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Original Article

The Role of Empathy and Marital Satisfaction in Shaping Marital Success

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A = Study design; B = Data collection; C = Statistical analysis; D = Data interpretation; E = Manuscript preparation; F = Literature search.

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Abstract

Objective of the study: At each stage of development, professionally, each spouse takes on new social roles and meets new challenges. The work aimed to examine the roles of empathy and marital satisfaction in shaping marital success among Polish people. Method: The study involved 40 women and 40 men who had been married for approximately 5 and 15 years, respectively. All respondents were born and raised in Poland. The following research tools were used: the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), the Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM), and the Successful Marriage Scale (SPM). Results: People with long marital experience scored higher on marital satisfaction factors than those with short marital experience. Conversely, individuals with short marital experience scored higher on the marital success factor than those with long marital experience. In couples with short marital experience, marital experience factors were found to be more strongly associated with marital success than in couples with long marital experience. In both marriage groups, empathetic concern had a direct negative impact on various aspects of marital satisfaction. Similarly, disappointment, which played a mediating role, had a significant negative impact on marital success in both groups. Furthermore, in both groups, perspective-taking had a direct impact on intimacy and disappointment, with both variables having a direct impact on marital success. Conclusions: The analysis of this research may have practical value for married couples, psychologists, couple psychotherapists, and researchers. It may encourage researchers to conduct further research in the field of empathy, marital satisfaction, and marital success. Unconfirmed hypotheses allow for a critical look at selected research groups and the formulation of new research hypotheses.

Keywords: empathy, marital satisfaction, marital success, Polish people

In social psychology, the issue of prosocial behavior and relationships with other people is important. Prosocial behaviors, characteristic of empathetic people, play a significant role in establishing friendships, teamwork, and creating relationships between people. Empathy and satisfaction with marriage are important for the success of marriage. Many studies indicate that empathy and satisfaction with marriage shape the success of marriage. People in a marriage in which behaviors filled with empathy take place feel safer, and there is trust and care for the other person between spouses (Groot & van Den Brink, 2002). The ability to freely share emotions with a partner, as well as receiving emotional support from him, causes the level of intimacy and kindness in marriage to increase (Bondarevs'ka & Mons'ka, 2014; Voydanoff, 2005). Concern for empathetic communication makes partners feel happier and satisfied with their marriage (Davis, 2001; Lysenko, 2018), and at the same time, their marriage is more successful (Furstenberg, 2019).

Researchers have conducted many studies showing the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction among women and men of various marital lengths (Majchrzak & Skupińska-Majchrzak, 2011; Wang-Sheng & McKinnish, 2017). However, there is a visible lack of current, in-depth studies examining the role of empathy and marital satisfaction in shaping the success of marriage, taking into account the length of marriage. Hence, the topic and purpose of this work will be to show the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction, and the success of marriage, in people in marriages of short and long duration. And also to show the role of empathy and marital satisfaction in shaping marital success

Empathy

The concept of empathy refers to many spheres (Depow et al., 2021). It includes the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral spheres of a person. Scientists Lipps (1979) and Titchener (2009) connected the phenomenon of empathy with a mechanism that meant internal imitation of the observed person or object. According to Lipps, an observer noticing the emotional state of another person receives information that causes him to internally imitate the signs of the observed state of the person. Piaget's (1972) research, conducted among children, led to the indication that empathy has a cognitive-emotional structure. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to recognize the emotions of others, while affective empathy refers to the ability to empathize with and experience the emotions of others. In other words, people with high levels of empathy can easily recognize and experience the emotions of others (Brett et al., 2022). Stotland (1969) defined empathy as the emotional reaction of the observer caused by the feeling that someone else

is experiencing or is on the way to experiencing some kind of emotion. In his definition, he included the element of accuracy of perception.

Wispé (1986) defined empathy as an attempt made by self-awareness to non-judgmentally understand the positive and negative experiences of another self. He therefore presented empathy as a more active process, which involves making a certain effort to make the observer understand the observed object by deliberately establishing contact with it. Hoffman (2000) defined empathy in a way that is consistent with the views of contemporary researchers, i.e., as an affective reaction more appropriate to the situation of another than one's own. In his theoretical model of empathy, Hoffman (2000) included role-taking, personal feeling of distress created by the suffering of others, and experiencing sympathy/care for others, and Wakabayashi (2006) and his colleagues took into account recognizing another person's thoughts or feelings and responding to those thoughts or feelings with appropriate behavior.

The research framework for empathy was created by Davis (2001). It aimed to draw attention to the common points of different concepts of empathy. The research framework for empathy was based on an inclusive definition, in which empathy is described as a set of theoretical constructs concerning the reactions of an individual to the experiences of others. The constructs that were highlighted are the processes occurring in the observer and the affective and non-affective effects that appear during such processes. The research framework assumes the course of a typical empathic episode (Davis, 1980). It is described as the encounter of the observer with the observed in some way, which results in a certain type of reaction on the part of the observer, which can be cognitive, affective, and behavioral in nature.

The cognitive aspects are perspective-taking, i.e., the tendency to adopt the psychological point of view of others, and fantasy. Affective aspects are presented in it through empathic concern, i.e., the tendency to feel sympathy and compassion for people affected by failure, and through personal distress, i.e., feeling distress and discomfort in response to the suffering of others. Behavioral aspects, in turn, are the type of reaction to a given event (Davis, 2001).

The research design contains the elements of a prototypical episode: antecedent conditions, process, and intrapersonal and interpersonal effects. The antecedent conditions are the properties of the observer, the observed, and the situation. The process is understood as the individual mechanisms that lead to the appropriate intrapersonal effects (having the nature of cognitive or affective reactions of the observer) or to interpersonal effects (related to behavioral reactions focused on the observed). Davis (2001), in his understanding of the research scheme, includes the interdependence that occurs between any construct, i.e., an element of an empathic episode, and all the other dimensions present within the scheme.

Marital Satisfaction and Marital Success

In the literature on the subject, many terms are synonymous with the concept of marital happiness, such as marital satisfaction, marital contentment, marital adjustment, or marital success (Czechowska-Bieluga & Lewicka-Zelent, 2021).

Researchers have indicated many factors that determine satisfaction with marriage and the way of functioning in it (Lysenko, 2018). Satisfaction with marriage is influenced by the social environment, i.e., friends, life successes, and social status (Hatami et al., 2016). The importance of similarity is also emphasized, which, in terms of education level, allows the couple to achieve a certain socio-economic status, but similarity in the context of race or nationality is equally important, because it means similar traditions, values, or views (Jackson, 2012). Belonging to the same social class makes it easier to maintain or achieve family status because it is associated with a certain economic and intellectual level of the spouses' families of origin, and this shapes their life goals, ambitions, and behaviors (Karimi et al., 2019; Rostowska, 2003).

Personality factors play a very important role in creating satisfaction with marriage (Braun-Gałkowska, 1992), such as intimacy, which is characterized by the desire for closeness with the partner, giving and receiving emotional support, trust, and understanding each other. In understanding intimacy, its interactive nature is important, i.e., revealing one's emotions to the partner, empathizing with them, and noticing the emotions of the other person (Plopa, 2003; Steil, 1997).

Passion is associated with the sexuality of partners, their physical attractiveness, and psychological and physiological arousal. Commitment concerns taking care of maintaining a good relationship, which makes the relationship durable and stable (Rostowski, 1987). Communication has an indisputable influence on the quality of the marital relationship. Proper communication is characterized by the openness of partners, empathetic understanding, and simplicity of the message (Rostowska, 2001; Trawińska, 1977). The partner communication style respects the views and expectations of the other person, and is characterized by tolerance and a lack of critical judgment. The non-partner style is one in which the person is focused solely on themselves, and the partner subordinates themselves to the other person, which results in abandoning their own needs (Płaszczynski, 1993).

According to Rostowska (2001, 2003), one of the key aspects influencing satisfaction with marriage is maturity. The social context is associated with such features as independence, responsibility, and autonomy, which make a person capable of making a conscious decision to take on new roles: spouse and parent. This is associated with becoming independent and feeling responsible for fulfilling this social role. Intellectual and emotional maturity play an important role in it. An intellectually mature person can rationally perceive reality, engage in logical

reasoning, and use verbal cause-and-effect thinking, and can also use imagination, which is also characteristic of empathy (Każmierczak, 2008). Realistic thinking, which helps partners maintain emotional stability and thus make decisions appropriate to the situation, has a positive impact on communication between partners (Rostowska, 2003) and parent-child relationships (Halian, 2024).

Another important element of maturity is the ability to compromise, which has a significant impact on overcoming conflicts (Li et al., 2024). A socially mature person can also share with others, which gives them satisfaction (Walęcka-Matyja & Szkudlarek, 2019). The highest level of maturity is the ability to cooperate in a relationship, which leads to satisfaction in both partners. Such a relationship between two people focuses on achieving a higher goal and taking care of the common good. The relationship moves to a deeper level, which positively affects the sense of satisfaction with it. According to Braun-Galkowska (1985), two partners before entering into marriage should have at least “initial maturity” and be characterized by the desire to further develop it, i.e., adopt an active attitude.

In the literature, one can also find a view that indicates that satisfaction with marriage is the effect of similarity of partners’ personality traits (Rostowski, 1987), attitudes, values (Kotlova & Saukh, 2019), level of intelligence, and being in agreement regarding the social roles performed. Researchers indicate that similarity in terms of values is a very important issue in the initial phase of acquaintance or marriage, when two people build trust and enjoy spending time together.

The concept of marital success has emerged as a multidimensional construct encompassing relationship satisfaction, intimacy, mutual respect, and adaptability to stressors over time (Glenn et al., 2010; Salehi et al., 2022). Marital success is a dynamic and multidimensional process rooted in transparency, mutual respect, and the simultaneous development of both partners (Molaei et al., 2025). According to Iranian researchers, marital success depends on emotional security, respect, and value congruence as integral elements (Nikooy et al., 2024). Attempts to define marital success encompass a wide range of approaches, from psychological and behavioral models to sociocultural and religious frameworks.

Contextual researchers often emphasize marital satisfaction and stability as key indicators. However, marital success goes beyond subjective satisfaction; It also encompasses long-term commitment, adaptive coping strategies, and emotional regulation between partners (Butzer & Campbell, 2008). Dynamic processes underlying successful marital adaptation include emotion regulation, conflict management, and intimacy (Zaheri et al., 2016). Empirical research confirms that these processes vary across cultural and religious contexts. Beyond communication, emotional rights, and mutual respect constitute the psychological foundations of marital success. The absence of such foundations often predicts marital dissolution and separation or divorce (Yoo et al., 2023). Marital success stems from a specific

form of transgressive behavior within marriage, demonstrated by both spouses. This involves recognizing difficulties as they arise, identifying their sources, and jointly taking steps to overcome them (Dakowicz, 2021). Many unhappy marriages (from the spouses' perspective) persist for a variety of reasons, including the lack of a perceived good alternative to the current marriage, moral and religious objections to divorce, concerns about the impact of divorce on children, economic dependence, and the economic costs of divorce (Glenn et al., 2010).

The success of marriage also may depend on the consistent expectations of both partners regarding the type of marriage and the roles that should be performed by them in the relationship. In some aspects, similarity of personality traits is not advisable, e.g., a high level of neuroticism (Gonzaga et al., 2007). It is important to remember that personality traits have different impacts at different stages of a relationship's existence and development, and as the relationship progresses, spouses' traits often have an increasing impact on marital satisfaction (Rostowski, 1987).

Problem and Purpose of the Research

Marriage is described as a social institution. It is inscribed in the social context, has its own specific structure, and performs a specific function (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2023). According to Rostowska (2003), marriage is an interpersonal system, defined as a small social group. Spouses, wishing to create the best and most lasting relationship, use their individual, psychological, and physical characteristics. Marriage, just like spouses themselves, is subject to certain dynamics, i.e., it is subject to change due to the passage of time and changing contexts (Groot & van Den Brink, 2002).

According to researchers (Davis, 2001; Kaźmierczak, 2008), empathy factors, such as perspective-taking or empathetic care, influence specific behaviors of spouses that are useful in marriage. They decide whether the satisfaction with the relationship is satisfactory. Researchers (Rembowski, 1989; Trzebińska, 1985) believe that empathy should include not only the emotional and cognitive components of interpersonal empathy, but also the executive element, which concerns specific behaviors resulting from affective-cognitive empathizing.

Many researchers have conducted studies that focused on the subject of the influence of empathy on behaviors that have a positive effect on the quality of marriage and its need. Sitarczyk and Waniewski's (2002) studies confirmed the thesis that with increasing empathy, the level of satisfaction with the relationship increases. Boetther (1977) demonstrated that with the growth of husbands' empathy, wives' marital satisfaction increased, and similarly, higher wives' empathy led to an increase in husbands' relationship satisfaction. Davis and Oathout's (1992)

studies showed that empathic care is related to the spouses' kindness, optimism, and openness in communication. Braun-Galkowska's (1985) studies showed that spouses who do not feel satisfied with their relationship show a deficit in empathy.

In contrast, perspective-taking among spouses was associated with emotional stability and negatively with indifference or hostility towards their partner. Personal distress influenced destructive behaviors – possessiveness or suspiciousness (Davis & Oathout, 1992). Long and Andrews (1990) showed that couples whose marriage lasts longer are characterized by a decrease in the willingness to initiate attempts to understand the partner's point of view, while there is a noticeable increase in awareness of the other person's feelings, needs, and attitudes. People with an increased willingness to understand the other person's point of view feel more satisfied with their married life. This feature increased the probability that the partner of a person with a high level of empathy will feel satisfaction with the relationship.

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) proved that the lack of appropriate communication skills of the husband, which causes withdrawal from conflict situations, stubbornness, and self-pity, is the most destructive to mutual marital interactions in the long term. Schweinle, Ickes and Bernstein (2002) in their research showed that partners who are unable to correctly recognize and interpret the thoughts and feelings of their partners, to a large extent, attribute a critical attitude to women. This pattern of thinking causes aggression in men. Correctly reading thoughts and feelings correlates positively with marital satisfaction.

Middle-aged marriages experienced greater intensity of negative emotions, such as contempt, anger, or self-pity. On the other hand, elderly respondents showed feelings more often and experienced less intense negative emotions. Older people who are married use strategies that reduce the impact of negative emotions more often than young people (Cartensen et al., 1995). Couples with the highest similar level of empathetic care and perspective-taking and couples with the lowest similar level of personal distress are more satisfied with their relationship than the others (Każmierczak, 2008).

Majchrzak and Skupińska-Majchrzak (2011) showed that women with short and long marriages scored higher in terms of empathy than men. The lowest level of empathy was observed among men in short-term relationships, while the highest was observed among women in short-term couples. Spouses from the group of short-term couples scored higher in terms of marital satisfaction compared to long-term couples. People with a higher level of empathy showed a higher level of marital satisfaction.

Braun-Galkowska's (1985) research showed that a few years after the wedding, in the period of 5–9 years, marital satisfaction decreases, but after a few years, marital satisfaction increases. The analysis of the research shows that many factors determine the success of a marriage and that the convergence of many components

is important (Każmierczak, 2008). They determine whether a given marriage is more successful and another less exemplary (Birditt et al., 2010; Wang-Sheng & McKinnish, 2017).

Since there is a visible lack of current research in this area, and the obtained results are not uniform, it was decided to show the role of such components of empathy as empathetic concern, personal distress, and perspective taking, and satisfaction with marriage, which includes intimacy, disappointment, self-fulfilment, and similarity in the process of shaping the success of marriage. At individual developmental, social, and professional stages, each spouse takes on new social roles and encounters new challenges. Hence, the research included people with short and long marital experiences. In recent years, many factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of war in Ukraine, or economic changes, could have influenced the development of the aforementioned aspects and shaped the success of marriage.

Taking into account the occurrence of external and developmental factors, it is suggested that there are differences in the perception of marital success by spouses depending on their marital experience. Referring to the literature and previous studies, it is assumed that people with a short marital experience will demonstrate greater satisfaction with marriage in terms of fulfilling their own needs and agreement regarding the fulfillment of important marital goals, such as free time, family traditions, and relationship development. People with a long marital experience will, on the other hand, demonstrate greater satisfaction with marriage in terms of being in a close relationship with their partner, commitment to working on the relationship, and a sense of knowing their personality traits. We expect that the length of marital experience will influence the strength of the relationship between empathy, marital satisfaction, and marital success. Furthermore, factors shaping marital satisfaction are expected to play an intermediate role between empathy and marital success, simultaneously enhancing marital success.

The literature suggests multiple understandings of empathy, marital satisfaction, and marital success. This article adopts the following understandings of empathy, marital satisfaction, and marital success. Furthermore, based on these dimensions, the researchers developed appropriate research instruments that will be used in this study.

The understanding of empathy is adopted from Davis (2001). He defines the phenomenon of empathy broadly and holistically as a set of theoretical constructs that concern an individual's response to the experiences of others. He defines these constructs as processes occurring in the observer and the affective and non-affective outcomes that emerge as a result of these processes. Davis developed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index – a multidimensional measure of empathic skills – based on the assumption that empathy comprises several distinct yet inter-related emotional and cognitive constructs.

The study adopted the understanding of marital satisfaction according to Plopa and Rostowski (2008). According to these researchers, marital satisfaction is the subjective belief in a successful relationship between spouses. According to these researchers, marital satisfaction is determined by several factors: a sense of closeness between the partners in a relationship based on true love. Another factor is openness. This dimension allows the couple to realize themselves and be who they want to be in the relationship. The similarity factor indicates a high degree of compatibility between partners, which relates to the achievement of important marital and family goals. Finally, the fourth factor – disappointment. This dimension is related to the sense of failure in life resulting from entering into marriage. Spouses experience no pleasure in being together, do not want to become closer, and avoid each other. Avoidance tendencies also dominate in problematic situations. The researchers constructed a tool to examine the dimensions of a successful marriage, which can be defined using four factors. The questionnaire is designed to examine the strengths and weaknesses of a good marriage.

The understanding of marital success was adopted according to Braun-Galkowska (1980). According to this assumption, the ultimate criterion for marital success is the subjective belief of the parties involved. Although the ultimate measure of marital success is the subjective feeling of the spouses, it is suggested that this feeling is conditioned by various external or internal factors that can promote or hinder success. Spouses may be aware of these factors, may fail to notice them, or may misjudge them. Internal determinants are those that reside within the individual and are the result of their development, experiences, and temperament, while external determinants refer to factors beyond the spouses' direct control but that significantly influence marital life. Based on this theory, she created a tool for measuring marital success (1985). It consists of a series of statements (e.g., mutual love, similar interests, mutual fidelity, etc.).

Taking into account previous studies and considering the research problem, the following research hypotheses were formulated.

H_1 . In people with long marital experience, there is a higher level of perspective-taking and empathic concern than in people with short marital experience.

H_2 . In people with long marital experience, there is a higher level of intimacy and disappointment than in people with short marital experience.

H_3 . In people with short marital experience, there is a significantly stronger relationship between empathic concern and self-fulfillment than in people with long marital experience.

H_4 . In people with long marital experience, there is a significantly stronger relationship between empathic concern and perspective taking, and intimacy than in people with short marital experience.

H₅. In people with short marital experience, there is a significantly stronger relationship between personal distress, similarity, and intimacy than in people with long marital experience.

H₆. People with long marital experience rate their marriage as more successful than people with short marital experience.

H₇. Length of marriage has a significant impact on empathy, marital satisfaction, and the success of a marriage.

Method

Characteristics of the Group

The study was conducted online. Participants were informed of their anonymity. Random sampling was used in the study. Due to the nature of the study, the condition for participation was to be married for about 5 years (short marital experience) and 15 years (long marital experience). The study involved 80 people, 40 women and 40 men, who had been married for about 5 years (40 people) and 15 years (40 people), living in the southern region of Poland. The largest percentage of respondents was in the age group of 35–60, 48.7%, i.e., in the period corresponding to middle adulthood. 43.75% of respondents were in the age group of 20–35, i.e., early adulthood, 7.5% of people declared their age as over 60, i.e., late adulthood.

The current place of residence in the countryside was declared by 36.2% of respondents, in the cities of up to 100 thousand residents – 35%, in a city with 100,000 to 500,000 residents – 15%, and in a city with more than 500,000 residents – 13.7%. Higher education was declared by 56.2% of people, secondary education by 30%, vocational education by 11.2%, and primary education by 2.5%.

Research Tools

To collect empirical material among married people with short and long marital experience, the following research tools were used: the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), the Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM), and the Marriage Successful Scale (SPM).

The Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS) was constructed by Kaźmierczak, Plopa and Retowski (2007). It was created based on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) by Davis (1980). It is used to measure personality empathy. It contains 28 statements, to which the respondents express their attitude by responding on a five-point Likert scale according to the degree to which a given statement describes

them (from 1 – *I completely disagree*, to 5 – *I strongly agree*). The test consists of three components: Empathic concern and personal distress, both referring to the emotional side of the empathy coin, and perspective taking, a cognitive aspect of empathy. Empathic concern (ET) is the ability to emotionally empathize with people who are having difficulties, which results in a desire to help. Personal distress (OS) is manifested in the tendency and susceptibility to experience negative feelings about others. Perspective-taking (PP) refers to the cognitive aspect of empathy, which involves taking on the other person's point of view in everyday life situations. The authors' research confirms the validity and reliability of the tool. Reliability measured using Cronbach's alpha index was $.60 \leq \alpha \leq .78$ for individual subscales.

The Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM) by Plopa and Rostowski (2008), used to examine the level of marital satisfaction, consists of 32 statements – the respondents mark their attitude towards them on a five-point Likert scale according to the degree to which a given statement describes them (from 1 – *I completely disagree*, to 5 – *I strongly agree*). The scale measures the marital bond and contains four subscales: Intimacy (IN) – is associated with satisfaction with being in a close relationship with a partner, with trust in the partner, being open towards them, caring for one's own and the partner's well-being. Self-fulfilment (SA) is associated with satisfaction with a relationship that allows for the realization of one's own goals, desires, and values; acceptance of the performed marital and family roles. Similarities (PO) – is a measure of the spouses' agreement regarding views on marriage and the realization of important goals. Disappointments (RO) – is responsible for the lack of satisfaction with marriage, lack of willingness to solve problems, and get involved. Reliability for the entire Cronbach's α scale is: .94.

The Marriage Success Scale (SPM) by Braun-Galkowska (1985) consists of two parts containing an identical set of 46 statements, which in this tool are understood as dimensions of a successful marriage. In the first part, the surveyed people mark any number of statements that they consider true for their own marriage (SPM I – real image). In the second part, they mark statements that, in their opinion, are important for a successful marriage (SPM II – ideal image). The combined results of both factors enable the determination of the marital success indicator. The tool is valid and reliable. Cronbach's α for the scale was .79.

Results

The obtained data in the Scale of Empathic Sensitivity (SWE), the Scale of Success of Marriage (SPM), and the Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM) for people with short and long marital experience were analyzed. The results are presented in Tables 1 to 5 and Figures 1–2.

Level of Analyzed Variables

Table 1

Level of analyzed variables obtained in the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS) for people with short and long marital experience

Variable	Short marital experience		Long marital experience		95% CI				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCL</i>	<i>ULCL</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
ET	39.4	7.7	39.5	6.6	-0.05	.48	-3.27	3.12	0.01
OS	22.4	6.4	23.4	7.0	-0.75	.44	-4.11	1.86	0.17
PP	33.3	7.1	33.4	5.9	-0.07	.47	-3.02	2.82	0.02

Note. ET = Empathic concern; OS = Personal distress; PP = Perspective-taking; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard deviation; *t* = Test statistic value; *p* = Statistical significance; *CI* = Confidence interval for the difference between means; *LLCL* and *ULCL* = Lower and upper limits of the confidence interval; Cohen's *d* = Effect size index.

The obtained results in Table 1 showed that there are no statistically significant differences in the factors concerning empathic sensitivity between people in a short marriage and people in a longer marriage. A significant trend is visible in the factors of empathic concern and perspective-taking. Both groups of subjects obtained similar results in the personal distress factor.

Table 2

Level of analyzed variables obtained in the Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM) and in the Marital Success Scale (SPM) for persons with short and long marital experience

Variable	Short marital experience		Long marital experience		95% CI				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCL</i>	<i>ULCL</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
IN	16.7	8.4	17.9	6.4	-0.76	.22	-4.60	2.05	0.17
RO	19.3	10.2	21.4	9.4	-0.95	.17	-6.48	2.28	0.21
SA	17.1	7.0	18.8	6.5	-0.51	.61	-3.78	2.23	0.11
PO	14.4	7.1	15.5	5.8	-0.79	.43	-4.05	1.75	0.18
SPM	36.13	25.27	29.18	20.97	1.34	.09	-3.39	17.29	0.30

Note. IN = Intimacy; RO = Disappointment; SA = Self-fulfillment; PO = Similarity; SPM = Marital success; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard deviation; *t* = Test statistic value; *p* = Statistical significance; *CI* = Confidence interval for the difference between means; *LLCL* and *ULCL* = Lower and upper limits of the confidence interval; Cohen's *d* = Effect size index.

The obtained results in Table 2 reveal that there are no statistically significant differences between the analyzed factors. However, it should be noted that higher scores in the marital success factors were obtained by people with a long marital

experience than by people with a short marital experience. However, people with a short marital experience received a higher score on the factor concerning marital success than people with a long marital experience.

Correlation Analysis

A correlation analysis was conducted between the empirical data obtained in the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), the Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM), and the Marriage Success Scale (SPM) for people with short and long marital experience. Then, the correlations were compared using Fisher's Z transformation, and Pearson's r was calculated.

Table 3

The relationship between variables obtained in the Empathic Sensitivity Scale (ESS), the Matched Marriage Questionnaire (KDM), and the Marriage Success Scale (SPM) for people with short and long marital experience

Variable	ET				OS				PP			
	Short marital experience	Long marital experience	z	p	Short marital experience	Long marital experience	z	p	Short marital experience	Long marital experience	z	p
IN	-.41**	-.36*	-0.25	.80	-.05	-.22	1.20	.23	-.39*	-.33*	-0.26	.77
RO	-.34*	-.36*	-0.09	.93	-.03	.02	0.23	.82	-.40**	-.35*	-0.28	.78
SA	-.43**	.22	-1.01	.31	-.01	.40*	-2.30	.02	-.30	-.21	-0.40	.69
PO	-.38*	.31	-0.36	.72	.02	.33*	-1.37	.17	-.43**	-.26	-0.82	.41
SPM	-.44**	-.36*	-0.41	.68	-.05	.25	-1.30	.19	-.43**	-.33*	-0.50	.61

Note. ET = Empathic concern; OS = Personal distress; PP = Perspective-taking; IN = Intimacy; RO = Disappointment; SA = Self-fulfillment; PO = Similarity; SPM = Marital success.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The results obtained in Table 3 indicate that in the group of people with short marital experience there are statistically significant negative differences between empathic concern and intimacy ($r = -.41, p < .01$), disappointment ($r = -.34, p < .05$), self-fulfillment ($r = -.43, p < .05$), similarity ($r = -.38, p < .05$) and marital success ($r = -.44, p < .01$). Similar relationships were noted between perspective-taking and intimacy ($r = -.39, p < .05$), disappointment ($r = -.40, p < .01$), similarity ($r = -.43, p < .01$), and marital success ($r = -.43, p < .01$).

In the case of people with long marital experience, a statistically significant and negative relationship was found between empathic concern and intimacy ($r = -.36, p < .05$) and disappointment ($r = -.36, p < .05$). In addition, personal

distress positively correlated with similarity ($r = .33, p < .05$) and self-fulfillment ($r = .40, p < .05$). Perspective-taking negatively correlated with intimacy ($r = -.33, p < .05$), disappointment ($r = -.35, p < .05$), and marital success ($r = -.33, p < .05$).

The Mediation Relationship of the Analyzed Variables

The results of the correlation analysis indicated significant relationships between empathy, marital satisfaction, and marital success in the lives of women with short and long marital experience. They did not provide a clear answer to the question about the role of empathy and marital satisfaction in shaping marital success in women with different marital experiences. To deepen the analysis of the issue, a structural equation analysis was performed using the PROCESS 4.3 macro (Hayes, 2022), which showed the mediating role of marital satisfaction. Two parallel mediation models were performed. One for women with short marital experience and the other for women with long marital experience.

The explanatory variables were empathetic concern (ET), personal distress (OS), and perspective-taking (PP). The mediators in the model were the dimensions of a matched marriage: intimacy (IN), self-fulfillment (SA), similarity (PO), and disappointment (RS). The explained variable was marital success (SPM), measuring the correspondence between the real and ideal image of marriage. Models were calculated separately for people with short and long marital experience. Both models showed a good fit to the empirical data. Results are presented in Tables 4 and 5 and Figures 1 and 2, limiting visualization of effects that reached an effect size of $\beta \geq .20$. The strength of effects was interpreted according to Cohen (2016).

Table 4

Standardized direct and total effects for individual paths of the tested parallel mediation models for couples with short and long marital experience

Models	Direct effects	Short marital experience			Long marital experience		
		β	p	R^2	β	p	R^2
1	ET \rightarrow IN	-.32	.011	.21*	-.31	.014	.26**
	OS \rightarrow IN	.08	.612		.37	.001	
	PP \rightarrow IN	-.22	.024		-.21	.031	
2	ET \rightarrow RO	-.20	.031	.19*	-.26	.025	.16*
	OS \rightarrow RO	.06	.711		.15	.353	
	PP \rightarrow RO	-.30	.011		-.20	.036	
3	ET \rightarrow SA	-.39	.049	.19*	-.23	.026	.30**
	OS \rightarrow SA	.03	.843		.52	.001	
	PP \rightarrow SA	-.08	.657		-.19	.353	
4	ET \rightarrow PO	-.28	.015	.23*	-.34	.010	.30**

	OS → PO	.15	.368		.47	.003	
	PP → PO	-.28	.012		-.02	.485	
5	ET → SPM	.26	.014	.46**	.10	.638	.35**
	OS → SPM	-.27	.006		-.23	.022	
	PP → SPM	.10	.542		.42	.005	
	IN → SPM	-.90	.000		.65	.017	
	RO → SPM	-.42	.004		-.56	.001	
	SA → SPM	-.10	.591		-.06	.785	
	PO → SPM	.98	.001		.10	.822	
Total effects		β	p		β	p	
	ET → SPM	.33	.035		.29	.071	
	OS → SPM	-.07	.678		.06	.727	
	PP → SPM	.28	.078		.39	.013	

Note. ET = Empathic concern; OS = Personal distress; PP = Perspective-taking; IN = Intimacy; RO = Disappointment; SA = Self-fulfillment; PO = Similarity; SPM = Marital success. Effects marked in bold are $\beta \geq .20$; R^2 = Percentage of explained variance.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5

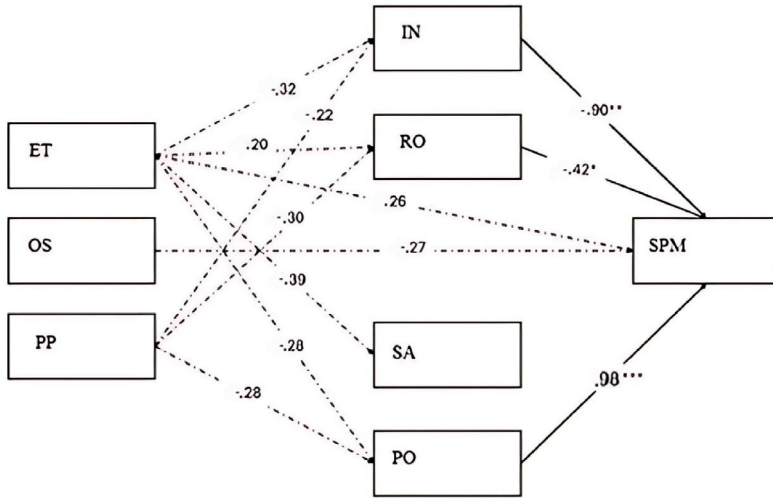
Indirect effects for individual paths of the tested parallel mediation models for couples with short and long marital experience

Paths	Short marital experience			Long marital experience		
	Indirect effect	95% <i>LLCI</i>	95% <i>ULCI</i>	Indirect effect	95% <i>LLCI</i>	95% <i>ULCI</i>
ET → IN → SPM	-.34	.07	.75	-.24	-.92	.23
ET → RO → SPM	.15	-.02	.34	.19	-.19	.50
ET → SA → SPM	.03	-.17	.23	.04	-.10	.20
ET → PO → SPM	-.39	-.87	-.09	-.01	-.27	.49
OS → IN → SPM	.05	-.25	.40	.11	-.19	.59
OS → RO → SPM	.02	-.15	.21	-.01	-.23	.19
OS → SA → SPM	.02	-.06	.14	-.05	-.28	.16
OS → PO → SPM	.03	-.37	.34	.03	-.42	.46
PP → IN → SPM	.34	.05	.81	-.26	-.89	.10
PP → RO → SPM	.16	-.05	.36	.17	-.07	.53
PP → SA → SPM	.04	-.09	.19	.04	-.09	.19
PP → PO → SPM	-.46	.98	-.10	.02	-.17	.41

Note. ET = Empathic concern; IN = Intimacy; OS = Personal distress; PP = Perspective-taking; RO = Disappointment; SA = Self-fulfillment; PO = Similarity; SPM = Marital success; *LLCI* = Upper Limit Confidence Interval; *ULCI* = Upper Limit Confidence Interval.

Figure 1

Matched marriage variables as mediators of the relationship between empathic sensitivity and marital success for people with short marital experience



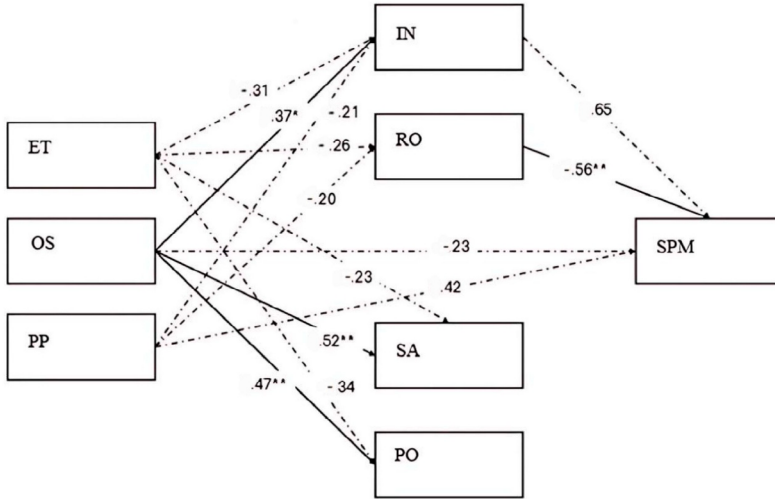
Note. ET = Empathic concern; OS = Personal distress; PP = Perspective-taking; IN = Intimacy; RO = Disappointment; SA = Self-fulfillment; PO = Similarity; SPM = Marital success. Solid lines indicate significant paths. Dashed lines indicate non-significant paths.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The mediation analysis conducted for individuals with long marital experience (Figure 1) revealed that there were trends toward a direct effect of personal stress (PS) and empathic concern (ET) on marital success (SPM). There are biased direct effects in terms of the negative impact of empathic concern (ET) on such aspects of a matched marriage as: intimacy (IN), self-fulfillment (SA), disappointment (RO), and similarity (PO). Moreover, perspective-taking (PP) also showed a trend of direct and negative impact on aspects of marital disappointment (RO), similarity (PO), and intimacy (IN). Intimacy (IN), disappointment (RO), and similarity (PO) play a mediating role between empathic concern (ET) and perspective-taking (PP) and marital success (SPM).

The tested parallel mediation model was statistically significant, $F(7,32) = 3.94, p = .003, R = .68, R^2 = .46$. The model shows that 46% of the variance of the dependent variable, i.e., marital success, is explained by the independent and mediating variables. This indicates a satisfactory fit of the tested model to the empirical data.

Figure 2
Matched marriage variables as mediators of the relationship between empathic sensitivity and marital success for people with long marital experience



Note. ET = Empathic concern; OS = Personal distress; PP = Perspective-taking; IN = Intimacy; RO = Disappointment; SA = Self-fulfillment; PO = Similarity; SPM = Marital success. Solid lines indicate significant paths. Dashed lines indicate non-significant paths.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

When analyzing the model for people with long marital experience (Figure 2), it was observed that personal distress (OS) has a direct negative effect and perspective-taking has a positive effect (PP) on marital success (SPM). In turn, empathic concern (ET) has a negative direct effect on intimacy (IN), disappointment (RO), self-fulfillment (SA), and similarity (PO). In addition, perspective-taking (PP) has a biased negative effect on intimacy (IN) and disappointment (RO). In turn, personal distress (OS) has a positive effect on intimacy (IN), self-fulfillment (SA), and similarity (PO). Intimacy (IN) and disappointment (RO) play a mediating role between empathic concern (ET) and perspective-taking (PP) and marital success (SPM).

The tested model was statistically significant, $F(7,32) = 2.46$, $p = .038$, $R = .59$, $R^2 = .35$, which indicates the explanation of 35% of the variance of marital success among people with long marital experience. This indicates a satisfactory fit of the tested model to the empirical data.

Discussion

The study aimed to show the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction and marital success in people's lives with short and long marital experience in Poland. When developing the study plan, such empathy factors as empathic concern, perspective-taking, and personal distress, as well as matched marriage factors such as intimacy, disappointment, similarity, and self-fulfilment, as well as marital success, were taken into account. Based on the available literature and previous and current research, the research hypotheses were tested.

The results obtained regarding the first hypothesis, which suggests that people with a long marital experience have a higher level of perspective-taking and empathic concern than people with a short marital experience, indicate that there are no significant differences in the level of empathic concern and perspective-taking between the two groups, i.e., marriages with a short and long marital experience. Both groups show high scores on the subscales of empathic concern and perspective taking. This means that they are characterized by the ability to take someone else's point of view and the ability to empathize with people experiencing failures. Previous studies (Wojciszke, 2020) have shown that the level of empathetic sensitivity varies in people with different lengths of marriage.

The results regarding the second hypothesis, which suggests that people with long marital experience have higher levels of intimacy and disappointment than those with short marital experience, indicate that both groups present a similar level of intimacy and disappointment, on average. This suggests that people with both short and long marital experience do not attach much importance and care to building close relationships with others, and are also accompanied by a lack of willingness to solve problems and engage in the process of creating good marital relationships. Previous studies by Majchrzak and Skupińska-Majchrzak (2011) have shown that in the lives of married couples with long marriages, intimacy plays an important role in the success of the marriage and in the lives of successful marriages, intimacy plays an important role.

The results obtained regarding the third hypothesis, which suggests that in people with a short marital experience, there is a stronger and significant relationship between empathic concern and self-fulfilment than in people with a long marital experience, suggest that there is no significant relationship between the analyzed variables in people with a long marital experience. In people with a short marital experience, a significant negative relationship with a moderate correlation was found between empathic concern and self-fulfilment. This means that in the lives of people with a short marital experience, the greater the capacity for compassion towards people experiencing difficult experiences, the lower the satisfaction with the roles they fulfill in the marriage. Moreover, this suggests that

the participation of empathic concern in the process of self-fulfilment may not depend on the length of the marriage, but on the partners' complex personality structure. The development of empathy and the sense of satisfaction may be related to partners' personality traits (Wojciszke, 2020).

The values related to the proposed fourth hypothesis, which assumes that in people with a long marital experience, there is a stronger significant relationship between empathic concern and perspective-taking and intimacy than in people with a short marital experience, indicate that a stronger relationship between empathic concern and perspective-taking and intimacy occurs in people with a short marital experience. On the other hand, the hypothesis in terms of the significance of relationships was confirmed, because in both groups of people, there are significant relationships between the analyzed variables. This indicates that both groups are characterized by the following relationship: the higher the intensity of the tendency to sympathize with people affected by misfortune or the ability to empathize with the other person's point of view, the lower the intensity of satisfaction with being in a close relationship. This suggests, in accordance with the literature (Każmierczak, 2008), that empathetic people more often experience the other person's negative emotions, which affects their perception of the relationship and their satisfaction with it.

According to the obtained material, the fifth hypothesis, which states that in people with a short marital experience, there is a stronger and significant relationship between personal distress and similarity and intimacy than in people with a long marital experience, indicates that in people with a long marital experience, there was a positive and significant relationship between personal distress and similarity and intimacy. This means that in people with a long marital experience, the greater the tendency to experience unpleasant emotions in response to the negative experiences of others, the greater the agreement of spouses in terms of important marital goals.

The results obtained regarding the sixth hypothesis, which states that people with a long marital experience assess their marriage as more successful than people with a short marital experience, suggest a lack of significant differences in this assessment. Both groups are characterized by a low score on marital success, which means that the studied people perceive the characteristics of their marriage as inconsistent with what they consider to be an ideal marriage. This suggests that factors other than marital length may also affect the perception of one's marriage. This may be influenced by the phase of the relationship, the age of the partners, having children, the quality of marital communication, or the personalities of the spouses (Rostowski, 1987).

Hypothesis seven, which suggests that the length of marriage has a significant impact on empathy, marital satisfaction, and marital success, was verified and not falsified. Therefore, at the adopted significance level of $\alpha = .05$, it can be concluded that the hypothesis is true with a probability of making an error not exceeding 5%.

Statistical models (1 and 2) for both groups showed a satisfactory fit to the empirical variables, although they explained different amounts of variance of marital success. In the lives of people with a short marital experience, the variables explained 46% of the variance of marital success, and in the case of people with a long marital experience, 35% of the variance of marital success. In terms of similarities, it can be stated that in both groups (young and older couples), empathetic concern shows a direct negative effect on various aspects of marital satisfaction. Similarly, disappointment, which plays the role of a mediator, has a significant negative effect on marital success in both groups. These are important factors that lower the assessment of marital success. In both groups, perspective taking appears to have a direct negative effect on intimacy and disappointment, both of which have a direct effect on marital success, while in older couples, perspective taking may lower the sense of marital success.

The models also showed fundamental differences, for example, in people with short marital experience, a lower level of personal distress was directly related only to a higher sense of marital success. In people with long marital experience, personal distress had a more complex effect – it increased the assessments of intimacy, self-fulfilment, and similarity, but at the same time negatively determined marital success. In people with short marital experience, a particularly strong effect of the influence of marital similarity on a higher intensity of marital success was found, while in people with long marital experience, this effect was close to zero strength of dependence. Moreover, in people with short marital experience, the mediators (intimacy and similarity) had significant indirect effects in the relationship between empathy and marital success, while in people with long marital experience, no significant indirect effects were observed.

Both models emphasize the importance of empathy and the mediating role of marital satisfaction in shaping marital success. However, the mediating contribution of individual aspects of marital satisfaction in individual relationships was different. This may suggest that individual aspects of marital satisfaction do not mediate the relationships between empathy and marital success to the same extent. Also, to varying degrees, marital experience was perceived in terms of limitations and sometimes beneficial changes related to women's personal beliefs and individual and social development (Braun-Gałkowska, 1992; Karimi et al., 2019).

Limitations of the Study

The analysis of the issue concerning the relationship between empathy and satisfaction with marriage and the success of marriage of adults with different lengths of marriage allows for a broader perspective on the social group that is marriage. The analyzed problem is not without certain limitations.

Firstly, the respondents came from one region of Poland, where there are very few divorces, and the marital bond among spouses is very strong. Another limitation that should be mentioned is the method of conducting the research. In order to obtain empirical data, the Internet was used. A limitation that is related to this may be the reliability of the study participants. In an online survey, it is not possible to check who filled in the questionnaires, and sometimes it is easier for the respondents to provide false data. This is a weakness of this study, which can be eliminated when examining subsequent groups.

Furthermore, another limitation of this study may be the difference in years between short and long marital experience. Some researchers believe (Wojciszke, 2020) that too small a difference in the length of marriage does not always differentiate the formed features related to the developmental phase of people, which could have resulted in the lack of significant differences between the groups of analyzed aspects. It would be necessary to propose further studies in which the comparative groups would differ from each other in terms of longer marriage duration, and which would be conducted using other research tools.

Applications

The analysis of the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction and marital success of people with short and long marital experience indicates several important conclusions.

Some specialists assume that the level of marital success decreases with the length of the marital experience (Majchrzak & Skupińska-Majchrzak, 2011), which was partially confirmed in this study. This study may constitute a basis for drawing attention to the approach of psychologists and psychotherapists working with married couples. Specialists working with married couples should sometimes demonstrate greater awareness and openness to the individual situations of spouses.

Psychoeducation in the scope of elements that make up marital satisfaction, i.e., intimacy, similarity, and self-fulfilment, would be important for married couples. Conducting such psychoeducation by psychologists during the preparation of engaged couples for marriage could help partners to focus on taking care of a close relationship, reaching compromises on marital goals, and ways of developing themselves through fulfilling roles in the relationship.

The higher level of disappointment in short-term marriages suggests that attention should be paid to educating young people, engaged couples, about the changes that occur in a relationship after marriage. During pre-marital education or workshops for engaged couples, psychologists could show what life in marriage looks like in terms of life changes. By describing the feelings that may accompany

newlyweds and those that appear in relationships after the birth of children, as well as by educating them about the fact that these feelings appear in most people and are considered normal, the sense of guilt due to emerging feelings would be reduced. Young engaged couples would also have more realistic ideas about their married life.

Researchers based on culture, contemporary challenges, and economic situation developed different models of marriage, as mentioned earlier (Każmierczak, 2008; Moreno, 2021). However, none of them meets the perfect model. This research can provide researchers with deeper knowledge to develop more useful models of marriage, taking into account such needs as empathetic care, intimacy, self-fulfillment.

This research does not exhaust the problem of empathy and satisfaction with marriage with different lengths of marriage. It would be justified to conduct further in-depth studies taking into account the stationary form on a larger research group, with a greater difference in years between the lengths of marriage in the compared groups. Such studies would allow for the observation of other interesting connections and dependencies. It would also be worth paying attention to gender differences in the level of empathy and marital satisfaction. Perhaps a comparison of research groups divided into women and men would show significant differences, providing a new perspective on the analyzed problem.

Conclusion

The study was conducted to show the relationship between empathy and marital satisfaction and marital success in adults with different lengths of marriage. When developing the study plan, empathy factors such as empathetic concern, perspective-taking, and personal distress were taken into account, as well as factors of a matched marriage, i.e., intimacy, disappointment, similarity, and self-fulfillment, which shape the success of marriage.

Empirical data did not fully confirm any of the hypotheses, although they indicate significant relationships between empathy and marital satisfaction in both groups. This may suggest that the ability to empathize emotionally with people experiencing difficulties, the tendency to experience negative feelings of others and to accept the other person's point of view in everyday life situations, and factors of marital satisfaction – such as: satisfaction with being in a close relationship with a partner, a sense of acceptance of the marital roles performed, and agreement between partners on the implementation of important goals – play an important role in the context of a marital relationship regardless of its duration. It can also be suggested that other variables concerning personality traits, the age of partners, the

quality of marital communication, or having children, play a role in the process of developing empathy and marital satisfaction, as well as the success of the marriage.

The analysis of this study may encourage researchers to conduct further research on empathy and marital satisfaction. Unconfirmed hypotheses allow for a critical look at the selected study group and the formulation of new research hypotheses. Further studies may be a chance for researchers to obtain interesting results that may serve other marriages.

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Conflict of interests

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