alexis experienced one such heated debate. “Most small animal people are against it,” she said, “because it’s slaughtering horses that are beautiful animals. We had that discussion and all hell broke out. It was horrible.” The romantic idea of horses as noble animals reflects the shift toward companion animal status. Michael noted how the public internalizes this shift:

One of our teachers explained that from what the general public, who voted for [the horse slaughter ban], what they saw were these commercials of these
majestic horses running and “Do you really want to kill them?” and all that stuff, and media is just not fair sometimes.

For Michael and many others who support horse slaughter, the ban passed because the small animal ideology has become increasingly attached to horses. Supporters believe that this ideology, which considers animals as individual companions, misses the bigger picture, which large animal students understand.

The position on horse slaughter is not simply an individual-level response on the part of veterinary students but is represented in the professional discourse as well. In the aforementioned Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Association of Equine Practitioners were cited as actively opposing the horse slaughter ban because it did not provide for the maintenance of unwanted horses (Cowan, 2013). Similarly, the American Horse Protection Association (AHPA), which does oppose the slaughter of horses for food, also did not endorse the ban. Its claim was that horse sanctuaries in the U.S. may not have the means or business skills to accept large numbers of horses, and, again, that the bills did not provide support for this problem. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) also observed that equine shelters are less established and equipped than cat and dog shelters, which are often connected with local governments. Therefore they argued that distinctions need to be made between these different types of shelters. Considering the cost of horse maintenance described earlier, caring for unwanted horses is an expensive enterprise.

The issue that unwanted horses are being shipped over the borders to Canada and Mexico because slaughter is not permitted within the U.S. is another one that has been taken up by the AVMA (Cowan, 2013), which proclaims that the majority of these horses are being slaughtered for food, in unknown conditions, when they could have been slaughtered here under close U.S. regulatory oversight and without experiencing the long, difficult journey to Canada or Mexico to meet the same fate, perhaps under less humane circumstances. The statements from the AVMA mirror those I heard from veterinary students. Veterinary medical education’s institutional influence on the professional identities and personal positions of students helps to assuage some of the confusion that comes with working with a border species such as the horse.

The passionate debate around slaughter is a consequence of the current border status of horses. As contested animals, horses present as a conundrum for veterinary students, who vehemently debate this species because of its perplexing
position in the social structure. Laws and federal regulation, such as those connected to horse slaughter, reflect these moments of transition and social change. As mentioned earlier, in 2006 Congress prevented federal funding for inspections of U.S. horse slaughter, consequently banning horse slaughter completely. I began my research in 2009, and after hearing so much about the horse slaughter ban debates from veterinary students, I focused on the border position that horses occupy. After I wrote an article on the concept of a border species, later the same year (2011) the federal government lifted the ban (see Vermilya, 2012). Since 2014, however, Presidents Obama and Trump have first reinstated and then lifted the ban yet again. And Congress is now considering a bill that might offer a more permanent ban. The story of horse slaughter, while difficult to follow, has not been surprising to me. For a species that is in transition and presents as a puzzling case for veterinary students, this legislation is simply reflecting that complexity.

**BORDERS AS SPACES FOR CONFUSION AND ALSO CONNECTION**

The border of the equine medical concentration within veterinary medicine is an ambiguous site for veterinary students, and horses are a contested species for them. Although boundaries are invisible lines that distinguish social categories from one another, borders are the spaces surrounding those lines (Morehouse, 2004). Consequently, borders can be confusing, ambiguous zones that consist of overlapping ideologies from different bounded areas. Borders can appear muddled, but they can also help make the bounded areas more defined. Although boundaries separate the small and large animal tracks, made clearer by the equine border track, the border track serves as a space for communication across tracks. In this way, it can be connecting as well as divisive. As a companion who lives out in the barnyard, horses represent a boundary object that bridges the small and large animal fields. They simultaneously maintain boundaries and help break down the barriers to communication (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star & Griesemer, 1989). Horses, as boundary objects, exist in the border space of equine medicine. Currently, horses help students solidify their definitions of large and small animals and maintain the boundary between them. However, boundary objects can also open the lines of communication across these constructed tracks.
Representing a species whose social definition has changed quite dramatically throughout the history of veterinary medicine, horses can facilitate a change in the structure of animal science and in societal views on animals. The issue of horse slaughter provides an example of this social change.

The students’ discourses around horses and their placement in medicine, the economy, the law, and social life illustrate the strategic discursive tools of categorization. In each of the themes in which they discussed horses, students revealed that they could categorize horses as companion animals and then later as production animals. When it fit the situation they were describing, they played on the small animal characteristics to portray horses as pets whose owners are willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money to care for them. These characteristics included having family member status and the ability to form a human-animal bond. When the conversation turned to working horses, wild horses, unwanted horses, or slaughtered horses, the students adjusted their language to emphasize the large animal qualities that horses possess. These qualities included being considered income producing and disposable.

The process of grouping seemingly similar things together and separating seemingly different items apart helps us create and maintain boundaries around categories that may actually exist on a continuum. Zerubavel (1996) calls this process lumping and splitting. Lumpng occurs when we construct entities as analogous to one another and assign them a label. For instance, we construct apple juice and tomato juice as members of the same group, juices, even though the properties of apple juice and tomato juice are arguably quite different from one another. Splitting occurs when we construct units as distinct and separate them into different categories. For instance, grape juice, while lumped with apple and tomato juice, is split from wine. Both grape juice and wine are drinkable, can be similar in color, and come from the same fruit. However, they are split into different classes: juice and alcohol. While grape juice and wine certainly have different characteristics, so, too, do apple and tomato juice. The significance of lumping and splitting is that they are products of social construction, enforced through language, that help us to decide which differences and similarities we choose to pay attention to, and which we do not. Lumping and splitting help us make sense of the world around us through boundary work.

The problem that a boundary object, or border species, presents is that it can bridge categories separated by boundaries. While this benefits communication between groups and allows for more flexibility for items that truly already exist
on a continuum, it also challenges our conceptualizations of categories. Students could lump and split horses according to the needs of the topic being discussed. For example, they could lump horses with small animals to explain their clients’ willingness to spend thousands of dollars on them, but they could also split horses from small animals to explain why slaughter, something never considered for pets, is a viable option to care for unwanted horses. The problem emerged when I spoke at length with students about a variety of topics. This caused them to have to lump and split back and forth. People have become adept at categorizing our social reality, so this is not too difficult a task (Zerubavel, 1991, 1996). Further, Zerubavel (1996) states that, although seemingly contradictory, lumping and splitting also occur simultaneously. For example, when we split age cohorts, we inevitably lump people of the same age together. However, changing how one lumps and splits the same entity is a unique task, and individuals indeed find this difficult. Asking the students to describe various situations involving horses produced an acknowledgment of the ambiguity of this species. They could not defend a consistent definition of horses. Horses have no singular purpose, place, medical definition, nor economic value.

Horses are an example that not all species fit into these bounded areas, and so we place them in border spaces. In the context of veterinary medicine, horses are the most prominent border species since they have been patients throughout the history of the field. Therefore, they preceded the distinction between farm animal patients and pet patients. When the tracking system began to be widely used in veterinary training, horses were already oscillating between these categories since they never really were made to fit into either. Therefore, within veterinary medicine, horses are the border species that stands out the most. In other settings, different border species might emerge. Instead of being a geographic place or mixed cultural site, here the border space centers on an animal. While human-animal scholars have already recognized animals existing in borders, they tend to focus on a physical place (see Wolch & Emel, 1998). For example, these scholars discuss the border between a forest and a suburban area, where wild animals and humans have a chance to interact in an ambiguous zone. Horses represent an animal within a border space who is not limited to a geographic place. The veterinary students continuously noted that horses are in most places currently; even urban dwellers have access to them. This chapter combines the ideas of animals existing in physical borderlands as well as in human cultural thought. Horses represent an accomplishment of both. They are symbols who reside in
physical socially constructed places as well as occupy socially constructed spaces in our imaginings. Their border status extends further still and characterizes how equine medicine is gendered. The next chapter discusses the gendering of the tracks, with the equine concentration, once again, on the border.