

# HEALTH SOCIOLOGY OF ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

by

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## **Abstract:**

In this study, we interrogate the ways the animal husbandry is crucial for the management of the health needs of the multispecies families. Guided by fundamental case theory of Saltland area, we consider villagers memberships in socially constructed categories impact positively their experiences with household health management. We conducted the research study in Saltland area focusing the locals with community-dwelling older adults who owned animals. Additionally, mapping the social-mental effects of animals and animal husbandry that can be exploited and organized for therapeutic purposes. Using a thematic analytic approach, we found that the participants' bonds with their domesticated animals led them to increase in biological stamina, love, empathy, care, self-awareness, punctual and it indirectly makes the benefit of the community.

## **Introduction:**

A number of sociologists have fought for decades to stimulate interest within sociology through research, editorial work, and professional organizing but have met with resistance and apathy as much as sympathy and support. Other social science disciplines, however, have flourished. Anthropology, for one, long ago labeled animal studies a “growth field” and accorded it space in an annual state-of-the-art review (Shanklin, 1985). By contrast, sociologists have not acknowledged the importance of animal husbandry studies; indeed, some have belittled it as mere “boutique” sociology.

For our aging society, the sustainable social integration of the elderly is a challenge, as well as the exploration of alternative possibilities and finding responses to this problem situation. In this dissertation, the research is conducted on the case study of Saltland. The study helps in highlighting and preserving a traditional value that still exists in Saltland (household farming), demonstrating its potential for the future to ensure Active Aging. The dimensions of active aging are health, psychological well-being, participation, and lifelong learning (WHO, 2002).

## **Objective:**

The aim of our research is to examine elderly people with animals (pets) living in different socio-cultural environments in the Saltland region, based on subjective health status, self-assessment of health, and the frequency of health risk behaviours. The research focuses on mapping the social-mental effects of animals and animal husbandry. During the research, we also aimed to explore the physical and mental health sociological characteristics of the target group, understand the nature of their motivations, describe their characteristics and dynamics, in relation to their social background and socio-cultural habits.

## **Research Questions:**

At a theoretical level, our research hypothesis is that human-animal contact affects certain psychological and physiological parameters of the elderly individuals involved in the relationship, positively influencing their physical and mental health. This study aims to demonstrate that, beyond the mental and physical assistance animals provide to their owners, they indirectly or directly contribute to the successful social integration of the elderly, fostering a closer connection with nature, harmony, and this reciprocity preventively averts the development of numerous physical and mental illnesses. We formulated the research questions

based on the theories and results of conducted studies that has been discussed in the literature. Summarized, we sought answers to the following questions;

- What is the physical and mental health status of the elderly in the Saltland region?
- What is their level of social support? How satisfied are they with their lives in general?
- What kinds of animals do they keep? What is their relationship with their animals like? How attached are they to their animals?
- What correlation can be shown between animal keeping and health or family status, and do gender and age play a significant role?
- Is there a connection between animal keeping and life satisfaction?
- What interpersonal integration resources do they have?
- Can the elderly be categorized based on the nature of their animal keeping?
- What are these promising agrotherapeutic opportunities?

#### **Data collection:**

Our research area is Saltland, a geographical, historical, and ethnographic region in Terra Siculorum, Romania. Its most important settlements are: Alsósófalva, Atyha, Békástanya, Felsősfalva, Fenyőkút, Illyésmező, Kalonda, Korond, Pálpataka, Parajd, Sóvárád, and Szováta. According to the INS statistical office data from the 2011 census, the population of each municipality is as follows: Korond 6005, Parajd 6218, and Szováta 10232.

#### **Research Target Group:**

In selecting our subjects, the criteria were that they are over 56 years old, residents of the Saltland region, and keep either livestock or companion animals in their household. I chose my interview subjects randomly, and some of them were contacted and questioned based on the protocols mentioned in the journal of the Pro Agricultura Hargitae Universitas Foundation.

In addition to the questionnaires, we also referred to the official sources specific to the person or community, such as the records of family medical files and data from statistical databases and the European Health Interview Survey (EHIS).

The data collection concerning the settlements in the Saltland region was facilitated by employees of the local councils, who provided access to the economic records of the villages. These records contain current databases pertaining to the entire population of the villages. The economic registers include the population of the village by name, indicating where the individual resides within the settlement, the gender ratio, age distribution, date of birth, members of households, land owned by residents (arable land, pastures), the number of owned animals, and livestock.

The data collection was carried out by structured and unstructured conversations recorded during fieldwork. Among verbal data acquisition techniques, we employed semi-structured sociological interviews as a qualitative method. The interviews were conducted using snowball sampling technique, following a predetermined thematic outline. The aim was to explore the

deeper causes of the experience of being an animal keeper, examining the indirect and direct symbolic values and social interactions of animal keeping. Focusing on the research advantages mentioned priorly, the following questions were addressed.

- How do they think, why do they think that way, what motivations, factors play a role in shaping the lives of the farmers?
- How do they spend their days? What are their daily tasks? What are their main resources?
- How do they experience animal keeping?
- What is their general mood?
- How much do they identify with their animal regarding their emotional state?
- How do they assess their own health status?
- When examining their life story, are they satisfied with how things have turned out so far?

In developing our research methodology, we attributed significant importance to the integration of prior professional experiences, analytical perspectives, procedures, and workplace parameters with new regional trends and experiences to bring added knowledge. In addition to interview series and questionnaires, data collection involved personal observation, utilization of data from regional professional events related to the target group, and articles from professional publications.

This research was carried out from the year 2018 to 2023, involving 49 individual interviews and 234 questionnaire recordings. From the year 2018 to 2020, data collection, including questionnaire surveys, contacting and conducting interviews with participants was carried out. From the year 2018 to 2020, the data processing, which involved creating the database, statistical analysis, and transcribing interviews into written form was carried out. The processing of questionnaire survey data was conducted using version 19 of the SPSS statistical program, PSPP, and Excel. Descriptive statistical methods such as mean, frequency, and standard deviation were used, along with correlation analysis, cross-tabulation analysis, cluster analysis, and regression analysis. The processing of semi-structured interviews was carried out through content analysis, considering the following aspects to understand the economic systems and the bio-psycho-social-spiritual completeness of the farmers in depth.

- Recessive and dominant symbolic values of animal keeping.
- Palette of social interactions, nature of bonding with companion animals
- Degree of attachment and independence in relationships
- Socioeconomic and demographic attitudes of farmers
- Typical difficulties, resources, and coping mechanisms
- Frequency of doctor visits, attitudes towards medication
- Quality and quantity of happiness factors

Lifestyle resources

The semi-structured interviews were attempted to be systematized with the help of grounded theory. The interpretation of the data mostly took place in 2022, which included interpreting the quantitative data based on hypotheses, as well as interpreting the qualitative data and creating typologies. The majority of the elderly participants in the sample are female respondents, and it is essential for the research that 99% of them are animal keepers."

### **Research Methods:**

The research methods encompass the techniques of data collection and data processing. Our primary quantitative method is direct questionnaire-based data collection, focusing on the following psychosocial dimensions: general social characteristics, social and interpersonal relationships, health, abilities, values, and questions related to animal keeping, as well as attitude assessments. Among the standard questionnaires, we utilized the following:

The Hungarian abbreviation of the WHO Well-Being Index (WBI-5), which is a shortened version.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) as the most used tool in research related to subjective well-being. We used its reliable and valid Hungarian version.

For defining psychological health, we applied Ryff's Scale of Psychological Well-Being (1995)

We measured the level of subjective social exclusion following the European Quality of Life Survey.

### **Results and discussion:**

To achieve the research goal, we used both qualitative and quantitative sampling, as described in the methodological section. Survey data provided a general overview of the elderly population in Saltland who keep animals. To answer deeper questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Using Engels' (1977) bio-psycho-social and Antonovsky's (1987) theory of coherence, conversations were organized into five thematic areas.

Collection and analysis of the research data, considering the relationships between concepts, we were able to identify the following basic categories: we compiled a set of five major units, consisting of:

- a. The first part explores psycho-social characteristics,
- b. The second unit aims to uncover lifestyle,
- c. The third examines the characteristics of animal keeping,
- d. The fourth maps out health status,
- e. The fifth examines the quality and quantity of well-being.

For our aging society, the sustainable social integration of the elderly is a challenge, as well as the exploration of alternative possibilities and finding responses to this problem situation. Based on our data following are the answers we find:

*"What animals do they keep? What is their relationship with their animals like? How attached are they to their animals?"*

The range of domestic animals in the Saltland is diverse: most commonly dogs, cats, poultry, cattle, rabbits, pigs, and sheep are kept. Caring for animals in Transylvania is characterized by a dualism, a dissociation. Most often, their animals serve a utilitarian function, kept for commercial purposes. However, anyone familiar with farmers knows that caring for, tending to, and bonding with their animals are integral parts of peasant culture. Empathy and emotions can be observed in their relationships. Their creed is that animals should not only provide physical benefit to humans; there is a need to establish a human-animal community. Farmers who regularly interact with animals emphasize unconditional love, attachment, and a sense of security. They help not only in protective interactions but also in establishing connections with the environment and overcoming social isolation. Companion animals induce positive physiological, psychological, cognitive, and behavioural changes."

*What interpersonal integration resources do they have?*

The presence and companionship of animals reduce stress, have beneficial and soothing effects, and enhance self-esteem (Molnár, 2015). Older individuals engaged in animal care do not struggle with self-care difficulties. Alongside household activities, they invest significant energy in caring for their animals. Due to their lifestyle, elderly animal keepers are healthier than the average population. They consume healthier, more natural diets thanks to their own produce and agriculture, regularly consuming whole grains, organic vegetables and fruits, meat products, dairy products, and high-quality food items from their own farms. Their physical activity and exercise are more intense due to daily work, which has a positive effect on their health. Their resourcefulness, love of nature, traditional knowledge, and environment free from civilization's harms preventively avert the development of numerous physical and mental illnesses, turning their surroundings into a pharmacy. Even without knowledge of trendy slow living teachings, their lifestyle is inherently slower, leading to a more conscious way of living with less consumption. Their occupation is characterized by good spirits, cheerfulness, and laughter, which are sustaining factors for their physical and mental health. As mentioned in holy bible Proverbs 17:22, 'a merry heart does good, like medicine,' their source of life energy, which is also positively reflected in their physiological parameters.

The people living and working in the Saltland, immersed in their own world, provide local responses to global issues. Rural life holds great value, with elements such as air, space, forests, fields, houses, gardens, yards, and animals all being essential factors for sustainable development. Coexisting with nature and mother earth, brings about tranquillity and dedication. In our world of diminishing values, where sensitivity, ethics, and morality are fading and only law prevails, the peasant farming lifestyle can restore inner value (Berecki, 2021). The ecological footprint of the elderly is smaller, but due to their inclination towards saving and adherence to traditions, their way of life is more environmentally friendly. Clearly, their love and respect for nature and natural values alone can easily evoke more environmentally conscious behaviours in them (Kertész, 2020).

*"What is the relationship between animal keeping and their health status, gender, age, and family status?"*

Upon examining causal factors, the most prominent observation is that animal companionship serves as an enhancer of life quality, aiding in lifestyle support and care, and improving physiological health parameters and subjective health perception. Cross-tabulation analyses revealed a significant disparity between self-rated health and cardiovascular diseases.

Demographic indicators showed a dominance of women at 65.8%, with every third woman over 76 living in a single-person household. Gender imbalances were explained by differences arising from lifestyle."

We found that women were more pessimistic than men in assessing their health status, although the medical records did not support this. In the social network of the studied population, family relationships predominated, with family being the most important social institution for the respondents. We demonstrated that the presence of social relationships associated with animal keeping plays a role in health preservation, inducing better mental health. In the case of pet owners, blood pressure and pulse results were more positive. The positive effects of health status and animal keeping are consciously acknowledged, experienced, felt, and integrated into life by 24.4% of individuals.

Based on our findings, it is evident that maintaining health requires harmony and alignment with nature. Those elderly individuals in the Saltland who live in peace on their small farms exhibit better physiological parameters. Their health is positively influenced by their lifestyle; they have more extensive self-realization, are happier, spiritual, more balanced, capable of coping with environmental challenges, and can effectively contribute to the community. Through Engel's lens, they appear healthier from a biological perspective, as evidenced by their anatomical, structural, and functional data. From a psychological perspective, see their mental health data. From a social perspective, see the diversity of their social networks. We have seen that the life of a farmer is full of beauty, even though a significant portion of their time is spent preparing for the next work phase. The lifestyle of livestock farming demands a certain way of life and value system. Thanks to the average daily 2.81 hours spent on animal care, they engage in physical activity and movement. Their diet is healthy, utilizing quality basic food sources grown in their own farms. The cognitive assessment of their quality of life, measured by the SWLS scale, shows that they are satisfied and find their lives meaningful. We have statistically proven that for most of them, their daily work provides a flow experience; instead of becoming tired, they feel invigorated because they perform their tasks with joy and enthusiasm.

Based on the results of the WHO questionnaire, the indicators for farmers with livestock are very good, regarding their physical and psychological state as well as their social networks. The social connections involved in livestock farming play a health-preserving role, which induces better mental health. In terms of mental health, being an animal lover helps them to positively evaluate themselves, be satisfied with life, and believe in the meaning of life. According to the results of the Ryff scale, they are able to manage their responsibilities well, feel responsible for the situation they live in, view life as a continuous process of learning, change, and development, and are happy and satisfied with the role they play in the world.

*How well-supported are they socially? How satisfied are they with their lives in general?*

Based on our results, their subjective, experienced quality of life is good; they find meaning in their lives and radiate a sense of euphoria. The daily routine of care directs their attention to the present and provides resources for the farmers. The sense of control over their lives impacts their physical and mental well-being, increasing their level of trust, which helps to develop their social networks. Their communication skills broaden, and their social capital grows.

It is known that the elderly typically have poorer social networks, struggle to connect with others due to lower levels of patience and adaptability and are often subject to the stereotype

that older people only complain. Through my research and the empirical generalization of the data, I have proven that Cicero's words remain timeless: "Nothing is more worthy of a man and nothing makes him freer than agriculture," and animals are also suitable for compensating for these emotional deficiencies in old age.

Our research findings clearly reflect that those engaged in peasant farming are calmer, more balanced, healthier, and live in harmony with nature. Elderly farmers find meaning in their lives, view their problems as solvable, and cope much better with health-threatening stresses. Animals being their friends, contribute to their sense of comfort, often replacing interpersonal relationships.

This dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of animal therapy and its health sociology aspects, particularly focusing on the quality of life and social integration of the elderly. Based on the results obtained, we were able to formulate the following principles:

Animals have a health-preserving effect on humans. Our research indicates that physical contact and interactions with (companion) animals have direct psychological and cognitive effects, which are measurably reflected in positive changes in certain physiological parameters (Topál, 2011). A natural, animal-friendly environment directly or indirectly influences health. Tasks related to animal care, such as action-coordination and movement-coordination therapies, can also be detected.

A companion animal is a mental health protective factor. In ensuring mental health, animal-human interaction itself possesses spontaneous therapeutic values. Our significant results demonstrate that human-animal interaction also has an indirect effect through social facilitation, by easing social integration among people (Topál, 2011). Based on the analysis of raw data and research findings, it can be confirmed that communication is easier in the presence of a companion animal. The communication channels expand and become more diverse, serving as socialization incentives for their owners.

Animal therapy encourages the use of active coping strategies. In problem-focused coping, individuals concentrate on changing the problem and aim to find solutions. Our raw data indicate that the most used coping strategy dimensions among those with companion animals are active coping, positive reappraisal, acceptance, and planning. In contrast, those without companion animals predominantly rely on religious coping and seeking instrumental or social support.

Their sense of coherence is high. We observed that their sense of control over their lives is elevated thanks to the animals. They find meaning in their lives, view their problems as solvable, and can understand the signals from the world around them.

**In conclusion**, it can be established that animals represent multiple forms of capital for farmers: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. They embody a rural value and a vanishing way of life in our fast-paced, global society. Animals improve the health of the elderly, reduce the number of doctor visits, positively affect health problems, decrease the frequency of illnesses, improve survival rates, and enhance mental well-being. Farming uplifts the spirit, and the nature of an elevated spirit is to spread. In our aging society, farming is an innovative way to combat social isolation among the elderly. Field experiences indicate that we must recognize the value in the peasant lifestyle and farming community, which is built on high-level knowledge and deep emotions.

It serves as a fundamental utilization model, which, in a broad sense, is part of the social welfare system. According to Schneider (2020), it can satisfy human needs for education, healthcare, housing, and economic security, influencing rural areas economically, environmentally, and socially, and supporting the new agrosocial paradigm. Regional embedding processes should harness the multifunctional potential of farms, which presents an opportunity for the elderly population, as the goal of farming is human enhancement (Schneider, 2020). I believe I have demonstrated that this is a viable path, one that helps to achieve a quality, happy old age.

Other questions of sociology research about animal husbandry studies can and should be raised, in addition the study conducted in this research. Asking, debating these sorts of questions will serve us well down the line as sociological interest in animal studies.

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Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

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The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

1. **Virginás, Z.:** Állattartó idősök egészségi állapota.  
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#### Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (2)

4. **Virginás, Z.:** Az állattenyésztés rejtett csodái.  
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### List of other publications

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