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Aja Smith is an anthropologist, working at the intersection of human-animal relations and professional training and personal development. Her research delves into issues pertaining to the body and affect, and she is specialised in the Danish region. Aja is affiliated with the Consumption, Culture and Commerce research group at the Department of Marketing & Management at the University of Southern Denmark.

Before coming to SDU, Aja obtained an MA in anthropology from the University of Copenhagen in 2009 and then went on to teaching for a few years. She first taught at respectively Monash University and Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia, where she then lived and upon returning to Denmark, she continued teaching at the Department of Anthropology, Copenhagen University. Aja has worked as a chief researcher on two research projects pertaining to the role of interdisciplinarity at the Faculty of Arts at Monash University and has experience working as a junior researcher at two different international market research agencies.



PhD Dissertation of

Aja Smith

Department of Marketing & Management,
University of Southern Denmark

Training Relations

Horses, leadership and proper sociality in
the Danish neoliberal welfare society

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Training Relations

Horses, leadership and proper sociality in the Danish neoliberal welfare society

This thesis explores the phenomenon of horse-assisted leadership training and the manners, in which the training relations between horses, managers and facilitators were entangled with perceptions of, what “proper sociality” entailed and felt like in contemporary Danish society. The study is positioned at the intersection of anthropology and consumer culture research and is based upon 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in fields, offices and conference rooms throughout Denmark in 2012 and 2013 as well as reading of emic literature and marketing material.

The main argument of the thesis is, that the relations between managers, horses and facilitators trained them all in being individual and social in ways, that aligned with perceptions of “proper sociality” in contemporary Denmark. I have argued, that facilitators specifically trained balancing uniqueness with sameness, managers specifically were training balancing authority with equality, and horses trained balancing lucidity with care – as did the facilitators through their relations with horses. I have held, that more fundamentally, all were training to sense, feel, move and think in ways, that aligned their manners of relating to themselves *and* to others with perceptions about, what constituted desirable individuality and sociality in the broader Danish society. I have approached contemporary Denmark as shaped significantly by the local marriage between welfare and neoliberal logics and affects – and argued, that the particular balance, which managers, horses and facilitators were training to strike between self-centredness and other-orientation, self-interests and fellow-feelings, was related to this marriage.

The thesis contributes to the conceptualisation of the relationship between the self and sociality, particularly within consumer culture research interested in destabilising the primacy of the agentive powers of the human consumer. It does so by broadening the notion of the social to include animals – and by emphasising the sensorial, bodily and affective dimensions of the relations between self and sociality. A related contribution of the thesis is to illustrate the analytical and ethical importance of rendering these sensorial, bodily and affective dimensions of phenomena sensible.

The thesis also contributes to the charting of Denmark ethnographically, sketching the relations between perceptions of “proper sociality” and the tension between neoliberal and welfare affects.

Finally then, the thesis – more broadly speaking – contributes to research on the local workings of neoliberal affects showing, how the marriage between neoliberalism and welfare in contemporary Danish society has made striking the right balance between individuality and sociality a question always to be solved *in relations with others*. And as such requiring training relations.

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The **Consumption, Culture and Commerce group** aims to be a global hub for state-of-the-art knowledge on market dynamics. We develop a cultural approach to studying market transformations of relevance to managerial and social sciences, as well as key industry and societal decision makers. We study changes in consumption and commercial practices, techno-material networks and meaning systems, and representational and ideological facets of marketing and consumption.

While broad in disciplinary foundation and contribution, and international in its composition, the CCC group is primarily known for its contribution to the growing domain of Consumer Culture Theory.

Department of Marketing & Management

At the Department of Marketing & Management we are approximately 98 employees, and we have an annual turnover of approximately 55 million DKK.

The department was founded in 1987 and celebrated its 30th anniversary on 1 January 2017.

We are located at the SDU Campus in Odense and Slagelse.

Research at the department is organised into five research units: Consumption, Culture and Commerce; Strategic Organization Design; Centre for Integrative Innovation Management; Management of People; International Business & Entrepreneurship.

IMM carries out research and research-based education in the fields of business economics (BA and MA levels), but also engineering, graduate diploma, and professional master programmes.

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