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The Meaning of Dwelling For Young Couples in the Light of Questionnaire Research Conducted on the Local Housing Market in Poznań

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Abstract. The notion of home is crucial for everyone and problems attributed to housing are of fundamental meaning both on the macro- and microeconomic levels. Moreover, the housing issue appears in cross-sectional scientific studies and it is often a subject of interest of the social sciences (economics being one of them), along with other fields e.g. technical and legal. The aim of the article is exploring the meaning of housing for young married couples. The findings are based on questionnaires carried out among a sample of 451 couples on the local housing market in Poznań in 2011. The project confirms that further research is required.

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Introduction

The concept of dwelling bears a set of unique features. On one hand, it constitutes part of a broader notion – i.e. housing market – and as such it acquires market value which in turn plays fairly essential role in countries' economies. Moreover, it is part of financial system through cash flows, mortgage and banking systems. Finally, it occupies a prominent place in many countries' politics, and numerous international documents endorse its meaning for mankind. Declarations adopted by the United Nations (UN) and the European Council prove particularly crucial as they raise an issue of housing accessibility for families (Lis, 2008, pp. 18-19). In this case, a dwelling is discussed as a macroeconomic issue.

On the other hand, home is of immense value for single households – young people who start families, enter adult life, and take up the roles of mothers and fathers. In that case, a dwelling may be considered a microeconomic issue. This, however, under no circumstances undermines its meaning. Definitions of home emphasise that it should be treated as a defined space for its residents, which is arranged according to their needs and tastes – the space where all the family members will fit into and play their roles (Kaltenberg-Kwiatkowska, 1982, pp. 7-8). It is also a place that "holds a man in the storms of sky and life (...). It is a body and a soul. It is the first world for every human being. Before one is doomed to live in the world, as imprudent metaphysicians preach, he/she is placed in the cradle of home. The home will always remain a big cradle in our dreams. Life starts well; it starts sheltered, warmed up and

in the home's shoulders" (Trzeciak, 1976, p. 394).

Thus, the meaning of home for families covers numerous socioeconomic functions fulfilling both the most fundamental and higher level needs. It satisfies the individual's safety needs, protects against the adverse impacts, and at the same time it pertains to the need of self-actualization. According to W. Rybczyński, people may find their dream homes "not to meet their own expectations of creating a perfect dwelling, but to express (...) their most private desires" (Rybczyński, 2003, p. 195). It is a place which may account for a successful family development, and as such it is a base for family life, dignity and respect. It is also a place which facilitates further education and work. In other words, home enables the individual's development (Bratt, 2002, pp. 13-15).

Not only the meaning, but also the roles of home are crucial. It is essential to identify them for at least two reasons:

- firstly, their identification (particularly in case of young couples) gives the possibility to estimate the overall perception of dwelling (e.g. if it is more an economic category, or social one),
- secondly, the identification is important with respect to market decisions. The investors who want to adjust their products to home buyers' needs and preferences have to gather information on buyers' behaviour (what they want and why) (Mruk, Pilarczyk, Szulce, 2007, pp. 58-59). Thus, it can be assumed that distinguishing roles a dwelling plays is one of the elements (apart from motives and preferences) of identifying people's housing needs. It is also useful information in the process of designing dwellings.

Since dwelling is particularly important for young people who start families and households, the aim of the article is to present the meaning of home for young couples. The author assumes also that young people perceive dwellings in social context, which means that the economic factor is not of key importance.

Functions of dwelling – previous research

The Polish property market is considered to be relatively young. Its current shape stems from the system transformation that the entire Polish economy underwent after 1989. Changes occurred within many key market issues in the last twenty years with regard to ownership rights, investors' profiles, prices of flats and houses, along with the way of entering transactions. The perception of housing, preferences as to its size and design changed too. Polish households have a free choice from a range of building designs and building materials, while decoration depends solely on the owners' imaginativeness and budget. What is essential, however, is that a dwelling is no longer perceived only as a place where a family lives. The media hype, the changes of supply and demand as a result of aggrandisement of some social groups, along with development of the Internet tools, promote properties as golden opportunities and capital investments. They reinforced the image of home as a commodity that generates calculable financial benefits. Today, the home serves the following functions:

- psycho-biological – it provides shelter from all weather, gives the feeling of security etc.
- cultural – through childrearing, handing over tradition and cultural patterns,
- economic – amassing wealth, performing professional activities, making investments (Łaciak, 2007, p. 175).

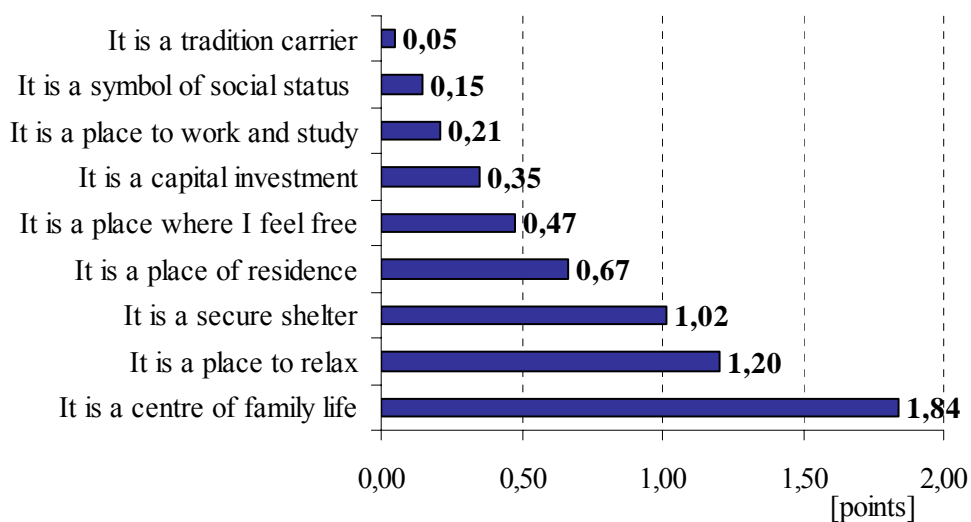
International research suggests that the home may also play the following roles (Workowska, 2004, p. 68):

- place for family life,

- secure shelter,
- place to relax,
- place where the residents may feel free and uninhibited,
- place of residence,
- place to learn and work,
- tradition carrier,
- symbol of status,
- uncongenial place¹.

The roles presented above were used in the study conducted among the people who declared the willingness to buy flats around the end of 2006². The respondents were asked to choose and rank the three main roles that they consider dwellings to play nowadays. The author added the category of capital investment, as he believed the economic role would turn crucial in the developing property market, and thus he decided to check and verify this thesis.

The conducted study shows that buyers consider a dwelling to be mainly a place where they will live their family life (see *Graph 1*), and this function was clearly ranked highest. Both the place to relax and secure shelter were also perceived as important. The findings show that the roles perceived as crucial are related to securing fundamental human needs, i.e. physiological, safety and belonging to a family, which is the original cell of social life.



Graph 1. Functions of dwellings listed by buyers on the Poznan property market³

Source: Own research.

It is noteworthy that the respondents also underscore the functions related to the higher level needs. Undoubtedly, a dwelling meets self-actualization and respect needs, as

¹ The roles mentioned above comprise in a way the functions listed earlier in the paper (as e.g. secure shelter falls within the psycho-biological category, while tradition carrier is undoubtedly a cultural category).

² The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used in the study that was carried out during the property fairs arranged by the weekly newspaper with property classified ads "Kup dom" (*Buy a house*). A group of 466 prospective buyers was analyzed after substantive verification and data segregation. The group was diversified with respect to sex, age, household's size, material status and household's type.

³ The respondents were asked to use rank order scaling. Due to the question formulation and result computation technique, it was assumed that the most important item got the highest rank (points) =4, less important was ranked 3, whereas the least important of answers got the lowest score=1. This technique enabled the author to rank the responses according to the scores they achieved – in line with the rule: the higher score, the more important housing function.

people perceive it as a place where the residents may feel free and uninhibited and which is a symbol of status. The author's thesis was proven – some of the prospective buyers indeed perceived the purchase as a capital investment. Some intended to resell the housing unit (irrespective of the time they would do it), whereas others hoped to capitalize on rental income. Thus, it is visible that although the economic factor does not play the leading role in the choice of housing, it is still essential (more information on the issue: Strączkowski, 2010, pp. 196-201)⁴.

Further research was conducted in the research team under prof. H. Gawron's supervision in the department of Real Estate and Investment at Poznan University of Economics. The study was conducted within the project "Housing needs and the methods of satisfying them on the local property market"⁵ in Poznań in 2011. Some of the findings are presented below.

The meaning of home for young married couples

Information on the study

As stated above, home has a central place in the process of family development. This is why it is important to know what roles young married couples ascribe to it. In the conceptualization process, the author decided to analyse people who were soon getting married. A group administered questionnaire was the main research tool used for gathering data (*Table 1* comprises basic assumptions of the survey). The main advantage of this technique is the possibility of personal administration and a high response rate (Kaczmarczyk, 2003, p. 177).

Table 1. Basic assumptions of the study of young married couples

Scopes of research:	1) material: subject – couples participating in pre-cana courses before they can be married; research area – meaning of housing for young married couples 2) spatial: the local housing market in Poznan (Poznan agglomeration)
Time and place of data collection:	1) time: March – June 2011 2) place: parishes running pre-cana courses
Intended sampling and the sample size	1) purposive sampling 2) sample size n=451 married couples (prospective spouses complete the questionnaire together)
Research tool:	administrated questionnaire

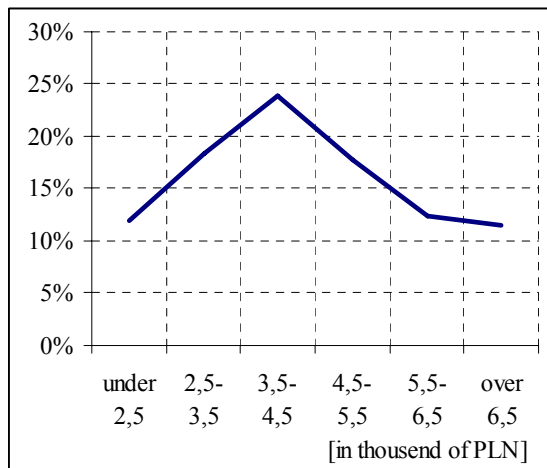
Source: Own research.

The method of data collection and the sample size require some explanation. First, the research method was determined by the possibility to collect data – in Poland most marriages are canonical and both prospective spouses must undergo a pre-cana course before they can be married in the Catholic Church. Second, approximately 3 000 marriages are recorded every year in Poznan, of which 70% are canonical. The sample size (n=451 couples) results from the author's attempt to gather population sufficiently big for the author to reach some general

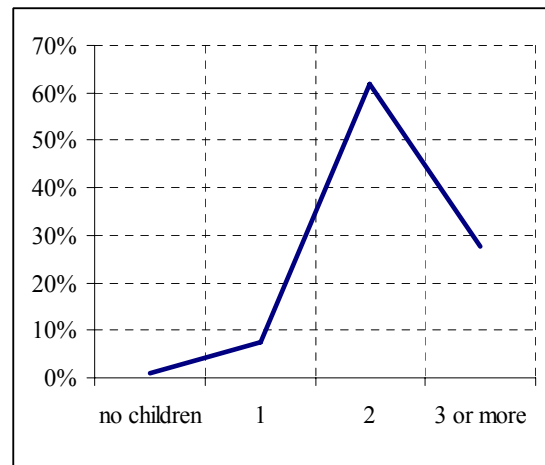
⁴ The review of other research devoted to dwellings, their meaning and roles, can be found in e.g. Henny Coolen's papers (see Coolen, 2009, Coolen, Meesters, 2011, Coolen, Kempen, Ozaki, 2002).

⁵ Scientific study – generic research financed from the education budget for 2010-2012.

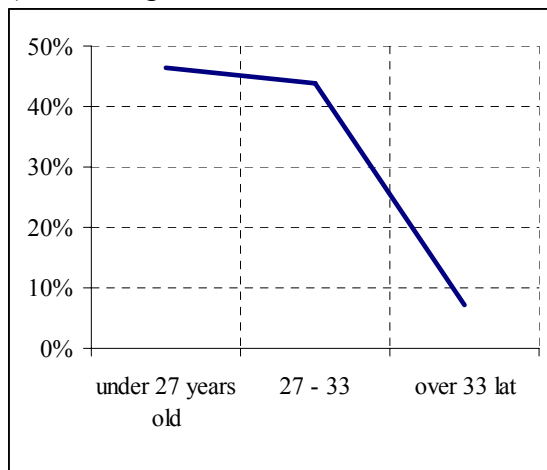
conclusions.



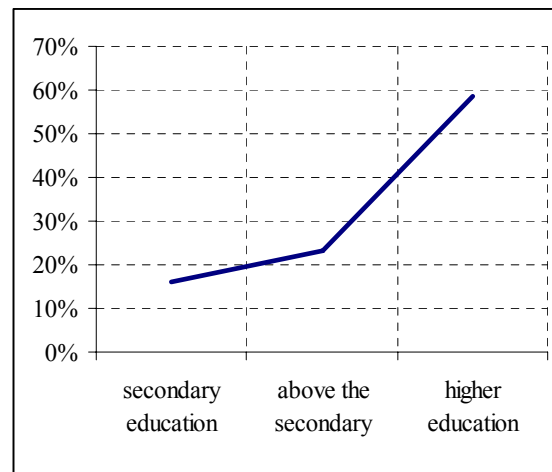
a) according to net income



b) according to desired number of children



c) according to prospective spouses' age



d) according to education

Graph 2. Dispersion of respondents according to characteristics

Source: Own research.

The author assumed that the perception of housing would depend on marriage type, as the couples differed with respect to material status, age and desired number of children. This is why not only general answers, but also some segmentation criteria were taken into consideration. The distribution of criteria is depicted on the charts below.

- prospective spouses' monthly net income – the income declared by both the fiancé and fiancée. In the research, it served as a measure of material status.
- desired number of children,
- average age of the couples – the couples were divided into three age groups: the first group was formed by the couples whose average age was up to 27, the second – up to 33, while the third group comprised the oldest spouses to be⁶,

⁶ The age groups were fixed on the basis of the definition of a young married couple given by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), as well as the average age of the respondents. According to the subject definition, a young married couple is the one, where the average age of the spouses does not exceed 33 years, yet one person is under 30 years old, the second under 35. As the average age of respondents is below average (approx. 27), younger spouses were classified in the first group. The third group comprises spouses who are older than the couples described in the definition.

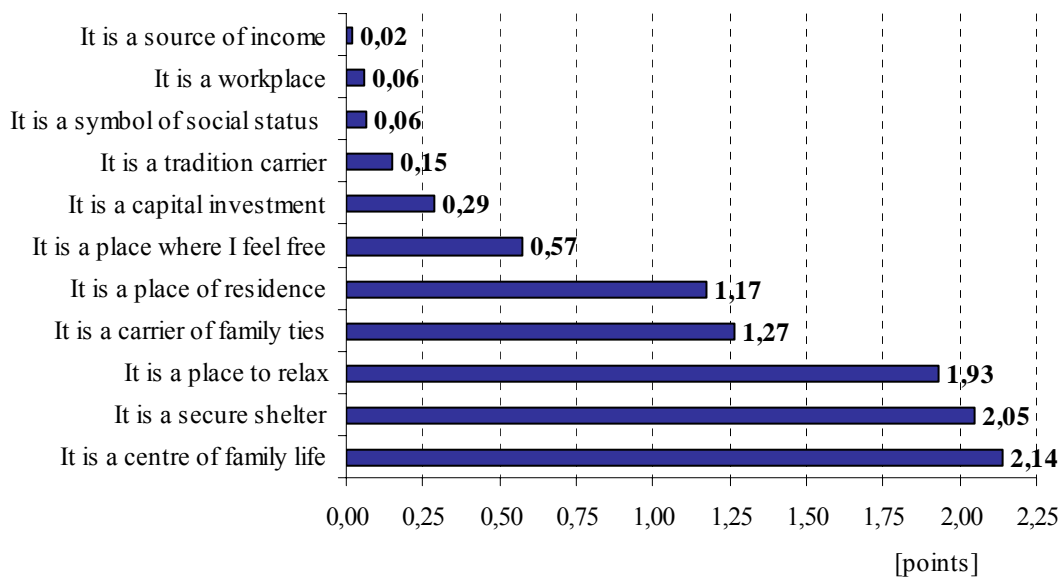
- education level – the average education indicator was used. The first group includes the couples with secondary education indicator; the second group has the indicator above this level, while the third group comprises couples with higher education indicator.

Research findings

The people questioned about their view on housing were asked to use rank order scaling. Due to the question formulation and result computation technique, it was assumed that the most important item got the highest rank (points) = 4, less important was ranked 3, whereas the least important of answers got the lowest score = 1. This technique enabled the author to rank the responses according to the scores they achieved – in line with the rule: the higher score, the more important housing function.

The research findings show that the buyers' emotional ties to their places of residence prevail. The purely economic categories (dwelling purchase as capital investment or source of income) are ranked less important. This means that while thinking of housing, people take into account not only their own but the whole family's housing needs.

Young couples associate housing mainly with family and its functioning. The home is not only a family life centre, but also a secure shelter, a place to relax and a carrier of family ties. Therefore, it may be concluded that the dwelling is perceived primarily through basic human needs. The factors like workplace and symbol of social status turn out to be less essential for the respondents.



Graph 3. The role of dwelling for young married couples

Source: Own research.

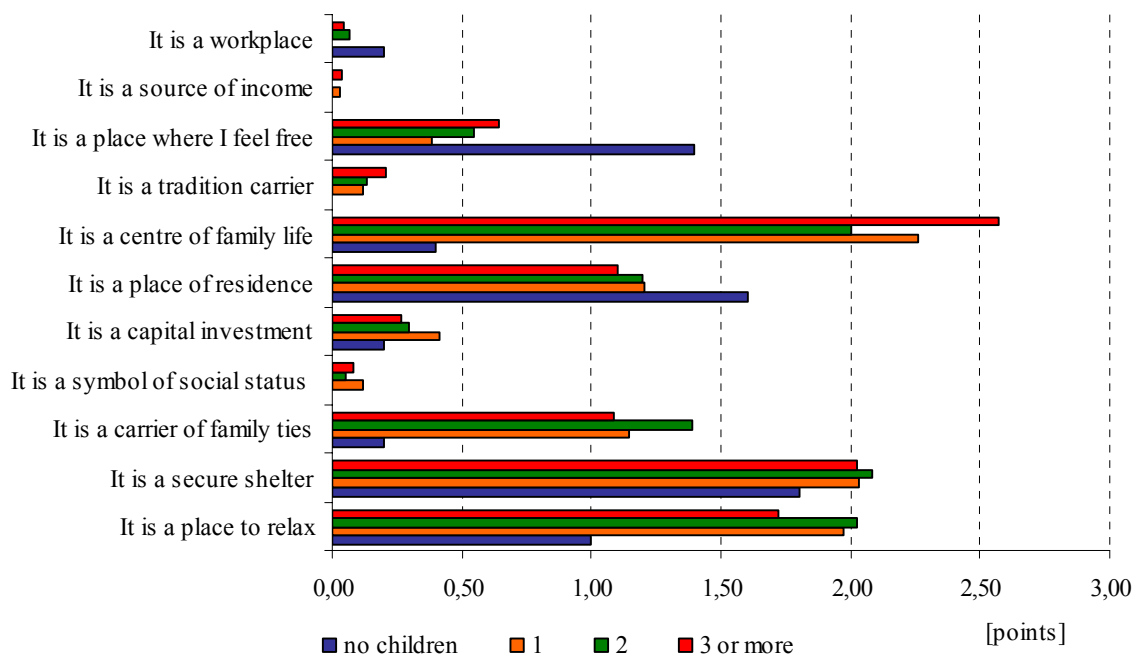
As expected, some variation may be noticed within the category of spouses' net income. The high-income couples name the economic role much more frequently than the others. They often perceive dwelling as a commodity that generates calculable financial benefits as a capital investment or source of income. Interestingly enough, the same respondents more often think about housing as a place which indicates social status or where they may feel free and uninhibited. This finding seems to be quite important as it indicates

that higher incomes let people look at flats and houses as means of satisfying higher level needs.

Among the low-income couples, the economic categories do not seem to be so important. Social status and economic benefits give way to the family-related functions. These respondents attach more importance to security and family ties, which indicates that they perceive housing in terms of needs described as fundamental in Maslow’s hierarchy.

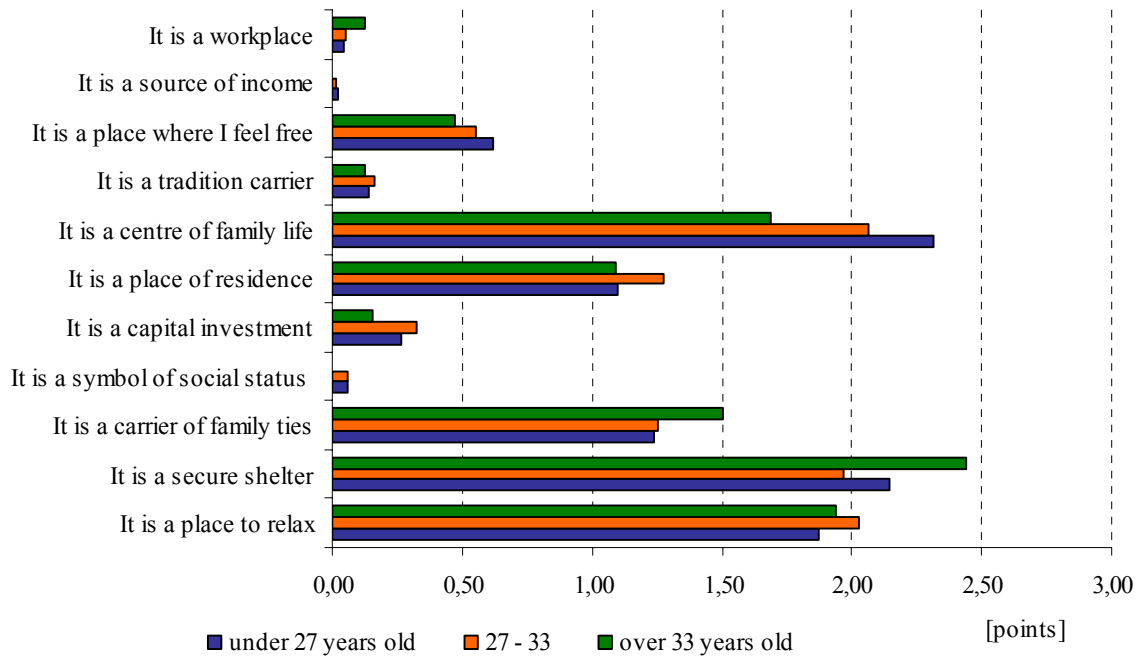
The responses are also diverse within the category of desired number of children. People, who do not plan to have children, tend to think of the dwelling as a place of residence and work, as well as space where they can feel free. Thus, they pay less attention to family-related meaning of home.

The situation is reverse among the couples who declare the willingness to have children – especially among the ones who intend to bring up three or more children. They often perceive home as a centre of emotional ties between family members, or as a place where families have their family lives and where each family member plays his/her social role.



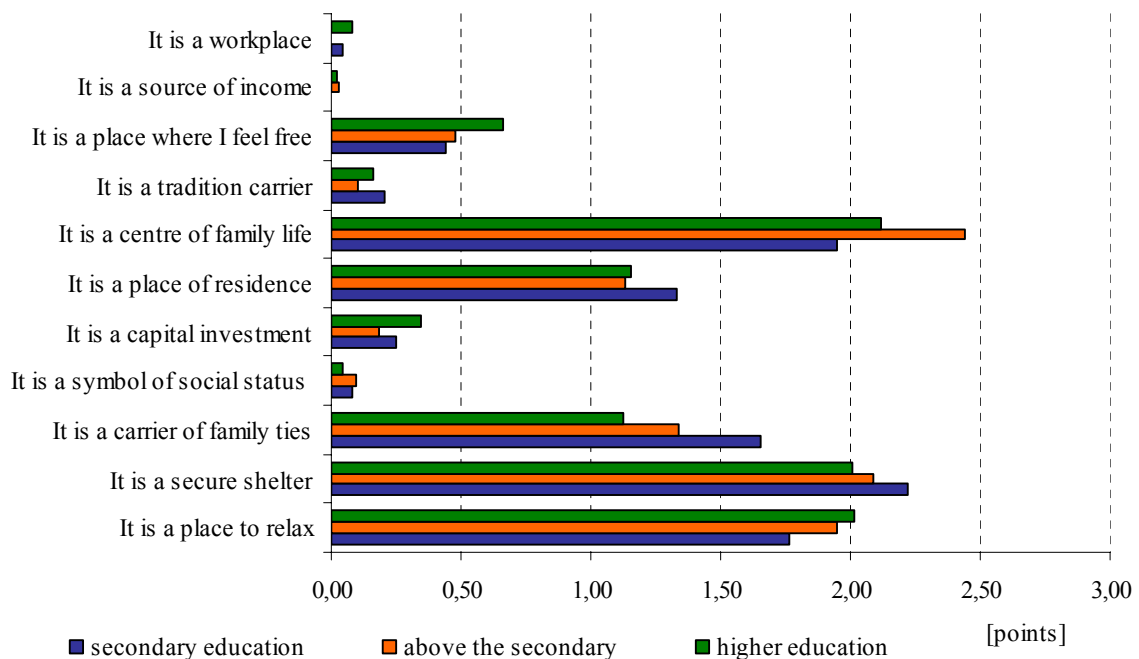
Graph 4. The role of dwelling for young married couples with respect to the desired number of children

Source: Own research.



Graph 5. The role of dwelling for young married couples with respect to their age
 Source: Own research.

Taking into consideration the prospective spouses' average age, it can be observed that younger couples more often tend to think about the dwelling in terms of family life, freedom they gain at home, as well as the social status it gives. In the light of inaccessibility of flats and houses for young people in Poznan (mostly due to insufficient incomes), the dwelling is presumably associated with freedom and independence, e.g. from parents. The somewhat older couples tend to perceive housing in terms of security, family ties and work. As is often the case, people who have rented dwellings before, appreciate the possibility of having their own homes more.



Graph 6. The role of dwelling for young married couples with respect to their education level
 Source: Own research.

The last analysed criterion is the prospective spouses' education level. The findings show that couples with different education levels classified housing functions diversely. Relatively more educated people rank the factors of family life and freedom higher. Moreover, they associate housing with a place to relax and opportunity to derive economic benefits. Interestingly, they rarely associate housing with social status, as if possessing a flat or a house was something natural and other factors contributed to their success.

In case of people of a slightly lower education level, the secure- and belonging-related factors prevail.

Conclusions

The presented research findings generate new insights for further research on households' housing needs. Nowadays, people perceive a dwelling differently, depending on household's type, as well as individuals' plans for the future. From results obtained on the local market, it may be concluded that people think of housing in terms of family matters, which may be described as sentimental and related to the basic housing needs. The economic factors are present, yet they are rarely listed by the respondents. This may suggest that dwellings usually bear social meaning. It may be stated that further research is recommended as the sequence of the studied functions may change over time. In the environment of system transformation and dynamic market changes, the economic factors may gain in importance.

To sum up, it should be emphasized that:

- young couples treat dwelling mainly as a place of family life, secondly, as secure shelter, thirdly, as a place to relax. That means, dwelling is considered a place fulfilling of psycho-biological needs,
- perception of dwelling through social factors is stronger than through economic factors. That means that home for the young is a place of social interactions, where they will build their families,
- the findings show that the young who point at the economic factors less frequently, do not consider their dwellings sources of income while building their households,
- the features describing young couples (education, age, desired number of children) diversify the responses. Thus, young couples have different expectations and needs, and they may search for different products on the market.

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