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**Trust, Intimacy, and Their Impact on Spousal Relationships among Older Adults:  
Examining Key Psychological Dynamics**

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**Abstract**

This study aimed to explore the relationship between trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships among older adults. The rationale stemmed from the observed importance of trust and intimacy in sustaining long-term relationships. The objective was to examine how these variables interplay in shaping spousal dynamics. Using a between-group research design, the study employed non-probability convenience sampling to recruit 50 couples (100 participants), aged 40–65 years, with a minimum of 15 years of marriage. Data were collected through standardized instruments: the Trust Scale, Relationship Assessment Scale, and Intimacy Scale. Descriptive and correlational analyses using SPSS revealed significant positive relationships between trust, intimacy, and spousal satisfaction. However, no significant differences were found based on family systems or gender. The study highlighted the critical role of trust in fostering intimacy and improving relationship quality. Recommendations include conducting workshops to enhance trust and intimacy and exploring these dynamics in diverse cultural and relationship contexts. Future research should consider larger, geographically varied samples and include partially separated or cohabiting couples to generalize findings.

**Keywords:** old age, trust, intimacy, spousal relationship

**Introduction**

In the field of social sciences, trust is widely acknowledged as a foundational factor influencing numerous aspects of human behavior (Camerer, 2003; Fukuyama, 1996). Psychologically, trust refers to the belief that a trusted individual will meet expectations. It begins within the family unit and extends to broader social relationships. According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the development of basic trust occurs in the first two years of life. Success in this stage fosters feelings of security and optimism, while failure leads to mistrust and insecurity (Cofta, 2007). Trust plays a pivotal role in interpersonal dynamics, with research indicating that humans are inherently predisposed to trust and evaluate trustworthiness based on neurobiological mechanisms. For instance, oxytocin has been shown to enhance trust in interpersonal interactions (Kosfeld et al., 2005). Trust is crucial not only in familial relationships but also in wider social contexts, including interactions within and between groups such as families, communities, organizations, and nations (Hardin, 2002). In academic settings, trust enhances engagement, information exchange, and overall academic performance. Conversely, low-trust relationships are linked to lower achievement and reduced collaboration (Goddard, 2003). In organizational contexts, trust significantly influences perceptions of fairness, behavior, and performance. Trust and perceived justice are interlinked, with one reinforcing the other over time (DeConick, 2010). However, trust is fragile and difficult to restore once betrayed. Broken promises and unmet expectations often result in diminished emotional investment as individuals protect themselves

from further disappointment (Rempel et al., 2000). Intimacy, another essential aspect of relationships, encompasses emotional closeness, transparency, and mutual understanding (Miller et al., 2007). Genuine intimacy is cultivated through dialogue, vulnerability, and reciprocity (Ridley-Duff, 2010). Establishing an intimate relationship requires significant time and effort, with body language and emotional rapport often serving as indicators of growing closeness (Morris, 2002). Intimacy involves balancing individuality and togetherness, as highlighted in Murray Bowen's concept of self-differentiation. This balance prevents relationships from becoming symbiotic and fosters true emotional connection (Aronson, 2003). Emotional intimacy, in particular, relies on trust and effective communication to facilitate the sharing of innermost thoughts and feelings (Camerer, 2003). It represents a profound connection of mind, heart, and spirit (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2004). Partners who maintain positive communication and mutual understanding are more likely to sustain intimate relationships (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). Over time, intimacy in long-term relationships can diminish as partners become more secure and potentially take each other for granted (Lippert & Prager, 2001). However, a climate of sensitivity and positive regard allows couples to continually share vulnerability, strengthening intimacy through trust and risk-taking (Sanderson & Evans, 2001). Numerous studies have examined the interplay between trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships (Nawaz et al., 2021). Salvatore et al. (2011) found that partners skilled in conflict resolution experience greater relationship satisfaction. Effective communication and problem-solving have been identified as critical for sustaining intimacy and positive relational outcomes (Bradbury et al., 2000). Moreover, individuals gauge their willingness to be vulnerable based on their perceptions of their partner's positive regard, which significantly influences intimacy levels (Murray et al., 2000). Daily expressions of affection and positive feelings also play a unique role in enhancing intimacy within couples (Lippert & Prager, 2001). While existing research underscores the importance of trust and intimacy in spousal relationships, there remains a lack of studies focusing on older adults in long-term marriages, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts. Understanding how trust and intimacy influence spousal satisfaction in this population is essential for developing culturally sensitive interventions to enhance relationship quality. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the interplay of trust, intimacy, and spousal dynamics among older adults, offering insights that could inform both theory and practice.

### **Objectives**

1. To evaluate the level of intimacy among spouses in long-term marriages.
2. To assess the degree of trust among spouses in long-term marriages.
3. To examine the influence of trust and intimacy on spousal relationships.
4. To investigate the relationship between the duration of marriage, trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships.
5. To compare spousal relationships in nuclear versus joint family systems.
6. To identify gender differences in spousal relationships.
7. To identify gender differences in levels of intimacy.

### **Hypotheses**

1. There is likely to be a significant relationship between intimacy and trust among older adults.
2. There is likely to be a significant relationship between spousal relationships and intimacy.
3. There is likely to be a significant relationship between spousal relationships and trust.
4. There is likely to be a significant relationship between the duration of marriage and trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships.
5. There are likely to be significant differences in spousal relationships between nuclear and joint family systems.
6. There are likely to be significant gender differences in spousal relationships.
7. There are likely to be significant gender differences in intimacy.

## Method

### Participants

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed to draw the sample. The study included 100 married participants (50 husbands and 50 wives), all aged 40 years or older, and with a minimum of 15 years of marriage. The participants, ranging in age from 40 to 65 years, were selected using a between-group research design. Both husbands and wives in these long-term marriages were included to explore the dynamics of trust and intimacy in spousal relationships.

### Instruments

#### 1. *Trust Scale*

The scale comprises three subscales: *Predictability (P)*, which emphasizes the consistency and stability of a partner's behavior based on past experiences; *Dependability (D)*, which focuses on the partner's dispositional qualities that inspire confidence despite potential risks and hurt; and *Faith (F)*, which centers on feelings of confidence in the relationship and the expected responsiveness and care from the partner in the face of an uncertain future. The overall trust measure is calculated as the sum of the scores from these three subscales (Remple et al., 1985).

#### 2. *Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)*

The RAS evaluates relationship satisfaction using seven items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score is calculated by summing item scores, with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), as cited in Washburn (2009).

#### 3. *Intimacy Scale (IS)*

This multidimensional construct of intimacy assesses various aspects of emotional closeness, including feelings of relationship importance, affection, honesty, respect, altruism, and solidarity. This scale measures various dimensions of emotional closeness using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 5 represents "strongly agree." Scores are summed to generate a total intimacy score, with higher scores denoting greater levels of intimacy (Meinhold, 2005).

### Procedure

This research focused on trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships among older adults. The topic was chosen based on observations of older couples who appeared very satisfied with their life partners. The aim was to determine whether intimacy or trust plays a more critical role in fostering better spousal relationships. To achieve this, various scales were employed to measure the relevant variables. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the purpose of the study was thoroughly explained to them. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS to assess the relationships between trust, intimacy, and spousal satisfaction.

### Ethical Considerations

All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They voluntarily signed informed consent forms before participating. Participant data were anonymized and stored securely to ensure privacy. Identifiable information was not disclosed in any reports or publications. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

### Results

SPSS version 26 was used to explore the relationships between trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships among older adults.

**Table 1:** *Descriptive of Demographic Characteristics*

Variables	F	%
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<b>Gender</b>			
	Females	50	50
	Males	50	50
<b>Type of marriage</b>			
	By choice	11	11
	By parents	89	89
<b>Family system</b>			
	Joint	34	34
	Nuclear	66	66
<b>Age</b>		M	SD
		45.80	4.44
<b>Duration of marriage</b>		23.06	4.08

**Table 2:** Mean and standard deviation of the variables (N=100)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
RAS total	27.63	4.00
IS total	93.22	17.65
T total	16.48	13.36

Note. RAS= Relationship Assessment Scale; IS= Intimacy Scale; T= Trust Scale; M= Arithmetic Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; N= Sample size

The table presents the mean and standard deviation for the Relationship Assessment Scale, the Intimacy Scale, and the Trust Scale. The mean scores indicate that participants had the highest scores on the Intimacy Scale, followed by the Spousal Relationship Scale, with the lowest scores on the Trust Scale. It was hypothesized that significant relationships exist between trust and intimacy, trust and spousal relationships, and intimacy and spousal relationships among older adults. To test these hypotheses, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the relationships between these variables.

**Table 3**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>Intimacy</b>	<b>Spousal Relationship</b>
Trust	-	.50**	.25**
Intimacy	-	-	.46**

Note. \*\* $p < .01$

As shown in Table 3, the results indicate a significant positive relationship among all the variables. Specifically, higher levels of trust in the spousal relationship are associated with greater reported intimacy. Therefore, the hypothesis is supported. It was hypothesized that there would be significant relationships between the duration of marriage and trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships. Bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to examine these relationships.

**Table 4:** Correlation between Duration of Marriage and Trust, Intimacy and Spousal Relationship (N=100)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Intimacy</b>	<b>Trust</b>
Duration	-	-.085	-.31**	-.24*
Relationship	-	-	.46**	.25**
Intimacy	-	-	-	.50**

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table indicates that there is no significant relationship between the duration of marriage and spousal relationships, so this hypothesis is not supported. However, a highly significant relationship was found between trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships, confirming the hypothesis. It was hypothesized that there would be significant differences in spousal relationships

between nuclear and joint family systems. An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess these differences.

**Table 5: Differences between Spousal Relationships of Nuclear and Joint Family Systems**

Variables	M(SD)	Df	T	P	LL	UL
Nuclear	27.90(3.09)	98	.97	.08	- .85	2.49
Joint	27.08(5.36)	-	-	-	-	-

*df*=Degree of Freedom; *LL*= Lower Limit; *UL*= Upper Limit; *M*=Arithmetic Mean; *SD*= Standard Deviation; *N*= Sample size

As  $p > .05$ , there are no significant differences in spousal relationships between nuclear and joint family systems. Therefore, the hypothesis is not supported. It was hypothesized that there would be significant differences in spousal relationships between males and females. An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine these differences.

**Table 7: Gender Differences on Intimacy**

Variables	M(SD)	Df	T	P	LL	UL
Male	93.68(18.50)	98	.25	.79	-6.12	2.49
Female	92.76(16.94)					

*df*= Degree of Freedom; *LL*= Lower Limit; *UL*= Upper Limit; *M*= Arithmetic Mean; *SD*= Standard Deviation; *N*= Sample size.

As  $p > .05$ , there are no significant gender differences in intimacy among older adults. Therefore, the hypothesis is not supported.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationships among trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships among older adults, while also examining the influence of marital duration, family structure (nuclear vs. joint families), and gender differences. The results provided insights into these variables, with some hypotheses being supported and others not supported. The first hypothesis posited that there would be significant relationships between trust and intimacy, trust and spousal relationships, and intimacy and spousal relationships. The results confirm that these relationships are statistically significant, supporting the hypothesis. Specifically, the positive correlations between trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships suggest that older adults with higher levels of trust in their relationships tend to report greater intimacy, which in turn is positively associated with their overall satisfaction in the spousal relationship. These findings align with existing literature, which suggests that trust and intimacy are central to relationship satisfaction. For example, Johnson et al. (2013) found that trust in a relationship is a key predictor of intimacy, which is essential for maintaining healthy spousal relationships. Similarly, Buss (2002) highlights the role of trust in promoting relationship stability and satisfaction, which was reflected in the current study's findings. The second hypothesis proposed significant relationships between the duration of marriage and trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships. The results show a significant negative correlation between the duration of marriage and intimacy ( $r = -0.31, p < 0.01$ ), as well as a smaller negative correlation with trust ( $r = -0.24, p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that, for older adults, the longer the duration of the marriage, the less intense their reported intimacy and trust. These findings challenge the common assumption that longer marriages necessarily lead to stronger relationships, as supported by Lammers et al. (2011), who argued that over time, couples may face diminishing returns in relationship satisfaction and intimacy. The decline in intimacy and trust over time could be attributed to the natural challenges of aging and the cumulative effects of relationship stressors, which can reduce emotional closeness (Ahmed et al., 2023). The third hypothesis proposed that there would be significant differences in spousal relationships between nuclear and joint family systems (Sansakorn et al., 2024). However, the results indicated that there were no significant differences between these two family structures, as  $p > 0.05$ . This finding suggests that the type of family structure does not significantly influence spousal relationship satisfaction among older adults, contrary to previous studies that have suggested family support structures, such as

joint families, might provide better emotional support (Gaur et al., 2016; (Fang & Mushtaque, 2024).

The absence of significant differences may be due to various factors, such as the emotional and financial independence of older adults, which could make them less reliant on the extended family system. Additionally, older adults may prioritize their spousal relationships over family structure as they age. The hypothesis concerning gender differences in intimacy was not supported, as the independent samples t-test showed no significant differences between males and females ( $p > 0.05$ ). Table 7 demonstrates that both male and female participants reported similar levels of intimacy, suggesting that gender does not play a significant role in determining intimacy among older adults. This result contradicts some studies that found gender differences in intimacy, with women often reporting higher levels of emotional closeness in relationships (Fehr, 2003). However, the absence of gender differences in this study could be due to the older age of the participants, where emotional expression may become more similar between genders as a result of longer relational experience or changing societal roles in later life.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the dynamics of spousal relationships in older adulthood. Significant positive relationships were found between trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships, supporting the importance of these constructs in relationship satisfaction. However, the duration of marriage did not consistently correlate with higher levels of intimacy and trust, and no significant differences were found based on family structure or gender. These results contribute to the growing body of literature on relationship dynamics in older adulthood and suggest that factors such as trust and intimacy remain pivotal in fostering healthy relationships over time, regardless of family structure or gender.

### **Limitations**

The study employed a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships evolve over time. The reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias due to social desirability or recall bias. Using observational methods or reports from multiple informants could enhance the validity of findings.

### **Recommendations**

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of marital duration on trust, intimacy, and spousal relationships, allowing for a clearer understanding of causality. Future research should include participants from diverse demographic backgrounds, including different age groups, marital statuses, and cultural contexts, to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Employing mixed-methods research could provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into the complexities of intimacy and trust in spousal relationships.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings highlight the importance of trust and intimacy in spousal relationships, which can inform counseling and therapy practices aimed at enhancing relationship satisfaction among older couples. The study underscores the need for targeted family support programs that focus on fostering trust and intimacy in older couples, particularly those experiencing diminishing levels of intimacy over time. Community-based interventions could be developed to strengthen relationship skills among older adults, focusing on improving communication, trust, and emotional connection.

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