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## THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN EMPATHY AND THE QUALITY OF MARITAL RELATIONS WITH DIFFERENT LENGTH OF MARRIAGE

The article explores the findings of a study on the connection between empathy and the quality of marital relations in couples married for less than two years and those with over five years of marital experience. The results indicate that both younger and more experienced couples demonstrate a high level of empathy components. Empathy plays an essential role in the quality of marital relationships, but its impact is ambiguous. In younger couples, a high level of empathy is connected with a desire for emotional intimacy and a fear of losing their partner. In contrast, in couples with longer marital experience, empathy contributes to stability and trust but reduces the pursuit of autonomy. Women in the initial stages of relationships tend to experience a stronger emotional bond, yet their satisfaction with the relationships decreases over time, whereas men's satisfaction increases in the later stages of relationships. In younger couples, empathy is associated with a desire for support and emotional engagement, while in more experienced couples, it is connected to the ability to consider the partner's viewpoint. The research also found that a high level of empathy can either enhance or reduce marital satisfaction, depending on the length of marriage and other factors.

**Keywords:** *empathy, emotional bond, quality of marital relations, marriage, relationship satisfaction, romantic attachment, motivational regulations in romantic relationships*

**Introduction and Current State of the Problem.** In today's world, the concept of the traditional family is experiencing a crisis, with the perception of the family as a functional unit of society undergoing significant changes. The divorce rate is rising, young people are increasingly reluctant to start families or have children due to instability in their personal lives and economic dissatisfaction. Many opt for alternative forms of marriage or relationships or decide not to create a family at all. This trend requires a more thorough investigation of family relationships across various scientific fields, including economics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

The notion of the family, both as a social unit and as a personal concept, holds immense significance and is regarded as one of the most critical elements in the system of values for both individuals and the state.

In modern society, a strong family, as a center of love, security, happiness, and comprehensive development, serves as a vital link that sustains the state and directly influences society norms, rules, and value ideals. To establish a family capable of passing on the right ideals to future generations, nurturing values, and enhancing the achievements of past generations, it is essential to have strong and harmonious marital relationships based on love, acceptance, mutual understanding, and support.

The relevance of this study lies in the necessity of continuing research on families in modern living conditions, where high expectations are placed on both individuals and families. People in the contemporary world face a choice between achieving self-realization as professionals and members of society or fulfilling themselves in family relationships. In today's society, where everyone strives to be successful, accomplished, and happy, it is crucial to determine the role of empathy and genuine human connections, which directly influence the quality of marital relationships and individual self-fulfillment.

Throughout the study of this topic, numerous scholars have attempted to classify and define strong family relationships, explore their components, and propose ways to improve the situation. Among them are Kliuchnikova S., Oshchepkova A., Semychenko V., Sheinova V., who focused on preserving marriages, and Sysenko V., Holod I., Yurkevych N., Shypovalov O., and Hryshyna N., who studied family conflicts and crises.

Modern research on marital relationships highlights several challenges, including the absence of a clear definition of marital quality, a lack of differentiation based on the quality of relationships, an absence of classification for marital relationships by quality levels, and a lack of a comprehensive

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list of factors affecting the quality of family relationships. Additionally, there is a need for more contextualized studies that consider crises, economic, or political changes (Proulx C.M., Helms H.M., Buehler C., 2007).

Empathy is a key factor in creating harmonious and strong marital bonds. It enables partners to understand each other better, effectively resolve conflicts, and foster trust, warmth, and mutual respect. (Reza, F. A., Sudirman, S. A., & Mubarak, M., 2021).

Scientific research highlights several types of empathy, including emotional, intuitive, cognitive, rational, and behavioral, each contributing differently to the development of relationships. A correlation has also been identified between the level of empathy of each partner and the degree of mutual understanding in the relationships, constructive conflict resolution, and emotional tension within a couple.

With a high level of empathy, some partners find it significantly easier to understand and support each other, enhance the overall emotional climate within the family, and establish close and profound relationships. These factors are essential for maintaining high-quality marital relationships (Ivanova-Korinevska Y.O., Khomych H.O., 2022).

**The aim** of the empirical study was to investigate the relationship between empathy and the quality of marital relationships in couples with different lengths of marriage.

It was hypothesized that there is a direct positive correlation between the level of empathy and the quality of marital relationships.

**Research Methods** To study empathy, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) by Mark Davis was used. This questionnaire describes a multi-component structure of empathy presented by the author. It proposes considering empathy as a multi-component construct which substructures are interdependent and reflect different aspects of an individual's emotional responsiveness. At the same time, these structural components significantly differ from each other.

Additionally, the Empathy Components Questionnaire by L. Batchelder et al. was employed. According to its author, this questionnaire reflects empathy both as a general ability and as a sum of interrelated individual components.

To assess the quality of marital relationships, the following questionnaires were applied:

- Motivational Regulation in Romantic Relationships Questionnaire by M. Blais et al., designed to study

motivational involvement in relationships among married couples. The author examines motivational regulation in terms of external and internal motivation.

- Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire by David Burns, a concise tool consisting of only seven questions. Despite its brevity, it reflects relationship satisfaction across various dimensions, including romantic relationships, family relationships, and friendship within couples.

- Romantic Attachment Questionnaire by K. Brennan and P. Shaver, which represents a multi-structural framework of attachment components that collectively form the phenomenon of romantic attachment.

For mathematical and statistical analysis, the Mann-Whitney U-test was used for comparative analysis, and Spearman's correlation coefficient was applied for correlation analysis.

**The study sample** consisted of 30 married couples, divided into two main groups based on the length of their marital relationships. The first group included 15 couples who had been married for up to 2 years, while the second group consisted of 15 couples who had been married for more than 5 years.

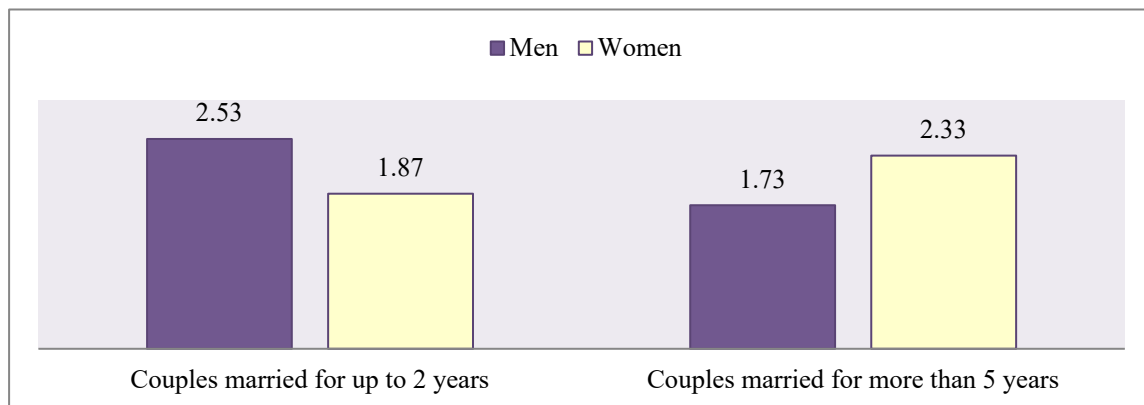
### Results of the Study

The findings based on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) revealed that both younger and more experienced couples exhibited a relatively high level of empathy components.

However, men and women in couples with shorter marital durations tended to idealize and romanticize their relationships, showing a strong desire to build lasting bonds founded on compromise and mutual understanding.

In contrast, in more experienced couples, the pronounced presence of empathy components reflected their accumulated experience and high adaptability to one another. In these relationships, excessive emotionality may often take a secondary role, suggesting a shift towards stability and deeper mutual respect.

According to the results of the empathy components assessment using L. Batchelder's questionnaire, it was determined that the overall level of empathy in men decreases with the duration of the relationships, whereas in women, it increases. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The overall empathy levels of couples with different lengths of marriage

This may reflect differing tendencies in how men and women approach relationships. Men tend to focus more on

their own emotionality and their partner's expression of emotions in the early stages of a relationship. In contrast,

women develop a deeper understanding and empathy for their partners as they gain experience.

In this study, the indicators of marital relationships quality included motivational regulation in romantic relationships, relationship satisfaction, and romantic attachment. The findings indicate that in the early stages of relationships (up to 2 years), women exhibit higher levels of intrinsic and identified motivation. This is associated with the novelty of the relationships and a stronger emotional bond.

However, with greater relationships, experience (over 5 years), these levels tend to decline as the relationship becomes more stable and routine.

For men in longer-term relationships, a higher level of integrated motivation was observed, reflecting a deeper understanding of the role that the relationship plays in their lives.

The results of relationship satisfaction levels among married couples are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Relationship satisfaction in couples with different lengths of marriage.

The study of romantic attachment revealed that women in the couples studied who had been married for less than two years exhibited a higher level of marital satisfaction. Conversely, in more experienced couples, men showed higher levels of satisfaction.

The data suggest a pattern in which men, upon reaching stability and predictability in their relationships, tend to experience increased satisfaction. However, women, losing the sense of romanticism and unpredictability, are prone to reduced satisfaction due to the relationships becoming more foreseeable.

In couples with shorter marital durations, romantic attachment is characterized by a strong desire for closeness yet accompanied by certain fears and contradictions linked to the initial stage of spousal adaptation. In longer-term relationships, trust increases, frustration and jealousy decrease, but the desire for closeness and autonomy also slightly diminishes.

The results of the analysis of the relationships between overall empathy levels and various structural components of marital relationship quality in the couples studied are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The relationship between empathy and components of marital quality in couples with different lengths of marriage

Indicators	Overall empathy score			
	Couples married for up to 2 years		Couples married for more than 5 years	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Amotivation	0.27	-0.24	-0.14	0.38*
External	-0.05	-0.09	0.26	0.33*
Identified	0.31*	-0.04	-0.29	-0.29
Integrated	0.22	0.33*	-0.50*	0.63*
Internal	0.25	0.04	-0.55*	-0.29
Satisfaction with the relationship	0.01	-0.49*	0.11	0.01
Frustration	0.24	0.19	-0.33*	-0.44*
Desire for closeness	0.33*	-0.45*	-0.36*	-0.20
Self-support	0.3*	-0.07	0.65*	0.53*
Ambivalence	-0.4*	0.25	-0.04	-0.07
Jealousy	-0.34*	0.37*	-0.02	-0.44*
Clinging to a partner	0.32*	-0.20	-0.16	0.24

**Note:** \*-significance of correlations at  $p \leq 0.05$

The results of the correlation analysis between the overall empathy score and the factors of marital relationship quality in the studied couples indicate the existence of certain interrelationships.

In particular, there is a positive correlation between amotivation and the general level of empathy in men who

have been married for more than 5 years ( $p = 0.38$ ). High emotional involvement with their partners and greater compassion is linked to a lack of desire for men to engage in marital activities or resolve joint problems. These results may indicate emotional exhaustion due to constant emotional involvement in the relationship.

External motivation also correlates with empathy ( $p = 0.33$ ), reflecting the dependence of emotional connection on external stimuli, such as the partner's approval.

In women married for less than 2 years, identified motivation correlates with empathy ( $p = 0.31$ ), emphasizing the importance of supporting a partner in their achievements.

For men married for less than 2 years ( $p = 0.33$ ) and for men married for more than 5 years ( $p = 0.63$ ), a positive correlation indicates that higher empathy is related to the desire to accept the partner's feelings and problems as own, and, accordingly, to arrive at a mutual solution to these problems.

For women married for more than 5 years, there is a negative correlation between empathy and internal motivation ( $p = -0.55$ ). This suggests that women with high empathy may begin to experience burnout over time due to excessive emotional involvement in the relationship.

In men married for less than 2 years, there is a negative correlation between empathy and relationship satisfaction ( $p = -0.49$ ). This may result from a mismatch between high expectations of emotional support.

For both women and men married for more than 5 years, the negative correlation with frustration ( $p = -0.33$  and  $p = -0.44$ ) may indicate comfort and openness facilitated by empathy.

There is also a connection between empathy and the desire for closeness. The positive correlation in women married for less than 2 years ( $p = 0.33$ ) suggests that a high level of empathy gives these women a sense of attachment to their partner, thereby triggering a desire to become emotionally closer. In contrast, the negative correlation in women married for more than 5 years ( $p = -0.36$ ) indicates that excessive emotional involvement in the partner's feelings leads to a desire for autonomy and a reduction in emotional contact.

Positive correlations were found between empathy and self-support in women married for less than 2 years

( $p = 0.30$ ), as well as in women and men married for more than 5 years ( $p = 0.65$  and  $p = 0.53$ , respectively). In this case, the correlations suggest that higher empathy levels are associated with stronger internal emotional resilience.

A connection between ambivalence and empathy was found in women married for less than 2 years ( $p = -0.40$ ). This indicates that higher empathy in women is linked to a desire to be included in the relationship and have confidence in the relationship.

There are correlations between empathy and jealousy in the subjects studied. The inverse correlations in women married for less than 2 years ( $p = -0.34$ ) and men married for more than 5 years ( $p = -0.44$ ) indicate that higher empathy allows both men and women to have greater confidence, reducing the fear of being betrayed or abandoned. Conversely, the positive correlation in men married for less than 2 years ( $p = 0.37$ ) suggests that empathy may manifest in their sensitivity and suspicion, which in turn is linked to heightened feelings of fear and jealousy.

It was also found that for women with shorter marital durations, there is a connection between empathy and clinginess ( $p = 0.32$ ). This means that high empathy and compassion tie women to their partners, reflecting not only high emotional involvement but also some degree of dependence.

Thus, the results of the analysis indicate that empathic characteristics play an important role in the quality of marital relationships, regardless of the duration of the marriage. Empathy acts as a factor of mutual understanding and emotional closeness, as well as mediates the desire of both men and women to maintain a balance between emotional sensitivity and self-support.

The results of the correlation analysis of the relationships between the overall level of satisfaction with relationships, which forms the foundation of quality marital relations, and the structural components of empathy in couples with different lengths of marriage are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The relationship between relationship satisfaction and empathy components in couples with different lengths of marriage

Indicators	Relationship satisfaction			
	Couples married for up to 2 years		Couples married for more than 5 years	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Fantasy	-0.33*	-0.27	0.01	-0.41*
Emotional disturbance	0.31*	-0.4*	-0.12	-0.16
Emotional distress	0.1	0	-0.33*	0.04
Cognitive empathy	0	0.19	-0.17	0.53*
Affective empathy	0.77*	0.34*	-0.02	-0.49*

**Note:** \*-significance of correlations at  $p \leq 0.05$

It has been established that there is an inverse relationship between relationship satisfaction and fantasy in women with more than 2 years of marriage ( $p = -0.33$ ) and in men with more than 5 years of marriage ( $p = -0.41$ ). These relationships can be explained by the fact that excessive fantasizing, idealization, and romanticization can decrease relationship satisfaction if the reality of the relationship no longer matches idealized expectations.

There is a connection between relationship satisfaction and emotional distress. For women with less than 2 years of marriage, a positive correlation ( $p = 0.31$ ) indicates that higher emotional sensitivity, care for the partner, and

attention to their emotional state are markers of harmonious relationships. On the other hand, for men with less than 2 years of marriage, a negative correlation ( $p = -0.4$ ) suggests that excessive caring may be perceived as an intrusion into personal boundaries, leading to decreased satisfaction in relationships, as harmony is replaced by emotional tension due to a lack of privacy for personal emotional experiences.

Emotional sensitivity (affective empathy) positively affects relationship satisfaction in men ( $p = 0.34$ ) and women ( $p = 0.77$ ) with shorter marriage durations. In contrast, the negative correlation in the group of men with longer marriages ( $p = -0.49$ ) indicates that excessive

sympathy and emotional involvement can become exhausting, intrusive, provoke negative emotions, and thereby reduce satisfaction with marital relationships.

A negative correlation between relationship satisfaction and emotional distress in women with longer marriages ( $p = -0.33$ ) suggests emotional exhaustion from over-concern with the partner's state, which can lead to decreased satisfaction and harmony in relationships.

For men with more than 5 years of marriage, cognitive empathy correlates with relationship satisfaction ( $p = 0.53$ ), indicating the positive impact of an analytical approach to understanding the partner's feelings.

Thus, in couples with shorter marriages, relationship satisfaction is related to the desire for emotional support and mutual understanding. However, excessive involvement in the partner's emotional state may be perceived as an infringement on personal boundaries, leading to decreased relationship satisfaction. In couples with longer marriages, relationship satisfaction may be associated with feelings of emotional exhaustion, which the participants experience due to the duration of the relationships and constant involvement in the partner's emotions.

### Conclusions

1. Empathy involves the ability to place oneself in another person's position, imagine what they are experiencing, their emotions, and feelings, and accordingly take these into account in one's reaction. Marital relationship quality is a combination of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive characteristics of the relationship between partners, reflecting the level of satisfaction, support, trust, mutual understanding, and respect within the marriage. High-quality marital relationships imply harmonious connections where partners feel satisfaction from shared life, maintain emotional closeness, and demonstrate mutual empathy and care. The quality, strength, and harmony of family relationships depend primarily on a range of external and internal factors.

2. The study found that both young and more experienced couples exhibit a high level of empathy component formation. Additionally, it was found that in men, empathy decreases with the duration of the relationship, whereas in women, it increases. This means that men are more oriented toward empathy and understanding the partner's emotions in the early stages of the relationships, while women come to a deeper understanding and empathy for their partner with experience.

3. It was determined that at the early stages of relationships, women have a higher level of satisfaction, which is linked to the novelty of the relationships and a stronger emotional bond. However, with more experience, satisfaction tends to decrease as relationships become more stable and routine. For men, on the contrary, the dynamics are opposite, as at the early stages, they are less satisfied with the relationships due to the loss of autonomy and changes in life structure, but as the relationship progresses, their satisfaction tends to increase. It is shown that romantic attachment in couples with less marriage experience is based on the desire for closeness, but at this stage, there are also certain fears and contradictions. In contrast, in long-term relationships, trust increases, frustration and jealousy decrease, but the desire for closeness and autonomy slightly decreases.

4. It was found that in young couples, there is a direct connection between the components of empathy and

relationship quality indicators such as internal motivation and the desire for closeness. That is, a high display of empathy in young couples indicates a desire to establish stronger emotional bonds, understand the partner's state, and also a fear of losing the partner. In couples that had been married for more than five years, empathy is directly related to a reluctance to engage in relationship processes due to the influence of external factors on the relationships, as well as a desire for autonomy and the establishment of personal boundaries. Direct connections were found between marital satisfaction and the display of compassion, involvement in the partner's emotional experiences, and understanding their emotional state in young couples, as well as with the acquired ability to consider their partner's perspective in couples with more marriage experience.

5. On the other hand, it was proven that there are also reverse connections between empathy and the quality of marital relationships in couples with different marriage durations. It was found that a high display of empathy in young couples is linked to lower satisfaction with the relationship and a desire for closeness in men, as well as a decrease in the fear of losing the partner and the desire to engage in relationship processes in women. Conversely, high empathy in long-term marriages is associated with a decrease in the desire to grow closer to the partner, a reduction in the fear of losing the partner, but at the same time a higher level of inner comfort and stability. Meanwhile, marital satisfaction has a reverse connection with the reduction of relationship romanticization in young women and a decrease in the desire for emotional disturbance in young men. In women with long-term marriages, high empathy is associated with emotional balance, while in men, high empathy is linked to a decrease in the desire to romanticize the relationships and to understand and support the partner.

Therefore, the research hypothesis about the existence of a direct connection between empathy and marital relationship quality was partially confirmed, as in addition to direct connections between empathy and components of marital relationship quality, certain reverse connections were also discovered.

We believe that under modern conditions, it is necessary to continue research with a broader sample of respondents, considering the challenges faced by contemporary families. This will allow for the development of new approaches to strengthening marriages and forming values in future generations.

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### ВЗАЄМОЗВ'ЯЗОК ЕМПАТІЇ ТА ЯКОСТІ ШЛЮБНИХ СТОСУНКІВ В ПАРАХ ІЗ РІЗНИМ СТАЖЕМ ШЛЮБУ

У статті розглянуто результати дослідження зв'язку між емпатією та якістю шлюбних стосунків у парах, котрі мають стаж шлюбу менше двох років та більше п'яти років. За результатами встановлено, що як для членів молодих пар, так і більш досвідчених пар, характерний високий рівень сформованості компонентів емпатії. Вона відіграє важливу роль у якості шлюбних стосунків, але її вплив є неоднозначним. У молодих парах високий рівень емпатійності пов'язаний із прагненням до емоційного зближення та страхом втратити партнера, тоді як у парах із більшим стажем шлюбів емпатія сприяє стабільності та довірі, але знижує прагнення до автономії. Жінки на початкових етапах стосунків частіше відчують сильніший емоційний зв'язок, проте з часом задоволеність стосунками зменшується, тоді як у чоловіків задоволеність зростає на більш пізніх етапах стосунків. Емпатія у молодих парах пов'язана з прагненням до підтримки та емоційної включеності, тоді як у досвідчених парах – із здатністю враховувати точку зору партнера. Виявлено також, що високий рівень емпатійності може супроводжуватися як зростанням, так і зниженням задоволеності шлюбом залежно від стажу та інших чинників.

**Ключові слова:** емпатія, емоційний зв'язок, якість шлюбних стосунків, шлюб, задоволеність стосунками, романтична прихильність, мотиваційні регуляції в романтичних стосунках

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