

The criteria for choosing a companion dog

AGNIESZKA BORUTA, ANNA KUREK, MARTA LEWANDOWSKA
Department of Animal Breeding and Production, Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW

Abstract: *The criteria for choosing a companion dog.* What criteria do people follow in selecting a dog in Poland? By means of a diagnostic survey a study was carried out examining the criteria for selecting a companion dog. The survey was filled out by 424 dog owners (in Poland), representing various ages and education. An analysis of the results allowed to divide the surveyed community into five clusters. The respondents from the 1st cluster preferred pedigree dogs. They regarded the most important criteria of dog selection to be parentage (0.809), size (0.652) and temperament (0.478). The 2nd cluster included people having a good contact with dogs and preferring a specific type of dog temperament. They most highly regarded the temperament of the dog (1.000) and its appearance (0.693). The 3rd cluster included altruists, for whom none of the analyzed criteria of selection were important. For them the most important criteria of dog selection was the temperament of the animal (0.977), less important were sex (0.593), parentage (0.558) and the utility purpose (0.453), whereas age and external appearance were completely irrelevant. The respondents in the 4th cluster (people preferring work and physical activity with the dog) differed from the others by having the highest assessment of the dog's utility purpose (0.906). Their utilitarian attitude towards dog selection confirms regarding temperament as second in the hierarchy of criteria (0.750) and size as the third (0.547). The least traits associated with the utilitarian side of the dog were shown by respondents from the 5th cluster (average dog owners). They regarded the following criteria to be most important: size (0.688), age and appearance (0.656) and sex (0.563).

Key words: dog choosing, conformation, temperament, utility purpose, sex

INTRODUCTION

In the initial phase of building and strengthening mutual relations between man and dog the animal was used solely for utility purposes (Vila et al. 1997). Currently many dogs living in a urban environment serve as companion dogs. The decision to own a dog generates consequences and duties for many years to come. Choosing a method of acquiring a dog, be it by purchase or through adoption, has its good and bad sides. The purchase of a dog from a breeding kennel is synonymous with acquiring information regarding its parentage, needs, and makes one aware of the costs of its future keep. The adoption of a homeless dog is associated with a lack of information about its past, which has a huge influence on the way the animal functions in the environment of man (Salman et al. 2000, Marston et al. 2004, Segurson et al. 2005, King et al. 2009, Boruta et al. 2014).

The aim of the study is to examine the criteria of selecting a companion dog in Poland.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Based on the results of an anonymous diagnostic survey, an analysis was performed of the criteria by which future

owners make their decision to select a dog. The research material consisted of data from 424 correctly filled out survey forms. Each of the surveyed people was a current dog owner.

The survey was designed basing on the “Google Forms” application and later distributed by means of forums and social portals, which bring together people interested in dog breeding and keep. The aim of the survey was to obtain information on the components that make up the final decision to select a particular dog by its future owners. The following criteria (that are taken into consideration by potential owners when selecting a dog) were analyzed: sex, parentage, utility purpose, age, size, appearance and temperament. The above mentioned variables, depending on the answer given by the respondent, were given the following values: 0 – the respondent does not take this criterion under consideration when selecting a dog, 1 – the respondent considers this criterion when selecting a dog.

The research material was processed statistically by means of the SPSS 23 statistic package. The correlation between the prevalence of particular variables was determined by means of the Fisher test. In order to distinguish groups of respondents characterized by specific preferences when selecting a dog, an analysis using *k*-means clustering (QUICK CLUSTER) was made.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As many as 91.5% of the respondents were female (Table 1). The method of distributing the survey was through forums and social portals, where women

TABLE 1. Profiles of the respondent group

Variable		<i>N</i>	%
Sex	female	388	91.5
	male	36	8.5
Age	18–25 years	150	35.4
	26–40 years	203	47.9
	above 40 years	71	16.7
Education	tertiary	274	64.6
	secondary	120	28.3
	vocational	18	4.3
	primary	12	2.8
Number of owned dogs	one	286	67.5
	two	104	24.5
	three and more	34	8.0
Dog breed	pedigree	184	43.4
	mix-breed	240	56.6

are more active. The respondents were divided into three age groups: I – people on the verge of adulthood (18–25 years), II – people at an age to establish their own families and to build their professional and financial stability (26–40 years) and III – older people, professionally (above 40 years). The majority of respondents had a higher education (64.6%), only 4.2% had a vocational education and just 2.9% had a primary education.

At the time of the carried out survey most people declared that they owned one dog (67.5%) and in 43.4% cases it was a pedigree dog.

Five clusters (groups) of respondents were distinguished, with various hierarchies of values when selecting a dog (Fig. 1, Table 2). Respondents from the 1st cluster considered that the most important criterion when choosing a dog was its parentage (0.809), then its size (0.625) and temperament (0.478). The chosen traits show that the respond-

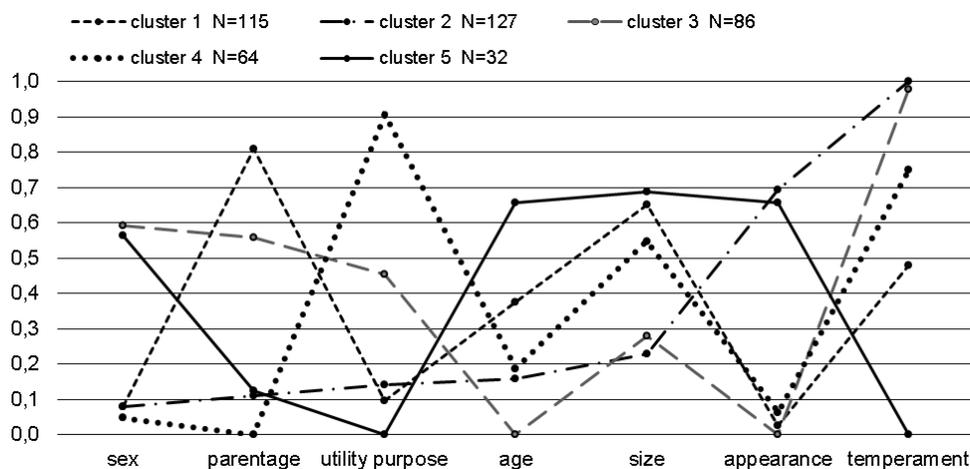


FIGURE 1. Clusters of variables determining the criteria for dog selection

TABLE 2. Cluster centres of variables determining the criteria for dog selection

Selection criteria	N		Cluster				
	significant	insignificant	1 N = 115	2 N = 127	3 N = 86	4 N = 64	5 N = 32
Sex	91	333	0.078	0.079	0.593	0.047	0.563
Parentage	159	265	0.809	0.110	0.558	<0.001	0.125
Utility purpose	126	298	0.096	0.142	0.453	0.906	<0.001
Age	96	328	0.374	0.157	<0.001	0.188	0.656
Size	185	239	0.652	0.228	0.279	0.547	0.688
Appearance	116	308	0.026	0.693	<0.001	0.063	0.656
Temperament	314	110	0.478	1.000	0.977	0.750	<0.001

ents from this cluster probably prefer pedigree dogs. The least important for them, similarly to the respondents from the 3rd and 4th cluster, was the appearance of the dog (0.026), its sex (0.078) and utility purpose – the main reason for which the dog is chosen (0.096). The 2nd cluster included people that valued the temperament of the dog the most (1.000). The external appearance is also of significance to them (0.693), but they assessed the other criteria at less than 0.229. The respondents from that cluster can be characterized as people who

have a good contact with dogs and prefer a specific type of their character. In cluster 3, similarly to cluster 2, the highest criterion was the dog's temperament (0.977). The respondents from that cluster deemed the following less important: sex (0.593), parentage (0.558) and utility purpose of the dog (0.453) and considered the age and external appearance completely irrelevant. The respondents from this cluster can be called altruists, for whom none of the analyzed criteria was important. Those grouped in cluster 4 differed from the others with the high-

est assessment of the utility purpose criterion (0.906). Their utilitarian approach in selecting a dog is confirmed by pointing to temperament as the second in the criteria hierarchy (0.750) and dog size as the third (0.547). These are people preferring work or physical activity with the dog. The least traits associated with the utilitarian side of the dog were shown by respondents from the 5th cluster. None of them pointed to the character and utility purpose of the dog when choosing one. They decided that the most important criteria were: size (0.688), age and appearance (0.656) and sex (0.563). We could define them as interested in the superficiality of the dog.

Reason for owning a dog

The results of the study show that none of the analyzed criteria have a statistically significant influence when selecting a dog for its utility purpose (Fig. 2). The majority of the respondents own

dogs for company (97.4%) and it was in this group that most people deemed the temperament of the dog to be important (75%). The respondents from this group, more often than others, valued the dog's sex (22%) and its appearance (28%). No people that own dogs to guard their homes paid attention to the sex and appearance of the dog (0%). And 60% of them pointed to the age as the criterion in selecting a dog. Among people owning dogs "for children" the most important was the temperament of the dog (67%) and its size (50%). This probably attests to a well-considered decision, as these traits are associated with the safety of children in contact with the dog. A safe behaviour towards children was shown as an important or a very important behavioural element of an ideal dog (Dive-rio et al. 2016).

The results of the study of Wood et al. (2005) show that the company of a dog is conducive to social interactions, while children growing up in the company of

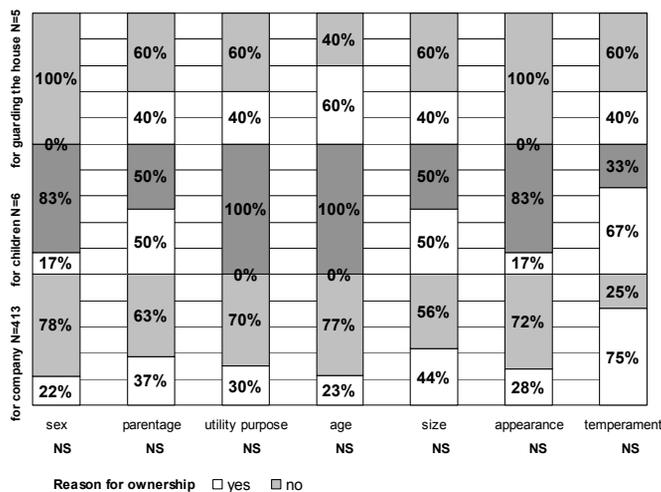


FIGURE 2. Criteria for dog selection depending on reason for ownership

a dog are more emphatic and popular among their peers. The owning of companion animals brings their owners emotional, psychological and physical benefits (Knight and Edwards 2008).

Number of owned dogs

Similarly to the reason for owning a dog, so the number of owned dogs did not have a statistically significant correlation with the criteria for selecting a dog (Fig. 3). Those that owned one dog, regarded utility purpose (31%), size and appearance (29%) to be of more importance during selection. With a larger number of owned dogs grew the significance of parentage (from 34 to 48%) and decreased the utility purpose (from 31 to 24%), size (from 47 to 27%) and appearance (from 15 to 29%). While conducting studies on the perception of an ideal dog Diverio et al. (2016) noticed that the majority of dog owners (60%) had 1–3 dogs.

Owning a dog previously

Respondents which had owned a dog previously differed statistically significantly ($P = 0.031$) from respondents that owned a dog for the first time by prevalence of selecting the appearance criterion (Fig. 4). In other criteria for selecting a dog no statistically significant differences between respondents were found. People owning their first dog were also more focused on its character (78%). Whereas to respondents that owned dogs previously much more important in choosing the next one was its size (44%), parentage (39%), age (24%) and sex (22%).

Breed of dog

The majority of respondents had mixed-breed dogs (Fig. 5). Among the respondents with pedigree dogs only 31% considered the appearance an important criterion of selection. This group

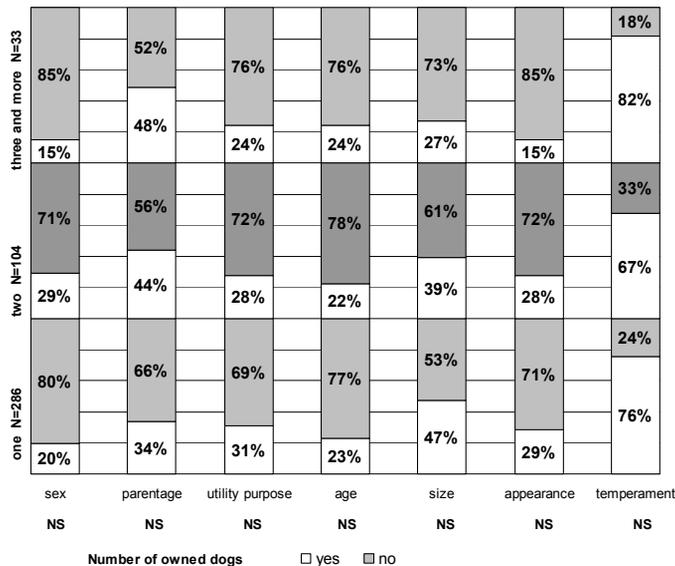


FIGURE 3. Criteria for dog selection depending on the number of owned dogs

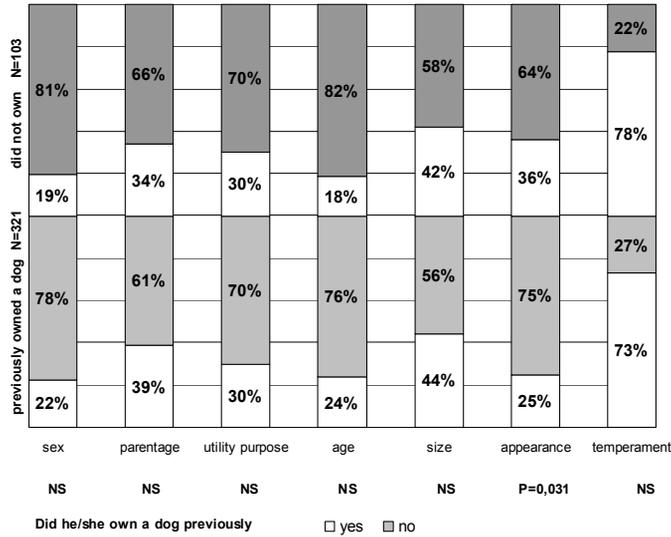


FIGURE 4. Criteria for dog selection depending on earlier dog ownership

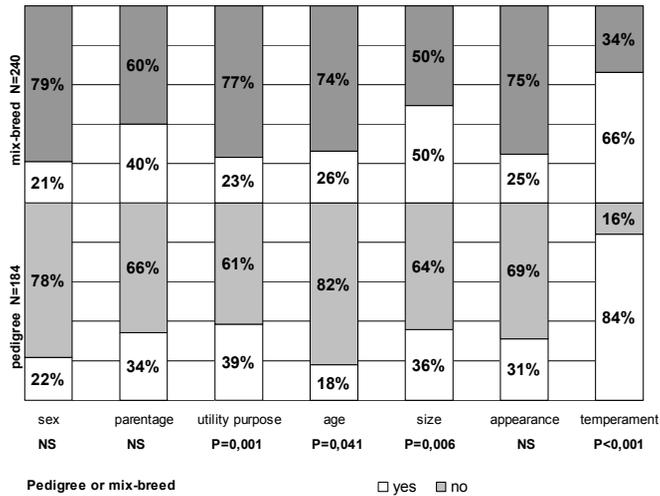


FIGURE 5. Criteria for dog selection depending on the parentage of the dog

did not differ statistically significantly from those owning mix-breeds, analyzing the importance of the parentage and sex criteria. People owning mix-breeds regarded more important the size (50%) and age (26%) of the dog, and those with pedigree dogs the temperament (84%)

and utility purpose (39%). These differences were statistically significant. Di-verio et al. (2016) showed that only in 19.2% of the studied cases of dog owners in Italy the physical attractiveness of the dog had an important or most important significance.

Temperament of the dog

Among people for whom the temperament of the dog is very significant, as many as 13% did not consider it a criterion when selecting a dog (Fig. 6). Whereas 24% of the respondents, for whom temperament is insignificant, pointed to it as an important criterion when selecting. These differences may rise from experiences gained by respondents during their dog ownership. These differences were statistically highly significant ($P < 0.001$). The most important during selection, for respondents not focused on character, was parentage ($P = 0.007$) and the size of the dog ($P = 0.032$). They differed significantly also in regard to the utility purpose of the dog ($P < 0.001$), which only 13% of them regarded as important when selecting a dog. In each group of respondents, on account of their attitude towards the temperament of the dog, a similar number of people regarded sex, age and appearance as an unimportant criterion for selection (from

72 to 79%). Also studies carried out by Diverio et al. (2016) showed that people prefer dogs with desirable temperament traits.

Information about the selected dog

The attitude towards information about the selected dog differentiated respondents in a statistically significant way in the utility purpose ($P < 0.001$) and temperament ($P < 0.001$) criteria. Among people for whom information about the owned dog is insignificant only 2% pointed to the utility purpose of the dog as the criterion for selection (Fig. 7). In the respondent group in which the temperament of the dog was an important trait, 80% regarded information about the dog to be very significant and 72% to be significant. In terms of other criteria of selection the respondents, with various attitude towards information about the dog, did not differ statistically significantly.

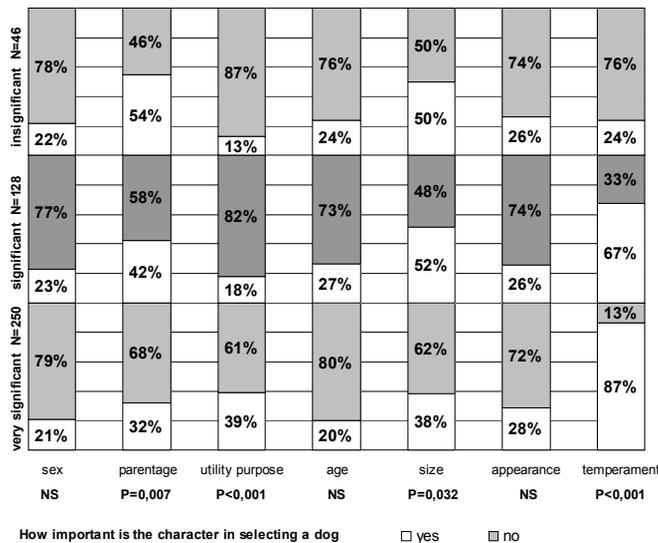


FIGURE 6. Criteria for dog selection depending on the attitude towards the character of the dog

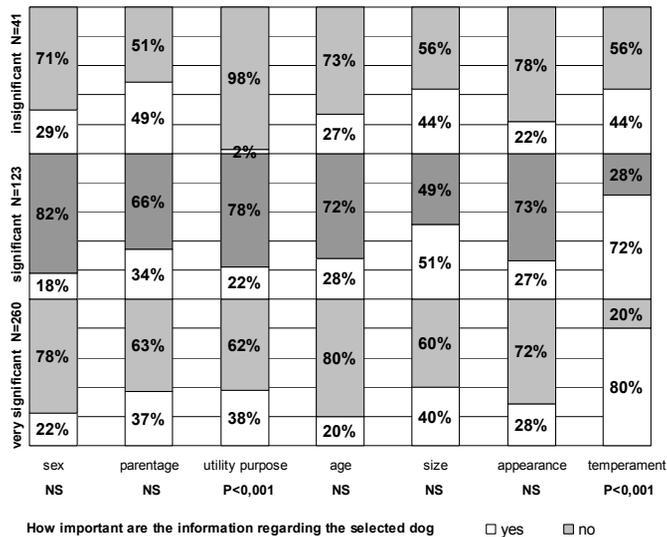


FIGURE 7. Criteria for dog selection depending on the attitude towards information about the dog

Age of the dog owner

Among the respondents the majority of the people were aged from 26 to 40 years old (Fig. 8). The youngest people focused more on the temperament of the dog than older people and this difference was statistically significant ($P < 0.001$). Only 26% respondents from this group regarded the parentage of the dog as a criterion of selection ($P < 0.001$). They regarded the age of the dog to be more important, which for as many as 30% of the respondents was an important criterion in selection ($P = 0.030$). The attitude towards other criteria of selection by people from various age groups was statistically insignificant. The studies of Howell et al. (2016) showed that people above 40 years of age are more conscious dog owners. They admit that despite a conscious decision to own a dog the care of it turned out more difficult than they expected. Together with the increase

of the respondents' age it was observed that they reported problems with destructive behaviour, urinating, defecating and barking as difficult.

Sex of the dog

The sex of the dog is not a significant criterion in selecting a dog, regardless of its utility purpose (from 78 to 100%) (Fig. 2) or the number of dogs already in the house of the person selecting another dog (from 71 to 85%) (Fig. 3). It also has no significance for novices or for experienced dog owners (from 78 to 81%) (Fig. 4). Similar results were obtained in the studies of Boruta et al. (2014). The studies of Žák et al. (2015) showed that though among rehabilitated dogs and those prepared for adoption in Czech shelters males dominate only slightly (56%), they constitute more than 67% of dogs selected by adopting people.

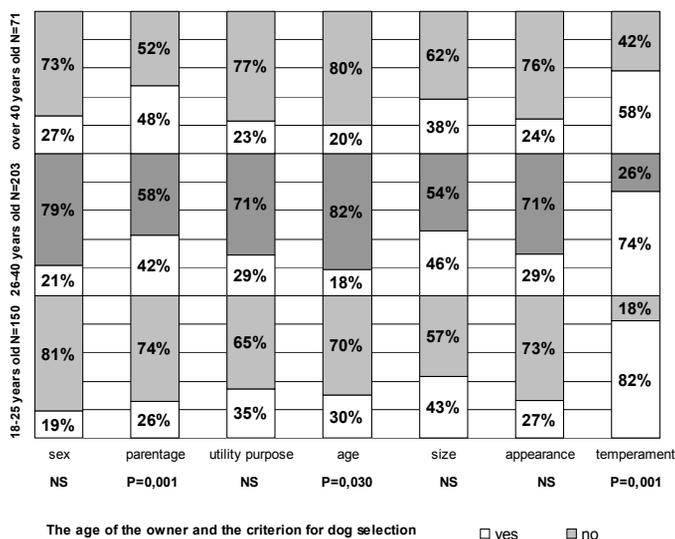


FIGURE 8. Criteria for dog selection depending on the age of the owner

CONCLUSIONS

A person deciding to take in/purchase a dog must be fully aware of the seriousness of his/her decision. A dog is usually a man’s companion for some dozen years, bringing joy and support, but also generating costs that are not so small.

The results of the carried out survey allow to formulate the following conclusions:

1. The most common criterion of dog selection was the animal’s temperament, and the least – its sex and age.
2. Basing on the analysis of the selection criteria, people deciding to own a dog can be qualified into one of five groups:
 - preferring pedigree dogs;
 - having a good contact with dogs and preferring a specific type of temperament;

- altruists – apart from character, none of the suggested criteria has greater significance;
- preferring work or physical activity with the dog;
- interested mainly in the dog’s superficiality.

REFERENCES

- BORUTA A., SIENKIEWICZ M., BRZOSZOWSKI M., 2014: Problemy behawioralne psów adoptowanych ze schroniska. *Przegl. Hod.* 6: 36–38.
- DIVERIO S., BOCCINI B., MENCHETTI L., BENNETT P.C., 2016: The Italian perception of the ideal companion dog. *J. Vet. Behav.* 12: 27–35.
- HOWELL T.J., MORNEMENT K., BENNETT P.C., 2016: Pet dog management practices among a representative sample of owners in Victoria, Australia. *J. Vet. Behav.* 12: 4–12.

- KING T., MARSTON L.C., BENNETT P.C., 2009: Describing the ideal Australian companion dog. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* 120 (1–2): 84–93.
- KNIGHT S., EDWARDS V., 2008: In the Company of Wolves The Physical, Social, and Psychological Benefits of Dog Ownership. *J. Aging Health.* 20 (4): 437–455.
- MARSTON L., BENNETT P., COLEMAN G., 2004: What happens to shelter dogs? An analysis of data for 1 year from three Australian shelters. *J. Appl. Anim. Welf. Sci.* 7: 27–47.
- SALMAN M.D., HUTCHISON J., RUCHGALLIE R., KOGAN L., NEW Jr. J.C., KASS P.H., SCARLETT J.M., 2000: Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters. *J. Appl. Anim. Welf. Sci.* 3: 93–106.
- SEGURSON S.A., SERPELL J.A., HART B.L., 2005: Evaluation of a behavioral assessment for use in the characterization of behavioral problems of dogs relinquished to animal shelters. *J. Am. Vet. Med. Assoc.* 227: 1755–1761.
- VILA C., SAVOLAINEN P., MALDONADA J.E., AMORIM I.R., RICE J.E., HONEYCUTT R.L., CRANDALL K.A., LUNDEBERG J., WAYNE R.K., 1997: Multiple and ancient origins of the domestic dog. *Sci.* 276 (5319), 1687–1689.
- WOOD L., GILES-CORTI B., BULSARA M., 2005: The pet connection: pets as a conduit for social capital? *Soc. Sci. Med.* 61 (6): 1159–1173.
- ŽÁK J., VOŠLÁŘOVA E., VECEREK V., BEDÁŇOWÁ I., 2015: Sex, age and size as factors affecting the length of stay of dogs in Czech shelters. *Acta Vet. Brno* 84: 407–413.
- Ankiętę wypełniły 424 osoby, posiadające psy, reprezentujące różny wiek i wykształcenie. Analiza wyników pozwoliła podzielić ankietowaną społeczność na pięć skupień. Respondenci ze skupuienia 1 preferowali psy rasowe. Uznali, że najważniejszym kryterium wyboru psa jest pochodzenie (0,809), wielkość (0,652) i temperament (0,478). W skupieniu 2 znalazły się osoby mające dobry kontakt z psami i preferujące określony typ temperamentu psów. Najwyżej ceniące temperament psa (1,000) oraz jego wygląd (0,693). W skupieniu 3 znaleźli się altruści, dla których żadne z analizowanych kryteriów wyboru nie było ważne. Dla nich najważniejszym kryterium wyboru był temperament (0,977), za mniej ważne uznali płęć (0,593), pochodzenie (0,558) i użytkowość psa (0,453), a za całkiem nieistotne wiek i wygląd zewnętrzny. Badani w skupieniu 4 (osoby preferujące pracę i aktywność fizyczną z psem) różnili się od pozostałych najwyższą oceną użytkowości psa (0,906). Ich użytkowe podejście do wyboru psa potwierdza wskazanie temperamentu jako drugiego w hierarchii kryterium (0,750) i wielkości jako trzeciego (0,547). Najmniej cech związanych ze stroną użytkowa psa wskazali badani ze skupuienia 5 (przeciętni właściciele psów). Za najważniejsze kryteria uznali: wielkość (0,688), wiek i wygląd (0,656) oraz płęć (0,563).

Słowa kluczowe: wybór psa, eksterier, temperament, przeznaczenie, płęć

MS received 23.08.2016

MS accepted 13.10.2016

Author's address:

Agnieszka Boruta
Katedra Szczegółowej Hodowli Zwierząt
Wydział Nauk o Zwierzętach SGGW
ul. Ciszewskiego 8, 02-786 Warszawa
Poland
e-mail: agnieszka_boruta@sggw.pl

Streszczenie: Kryteria wyboru psa towarzyszącego. Za pomocą sondażu diagnostycznego przeprowadzono badanie kryteriów wyboru psa towarzyszącego w grupie polskich posiadaczy psów.