



The age of partners and the duration of the relationship versus the quality of close emotional relationships

Wiek partnerów i staż związku a jakość bliskich relacji emocjonalnych¹

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Abstract: Assessing close emotional relationships requires taking the time perspective into account. Its good dimensions are the age of the partners and the period of their life together. The aim of the research was to assess the connection between the age of partners and the length of their relationship and the quality of close relationships, including mutual communication, intimacy and conflict behaviour. They are recognised as key to the quality of the relationship, but it is still open to question how they change over time. The study involved 696 people aged 20-68, including 360 women and 336 men. The respondents were classified into three groups significant for human development, including 16-year age ranges. In the first group, there were 240 people aged 20-35 years (i.e., in early adulthood), the second group consisted of 276 people aged 36-51 years (which is considered appropriate for middle adulthood), and the third group of 180 people aged 52-68 (i.e., in the period associated with the second half of middle age and entering late adulthood). The respondents were in a lasting relationship from one year to 47 years. The research used a socio-demographic survey questionnaire and K. Hahlweg's Partner Relations Questionnaire in the Polish adaptation of I. Janicka. It was found that with the age of the partners and duration of the relationship, the number of conflict behaviours increase and the intimacy and mutual communication important for its integration weakens. The most vulnerable to these types of changes are spouses in the second half of middle adulthood and entering old age. Potential processes driving these findings are discussed. The age of the partners and the related seniority of the relationship may lead to changes in its quality. However, they cannot be regarded as sufficient for the evaluation of close relationships. They also depend on the health of the partners.

Keywords: behaviour in quarrels, communication, intimacy, marriage, time effect

Abstrakt: Jakość związków emocjonalnych zależy od indywidualnych cech partnerów, ale przede wszystkim czynników relacyjnych, odpowiedzialnych za integrację czy stanowiących ryzyko dezintegracji związku. Ich ocena wymaga uwzględniania perspektywy czasowej. Każdy trwały związek doświadcza zmian jego jakości, co może wiązać się z wiekiem partnerów oraz czasem ich wspólnego życia. Celem badań była ocena zależności między wiekiem partnerów i stażem ich związku a jakością bliskich relacji obejmujących: wzajemną komunikację, intymność i zachowania konfliktowe. Uznaje się je za kluczowe dla jakości związku, ale wciąż otwarty jest problem dotyczący ich zmian w czasie. W badaniu wzięło udział 696 osób w wieku 20-68 lat w tym 360 kobiet i 336 mężczyzn. Osoby badane zaklasyfikowano do trzech znaczących dla rozwoju człowieka grup, obejmujących 16 letnie przedziały wiekowe. W grupie pierwszej było 240 osób w wieku 20-35 lat - tj. w okresie wczesnej dorosłości, grupę drugą stanowiło 276 osób w wieku 36-51 lat, który uznawany jest za właściwy dla średniej i środkowej dorosłości oraz grupę trzecią, w ramach której wyróżniono 180 osób w wieku 52-68 lat tj. w okresie, który wiązany jest z drugą połową wieku średniego oraz wkraczaniem w późną dorosłość. Osoby badane pozostawały w trwałym związku od jednego roku do 47 lat. Do badań zastosowano ankietę socjodemograficzną oraz Kwestionariusz Relacji Partnerskich K. Halwega w adaptacji polskiej I. Janickiej. Stwierdzono, że wraz z wiekiem partnerów i stażem związku zwiększa się liczba zachowań konfliktowych oraz osłabieniu ulegają, ważne dla jego integracji, intymność i wzajemna komunikacja. Najbardziej narażone na tego typu zmiany są małżonkowie w drugiej połowie średniej dorosłości i wkraczający w wiek senioralny. Omówiono potencjalne procesy, które mogły doprowadzić do takich ustaleń. Wiek partnerów i związany z nim staż związku mogą prowadzić do zmian jego jakości. Nie można jednak ich traktować jako wystarczających do oceny zmian bliskich relacji.

Słowa kluczowe: efekt czasu, intymność, komunikacja, małżeństwo, zachowania w kłótni

1. Introduction

The quality of close relationships can be assessed on a one-dimensional scale when the aim of the study

is the of satisfaction with the relationship, or on a multidimensional scale allowing conclusions to be drawn about their determinants. This article takes the latter, more complete approach. It was recognised

¹ Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2022-1Jarec.pdf>

that the quality of emotional relationships depends on the above all, on relational factors responsible for integration or constituting the risk of disintegration of the relationship. The following are considered important: mutual communication, intimacy and conflict behaviour. Mutual and open communication brings partners closer to each other, allows them to get to know each other better, understand each other, interact better and strengthen the emotional bond between them (Harwas-Napierała, 2014; Kaźmierczak, Plopa, 2012; Ryś, Greszta, Grabarczyk, 2019). Intimacy is a special emotional and sexual closeness between partners, which accompanies love and determines the strength of the relationship (Dandurand, Lafontaine, 2013; Ryś, 2016; Wojciszke, 2021). It acts as a buffer for the stresses that arise in close relationships (Milek, Butler, Bodenmann, 2015). It has a neurohormonal background, as evidenced by the release of oxytocin, whose levels correlate positively with feelings of trust and connection with another person (Rostowska, Rostowski, 2014). In turn, conflict is judged based on behaviour in quarrels. Conflicting behaviour is usually caused by antagonistic attitudes or expectations of partners and incorrect interpretation of mutual behaviour (Jankowska, 2016).

These dimensions of relationship quality are related to each other. The manifestation of intimacy is the verbal and non-verbal communication of feelings. Intimacy is associated with devoting time to one's partner, common conversations and mutual interest. It concerns communication between partners not only in the emotional sphere, but also in the cognitive and task-related spheres (Hassebrauck, Fehr, 2002; Ryś et al., 2019). However, it turns out that the closer the relationship, the greater the risk of conflicts, and in marriage they are inevitable. Conflicts adversely affect the sexuality of partners and, consequently, satisfaction with the relationship. This negative effect of the conflict has also been observed in conservative Iranian couples. Although in Muslim countries sexuality is less publicly discussed and more stigmatized, women and men treat it as very important to marriage (Uhlich, Nouri, Jensen, Meuwly, Schoebi, 2021).

Conflicts manifest themselves in the form of inappropriate verbal communication (e.g., criticism, malicious remarks, irony, ridicule, humiliation) and non-verbal communication (e.g., taking offence, isolating oneself from a partner). Arguing is a form of communication, but with an unusual course because it is stimulated by negative emotions. Conflicts do not actually have to endanger marital happiness – short-term and weak-strength can be constructive and contribute to resolving problems. This does not apply to long-term and disruptive ones, which tend to escalate, leading to hostility and aggression (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, McIlvane, 2010; Mandale, Birditt, Orbuch, Antonucci, 2019; Ryś et al., 2019). The way partners engage in day-to-day communication processes is related to the resolution of marital conflicts (Li, Cao, Zhou, Ju, Lan, Zhu, Fang, 2018).

Relationship quality, viewed as a process, requires a time perspective. Each lasting relationship experiences changes in its quality, which may be related to the age of the partners and the duration of their life together.

Age is associated with the development of an individual but also determines important and even breakthrough stages in life. The period of adulthood is divided into early (from 18 to 30/35 years of age), middle (from 35/40 to 65 years of age) and late (after 65 years of age). Early adulthood is mainly associated with professional plans and creating a close intimate relationship, which is considered a development criterion for this period (Brzezińska, Appelt, Ziółkowska, 2016). This is where closeness and intimacy become important. However, decisions about marriage – and especially about parenthood – are postponed. The latest statistics from 2020 show that the age of partners getting married is becoming older. In 2020, the majority (i.e., 34,406 men) legalised their relationship at the age of 25-29 and the same number at the age of 30-34. In turn, the majority (i.e., 56,258 women) got married at the age of 25-29 (Demographic Yearbook, 2021). Young adults often opt for a less obliging form of living together – cohabitation. According to the risk regulation model, the reason for such changes is the simultaneous orientation towards two competing goals: promoting relationships, seeking a close relationship and maintaining independence. The quest

to protect one's self threatens mutual intimacy. These kinds of people are generally afraid of rejection and, therefore, avoid closeness and intimacy (Murray, Holmes, Collins, 2006). Research confirms that less-dependent relationships of younger partners break down faster than mature and legalised ones (Janicka, Szymczak, 2019).

In middle adulthood, many additional roles and tasks emerge in addition to the dominant ones of family and work. Research shows that people at this stage function simultaneously in three task areas: family, professional and as caregivers of the older generation. Usually, they also help children who are entering adulthood and care for their grandchildren. Such an overload of roles can adversely affect the relationship between partners (Brzezińska et al., 2016, Szelendak, 2015). Research shows that people between 36 and 55 years of age experience the greatest intensity of roles and tasks (Duxbury, Higgins, 2001).

In turn, people in late adulthood are characterized by balance and emotional control as well as wisdom, which is considered an attribute of senior age, which should foster satisfying relationships. However, this is not always the case. The cause may be somatic, neurological and even mental diseases, the risk of which increases with age (Straś-Romanowska, 2017), as well as hormonal changes that usually occur after the age of 50. The aforementioned changes, menopausal in women and andropausal in men, are often accompanied by ailments and even diseases, which result in a feeling of unattractiveness, weakening of the mutual bond as well as misunderstandings (Jarecka, 2016, 2021). A poor quality of marriage is associated with, for example, cardiovascular diseases (Birditt, Newton, Cranford, Ryan, 2016; Donoho, Seeman, Sloan, Crimmins, 2015; Smith, Baron, Deits-Leb-ehn, Uchino, Berg, 2020), the risk of developing diabetes (Roberson, Fincham, 2018; Whisman, Sbarra, Raison, 2014). Even in highly communitarian Latin American families, it was confirmed that somatic symptoms can foster negative behaviours and adversely forecast the quality of the marriage (Wheeler, Updegraff, Kimberly, Umaña-Taylor, 2018). According to a review of studies (Goldfarb, Trudel, 2019) depression is particularly dangerous.

Longitudinal studies of people aged 50+ showed a mutual dependence between marital discord and symptoms of depression. This applies equally to middle-aged and older men and women. Living with a depressed partner leads to a sense of rejection that compromises the quality of the relationship (Whisman, Uebelacker, 2009). In later studies, similar results were obtained. Symptoms of depression in a husband or wife negatively influenced their marital satisfaction (Jenkins, Fredman, Le, Sun, Brick, Skinner, McHale, 2020).

On the other hand, the duration of the relationship is associated with normative and non-normative stages of the functioning of the family, which require the couple to adapt to new conditions or difficult situations such as, for example, moving house, the birth of a child, the loss of a job, the illness of a loved one, etc. It is assumed that marriage longevity is the responsibility of both partners (i.e., that it is the result of a satisfying relationship and/or similar expectations of relationship longevity). Sometimes, however, the relationship is disintegrated due to the fault or need of only one of the partners. From 1980 to 2019, an increase in the number of divorces was observed (from 39,833 to 65,341). Wives file for divorce more frequently than husbands, and husbands are more often blamed for the breakdown of marital relations than wives (Demographic Yearbook, 2020).

The time spent living together by partners should be associated with the strengthening of community: emotional, manifested in mutual love and support; cognitive (i.e., a community of life plans and attitudes); spiritual, linked to religiosity and family traditions; and material and territorial, requiring economic security, cohabitation and daily accessibility. All communities require closeness and mutual dependence (Wałęcka-Matyja, Janicka, 2021). Such dependency in the relationship may make the passing time work to the couple's benefit. Research shows that partners with 10 years of experience argue, on average, twice as often as those with 30 years of experience. By linking a long relationship with older age, it is explained that such people are weaker, more tolerant, conciliatory and less interested in mutual struggle and conflicts (Szelendak, 2015).

However, research from the Central Statistical Office conducted in 2019 showed that older and long-tenured spouses are also parting but are reluctant to divorce. The most common separations were adjudicated for the age group of 55 years and more (360 separations), and separation actions were filed by partners whose marriage was 30 years and more (283 separations). On the other hand, the highest number of divorces took place among people aged 40-49 (19,062 couples) – the duration of their marriage from 5 to 9 years (14,466), and from 10 to 14 years (12,057) (Demographic Yearbook, 2020).

2. Research objective and hypotheses

The aim of the research was to assess the connection between the age of partners and the length of their relationship as well as the quality of those close relationships.

The research results reported earlier showed that the specific age of partners and the length of time they have lived together can contribute to changes in relationship quality. This mandates the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1. There is a correlation between the age of the respondents and the quality of partner relationships (quarrel behaviour, intimacy and mutual communication).
- Hypothesis 2. Age differentiates all dimensions of the quality of relations between men and women.
- Hypothesis 3. The sex of the partners significantly differentiates the quality of their relationships (behaviour in quarrels, intimacy, mutual communication).
- Hypothesis 4. The quality of partnership relations (i.e., behaviour in a dispute, intimacy and mutual communication all depend on the length of the relationship).

3. Materials and method

3.1. Respondents

The study included 696 people aged 20-68 years ($M. = 43.51$; $SD = 12.57$), including 360 women (51.7%) aged 21-68 ($M. = 43.51$; $SD = 12.62$) and 336 men (48.3%) aged 20-68 years ($M. = 43.57$; $SD = 12.53$). There were 369 people with higher education, 237 with secondary education, and 90 with vocational education. The respondents were in a relationship for a period from a year to 47 years ($M. = 43.57$; $SD = 12.53$). Everyone assessed their economic situation as stable. In 633 cases (92.9%), they were married couples; in 45 cases (7.1%) – cohabitation. As an alternative to marriage, living together has proved popular with young adults. This is confirmed by the existing Polish research (Janicka, Szymczak, 2019).

To take a closer look at possible changes, the respondents were classified into three groups significant for human development, including 16-year age ranges. The first group included 240 people aged 20-35 [i.e., in early adulthood ($M. = 29.08$; $SD = 4.19$)], the second group consisted of 276 people aged 36-51 ($M. = 46.02$; $SD = 4.48$) – which is considered appropriate for middle and medium adulthood – and the third group, in which 180 people aged 52-68 were distinguished ($M. = 59.02$; $SD = 5.27$) in the period associated with the second half of middle age and entering late adulthood.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents in terms of age and relationship duration of the respondents.

Based on the values of the Student's t-test for independent samples, no statistically significant differences were found between the age of women and men in the distinguished groups (i.e., in the group of people aged 20-35, $t(238) = -1.48$, $p > 0.05$, in the group of people aged 36-51, $t(274) = -0.30$, $p > 0.05$, nor in the group of people aged 52-65, $t(178) = 0.95$, $p > 0.05$).

The analyses did not show any statistically significant differences between men and women in terms of the relationship in the age group of 20-35 years, $t(238) = -1.64$, $p > 0.05$, neither in the 36-50

Table 1. Age and duration of the relationship between the surveyed men and women

	Age											
	20-35 years				36-51 years				52-68 years			
	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	28.68	4.29	29.48	4.07	45.95	4.36	46.11	4.64	59.39	5.16	58.65	5.38
Relationship duration	2.76	1.87	3.18	2.07	17.56	8.37	17.35	7.35	33.07	8.37	29.21	9.08

M - average value; *SD* - standard deviation

age group, $t(273.04) = -0.30, p > 0.05$. On the other hand, in the 52-65 age group, the marriage duration for women was significantly longer than in the group of men, $t(178) = 2.96; p < 0.01$. Due to statistically significant deviations from the normal distribution, the statistical significance of the differences was verified based on the bootstrapping method.

3.2. Procedure and materials

The selection of people for the research was deliberate and people were recruited according to the snowball principle. The inclusion criterion was the age of the respondents (i.e., a minimum of 20 years and being in a permanent heterosexual relationship for a minimum of a year. People in cohabiting relationships were also eligible for the study, but only if they declared a shared future with their current partner.

The participants were informed about the scientific purpose of the study and the method of its conduct. All respondents gave their informed consent to participate in the study. The *IBM SPSS 25* programme was used for statistical analyses. The statistical significance level p was set at 0.05.

A socio-demographic questionnaire and the Partner Relationships Questionnaire by K. Hahlweg in the Polish adaptation of I. Janicka (2008) were used for the research.

The questionnaire constructed for the purposes of the study was used to obtain information on sex, age, education, economic situation, the form of close relationship and its duration.

Partner Relations Questionnaire (PFB -Partnerschaftsfragebogen) is used to measure the quality of relationships between partners in marriage and

cohabitation. It covers three dimensions: behaviour in quarrels (blaming, criticising, recalling mistakes – e.g., “he/she argues with me about any little thing”); intimacy (hugging, caressing, talking about feelings, sexual needs – e.g., “he/she hugs me”) and mutual communication (showing interest, open conversations, listening to your partner – e.g., “together, we agree on our common plans for the future”). There are ten statements for each of the dimensions rated on a four-point scale from 0 (‘never’) to 3 (‘very often’). The tool has good psychometric parameters. Reliability coefficients amounted to 0.93 for the behaviour in Quarrels scale, 0.91 for the Intimacy scale, 0.88 for the Mutual Communication scale (Hahlweg, 1996, in: Janicka, 2008). Adaptation to Polish conditions confirmed satisfactory accuracy and reliability (Janicka, 2008).

The Partnership Relationship Questionnaire is widely used in Europe and has been translated into ten languages. It can also be used to diagnose disorders in relationships between partners (Hinz, Stöbel-Richter, Brähler, 2001).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics for the analysed interval variables obtained in the study sample are presented in Table 2. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to verify the assumption of a normal distribution of the analysed variables.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the analysed interval variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>min.</i>	<i>max.</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>K</i>	<i>K-S</i>	<i>p</i>
Behaviour in quarrels	8.35	5.14	0	26	0.57	-0.07	0.09	0.001
Intimacy	18.82	6.58	1	30	-0.33	-0.60	0.08	0.001
Mutual communication	18.55	5.81	1	30	-0.18	-0.55	0.06	0.001

M - average value; *SD* - standard deviation; *min.* - minimum value; *max.* - maximum value; *S* - skewness measure value; *K* - the value of the measure of kurtosis; *K-S* - the value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test; *p* - statistical significance

Statistically significant deviations from the normal distribution were found in the analysed dimensions of relationship quality (i.e., behaviour in quarrels, intimacy and mutual communication). However, the values of skewness and kurtosis measures ranged from -1 to 1, which means that the deviations from the normal distribution concerned neither the symmetry of the distribution nor the differentiation of the results between the respondents. Due to statistically significant deviations obtained from the normal distribution, subsequent statistical analyses were performed based on the bootstrapping method.

Table 3. Correlation coefficients between the age of women and the age of men and the results on the analysed scales

	Age	
	Women	Men
Conflicts	0.139; 0.325	0.328; 0.498
Intimacy	-0.502; -0.339	-0.612; -0.463
Mutual communication	-0.401; -0.211	-0.398; -0.192

Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients between the analysed variables turned out to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The correlations were negative between the results on the conflict scale and the scores on the intimacy scales ($r = -0.44$ and $r = -0.32$) and mutual communication ($r = -0.43$ and $r = -0.31$) and positive between the scores on the scales of intimacy and mutual communication ($r = 0.60$ and $r = 0.70$).

4.2. Age of the surveyed women and men and the quality of their partnerships

The relationship between the age of the surveyed women and men and the quality of their relationship with a partner was analysed. Pearson's *r* correlations were used for the needs of the analyses.

It occurred that in both the group of women and men, the correlations between the age of the respondents and the results regarding conflicts, intimacy and communication turned out to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). With age, the number of conflict behaviours increased, while intimacy and mutual communication declined. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed – there is a relationship between the age, the studied women and men, and the quality of partner relations.

Further analyses aimed to compare the mean values of the variables concerning the quality of relationships (i.e., quarrel behaviour, intimacy and mutual communication among women and men in the distinguished age groups). The summary was supplemented with the values of the one-way analysis of variance. The size of the effect was estimated with reference to the ranges adopted for the measure – no effect: < 0.01 ; weak effect: $0.01 \leq 0.06$; moderate effect: $0.06 \leq 0.14$; strong effect: ≥ 0.14 (Sink and Mvududu, 2010).

Statistically significant intergroup differences were obtained for all analysed variables both in terms of women's and men's results (Table 4).

Analysing the results of women based on the value of the Games-Howell post-hoc test, it was found that statistically significant differences in the results, on the quarrel behaviour scale, occurred between people aged 52-65 and those aged 20-35 (2.41; 4.57); and

Table 4. Average values of the quality of partner relations among women and men in the distinguished age groups

		Age									
		20-35 years		36-51 years		52-65 years		F	df	p	η^2
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Women	Quarrels	6.59	4.73	6.63	4.01	10.08	3.52	23.34	2.357	0.001	0.12
	Intimacy	22.14	5.08	18.13	6.21	14.84	7.03	37.75	2.357	0.001	0.18
	Communication	21.42	5.30	18.80	5.96	16.29	5.94	20.59	2.357	0.001	0.10
Men	Quarrels	7.28	5.32	8.35	5.29	13.26	4.65	38.47	2.333	0.001	0.19
	Intimacy	22.61	4.59	18.94	5.99	14.32	6.30	56.28	2.333	0.001	0.25
	Communication	20.02	4.93	17.38	5.18	16.22	5.85	14.76	2.333	0.001	0.08

M - average value; SD - standard deviation; F - the value of the analysis of variance; df - the number of degrees of freedom; p - statistical significance; η^2 - measure of the strength of the effect

people aged 36-51 (2.43; 4.38); (moderate effect). The mean value of the results, on the quarrel behaviour scale, in the group of women aged 52-65 was higher than in the other two age groups. Statistically significant differences in the results, on the intimacy scale, occurred between the group of women aged 20-35 and the group of women aged 36-51 (2.75; 5.40) and the group of women aged 52-65 (5.75; 9.00), as well as between the group of women aged 36-51 and the group of women aged 52-65 (1.56; 5.04). The effect on these differences turned out to be strong. The mean value, of the results on the intimacy scale, was the highest in the group of women aged 20-35, lower in the group of women aged 36-51 and the lowest in the group of women aged 52-65. Statistically significant differences in scope the results, on the scale of mutual communication, occurred between the group of women aged 20-35 and the group of women aged 36-51 (1.28; 3.98) and the group of women aged 52-65 (3.63; 6.77), as well as between the group of women aged 36-51 and the group of women aged 52-65 (0.94; 4.15); (moderate effect). The mean value of the results, on the mutual communication scale, was also highest in the group of women aged 20-35, lower in the group of women aged 36-51 and the lowest in the group of women aged 52-65.

Analysing the results of men based on the value of the Games-Howell post-hoc test, it was found that statistically significant differences in the results, on the quarrel behaviour scale, occurred between people

aged 52-65 and those aged 20-35 (4.58; 7.35), as well as those aged 36-51 (3.44; 6.26); (strong effect). The average value of the results regarding conflicts in the group of men aged 52-68 was higher than in the other two age groups. Statistically significant differences in the results, on the intimacy scale, occurred between the group of men aged 20-35 and the group aged 36-51 (2.27; 5.06) and aged 52-68 (6.66; 9.82), as well as between the group of men aged 36-51 and the group of men aged 52-68 (2.90; 6.27); (strong effect). The mean value of the scores, on the intimacy scale, was the highest in the group of men aged 20-35, lower in the group of men aged 36-51 and the lowest in the group of men aged 52-68. Statistically significant differences in the results, on the mutual communication scale, occurred between the group of men aged 20-35 and the group of men aged 36-51 (1.29; 3.95), as well as the group of men aged 52-68 (2.17; 5.37); (moderate effect). The mean value, of the results on the mutual communication scale, was higher in the group of men aged 20-35 than in the group of men aged 36-51 and in the group of men aged 52-68.

The obtained results justify the adoption of Hypothesis 2 – Age differentiates all dimensions of the quality of relations between men and women. The participants from the oldest age group (52-68 years old) obtained significantly higher results in terms of quarrel behaviour and lower results in terms

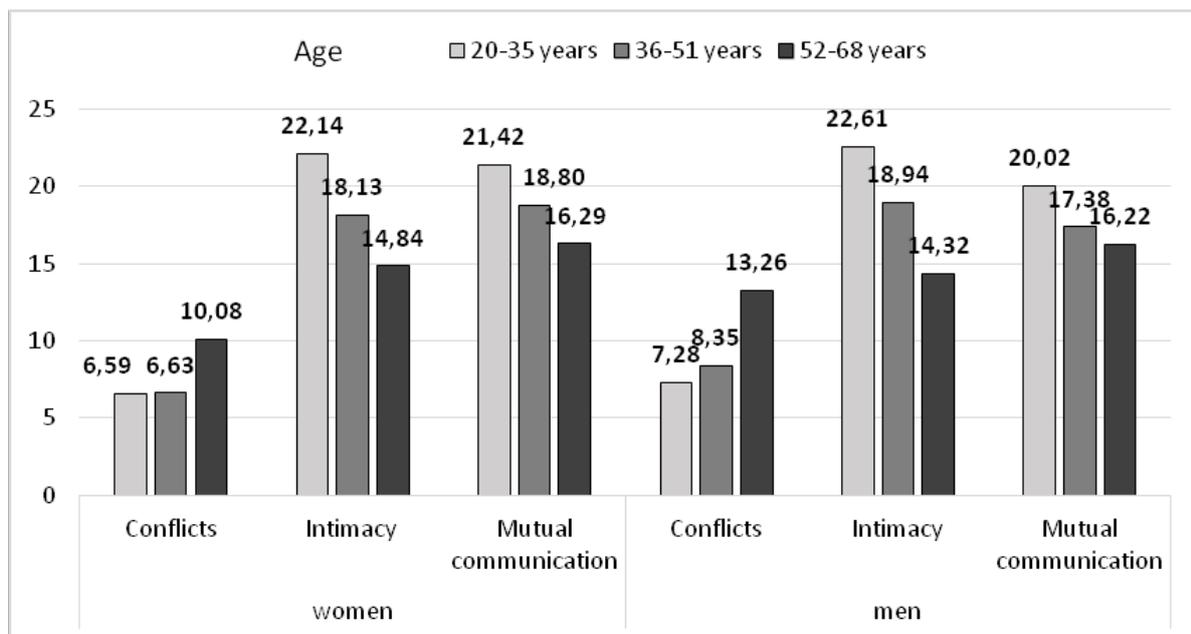


Figure 1. Average values of the results on the analysed scales in the compared age groups among women and men.

of intimacy and communication, compared to the younger age groups, i.e. 20-35 years old and 36-51 years old.

The results of the analyses showed that the least favourable quality of relationships, which is manifested by the greatest number of conflict behaviours and the lowest intimacy and mutual communication,

Table 5. Conflict behaviour, intimacy and mutual communication in women and men in appropriate age groups

	Variables	Women		Men		t	df	p
		M	SD	M	SD			
20-35 years	Quarrels	6.59	4.73	7.28	5.32	-1.06	238	0.291
	Intimacy	22.14	5.08	22.61	4.59	-0.75	238	0.456
	Mutual communication	21.42	5.30	20.02	4.93	2.12	238	0.043
36-51 years	Quarrels	6.63	4.01	8.35	5.29	-3.00	227.23	0.004
	Intimacy	18.13	6.21	18.94	5.99	-1.09	274	0.288
	Mutual communication	18.80	5.96	17.38	5.18	2.11	273.37	0.036
52-68 years	Quarrels	10.08	3.52	13.26	4.65	-5.19	167.65	0.001
	Intimacy	14.84	7.03	14.32	6.30	0.53	178	0.599
	Mutual communication	16.29	5.94	16.22	5.85	0.08	178	0.930

M - average value; SD - standard deviation; t - value of the Student's t-test for independent samples; df - the number of degrees of freedom; p - two-sided statistical significance

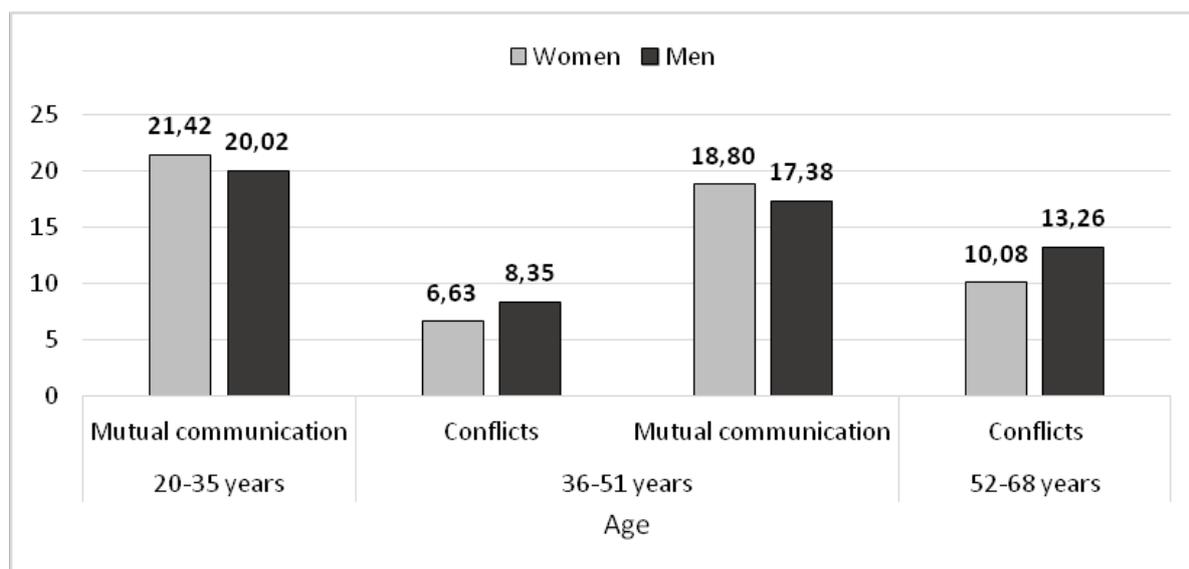


Figure 2. Statistically significant differences in the analysed variables between women and men in the distinguished age groups.

are characteristic of the oldest group of women and men (52-68 years old). On the other hand, the best results were obtained by the youngest group (20-35 years old) (Fig. 1).

4.3. The quality of relations between men and women in the distinguished age groups

Women and men were compared concerning the mean values of dimensions determining the quality of partner relations (i.e., quarrels, intimacy and mutual communication). The measurement results are presented in Table 5. The list was supplemented with the values of the Student's t-test for independent samples.

In the 20-35 age group, women rated communication in their close relationships significantly higher than men ($p < 0.05$). In the 36-51 age group, men admitted to having more conflict behaviour and weaker communication than women ($p < 0.05$). On the other hand, women and men in the 52-68 age group significantly differentiated conflict behaviour ($p < 0.05$). They were more common in men than in women. Finally, it can be observed that the mean values of the scores on the mutual communication scale were higher in the group of women than in the group of men aged 20-35 and 36-51 years, respec-

Table 6. Correlation coefficients between the duration of the relationship and the results on the analysed scales in the group of women and the group of men

	Seniority	
	Women	Men
Conflicts	0.091; 0.289	0.275; 0.470
Intimacy	-0.493; -0.317	-0.608; -0.458
Mutual communication	-0.401; -0.208	-0.368; -0.158

tively. The mean values of the results on the conflict scale were higher in the group of men than in the group of women aged 36-51 and 52-68 (see Fig. 2).

Hypothesis 3 was confirmed – the sex of the partners significantly differentiates the quality of their relationships (behaviour in quarrels, intimacy, mutual communication). The differences were in mutual communication and in quarrel behaviour. In all analysed age groups, women assessed the quality of relationships in close relationships more favourably than men.

4.4. The duration of the relationship and the quality of relations

Table 6 shows the Pearson's r correlation coefficients between the duration of the relationship and the results on the analysed scales in the group of women and men.

Both in the group of women and the group of men, statistically significant positive correlations between the duration of the relationship and the results on the conflict scale were found, as well as statistically significant negative correlations between the length of the relationship and the results on the scales of intimacy and mutual communication ($p < 0.05$). Along with the time of the relationship of the surveyed men and women, the number of conflict behaviours increases, and intimacy and mutual communication weaken.

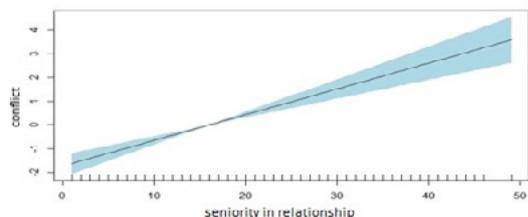


Figure 3. The connection between the length of the relationship and the results on the conflict scale in the sample (N = 696).

To verify the nature of the relationship between the length of the relationship and conflict behaviour, intimacy and mutual communication, an analysis was performed based on generalised additive models (GAM). They allow for the study of non-linear relationships between explanatory and explained variables.

In the studied sample (i.e., in the group of women and men), it was found that the relationship between the duration of the relationship and the results on the conflict scale was statistically significant, $F(1.00; 1.00) = 54.92, p < 0.001$. The course of the relationship explained 7.2% of the variance in the results on the conflict scale. The connection between the length of the relationship and the results on the conflict scale was linear and positive (Fig. 3).

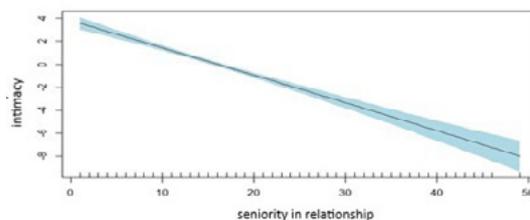


Figure 4. The relationship between the duration of the relationship and the results on the intimacy scale in the studied sample (N = 696).

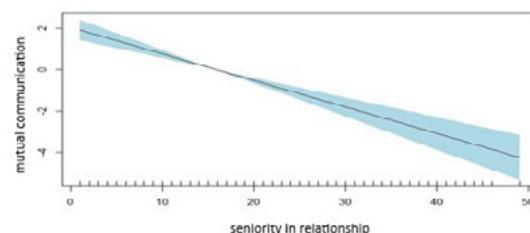


Figure 5. The relationship between the duration of the relationship and the results on the scale of mutual communication in the studied sample (N = 696).

The following relationships turned out to be statistically significant: between the duration of a relationship and the results on the intimacy scale - $F(1.11; 1.22) = 160.20, p < 0.001$ (Fig. 4) and between the duration of the relationship and the results on the scale of mutual communication $F(1.00; 1.00) = 61.05, p < 0.001$ (fig.5). The duration of the relationship explained 21.7% of the variance in the scores on the intimacy scale and 8.0% of the variance in the scores on the mutual communication scale. The relationship between the duration of the relationship and the results on the scale of intimacy and mutual communication in the studied sample was negative and linear.

The analyses carried out above allow us to conclude that the quality of the partnership relationship depends on the length of the relationship. With the duration of the relationship, the number of conflict behaviours increases, and intimacy and mutual communication weaken. The fourth hypothesis was confirmed here.

5. Discussion of the results

The presented research results were aimed at assessing of the partners' age and the duration of their relationship for the quality of close relationships, including its essential parameters (i.e., conflict behaviour, intimacy and mutual communication). Their importance for the quality of the relationship is not questioned, but the problem of changes over time remains open.

Age and seniority in a relationship are associated with specific developmental changes for the individual and the couple. The respondents were classified into three groups significant for human development, including 16-year age ranges: 20-35 years (Group 1), 36-51 years (Group 2) and 52-68 years (Group 3). People from Group 1 had the shortest seniority in a relationship, and people from Group 3 had the longest experience. People from Group 1 had the shortest seniority, and people from Group 3 had the longest experience.

Research has shown a relationship between the age of partners and the quality of their close relationships. The most favourable results (i.e., the highest in terms of intimacy and communication and the lowest number of conflicts (compared to other age groups)), were obtained by women and men in early adulthood (i.e., at the age of 20-35). This is a good prospect for their relationship. Research confirms that the emotional intimacy of the partners is particularly important for the quality of the relationship (Dandurand, Lafontaine, 2013; Hassebrauck, Fehr, 2002; Ryś, 2016; Wojciszke, 2021) and communication (Dakowicz, Dakowicz, 2021; Harwas-Napierała, 2014; Kaźmierczak, Płopa 2012; Ryś et al., 2019). In the own research, a positive dependence was found between the intimacy and mutual communication of partners, and their negative relationship with conflict behaviour. Also, Jankowska (2016) pointed out that intimacy positively correlates with supporting and engaged communication of partners, and negatively with a deprecating one. According to Milek et al. (2015), poor intimacy leads to negative behaviours - anger, irritability, withdrawal from contacts.

It was observed that with the age of the respondents, undesirable behaviour (conflict) increases, and intimacy and mutual communication – which

are important for the integration of the relationship – weakens. This regularity turned out to be appropriate for the group of women and the group of men. German studies confirm that the quality of relationships =between partners decreases with age. They also showed that women, on average, score higher in assessment of own marriage, than men (Hinz et al., 2001). In my research, women rated communication higher and indicated fewer conflicts in their relationships than men. This type of difference was observed in communication for people aged 20-35 and 36-51 years, and for quarrel behaviour for people aged 36-51 and 52-68. Earlier research proves that women are more sensitive to marital tensions than men (Mandale et al., 2019). The results of this study do not justify the conclusion of such a regularity because the level of intimacy and communication turned out to be similarly low and did not differentiate between men and women who reported the most conflicts.

The second half of middle adulthood and late onset turned out to be the period particularly vulnerable to adverse changes. For people aged 52-68, the highest number of conflict behaviours and the lowest rates of intimacy and communication were recorded. It may be favoured by hormonal changes appropriate for this age group (i.e., menopausal in women and andropausal in men). They occur after the age of 50 and have a negative impact on the psychophysical and social functioning of an individual. They can be accompanied by anxiety and even fear. The interest in physical closeness declines, misunderstandings between partners and even conflicts occur more often, which, in turn, may intensify the symptoms of hormonal changes (Jarecka, 2016). A poor quality marriage is also associated with various indicators of poor health, the emergence of chronic diseases, which is more often diagnosed in the elderly (Donoho et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2020; Wheeler et al., 2018, Whisman, Uebelacker, 2009; Whisman et al.2014). Much attention is paid to life-threatening cardiovascular diseases and its relationship to marital relations (Donoho et al., 2015; Smith, Baucom, 2017; Smith et al., 2020; Tulloch, Johnson, Demidenko, Clyde, Bouchard, Greenman, 2021). It turns out that the mental stress caused by marital conflicts leads to in-

creased heart rate and high blood pressure (Tulloch et al., 2021). It is noted, however, that they may be fostered not so much by the marital conflict itself, but by hostility and control that determine involvement in the conflict (Smith et al., 2020). Abnormal relationships between spouses may affect the release of cardiovascular markers and their risk factors (e.g. calcification of the coronary arteries, increase in blood pressure). Therefore, it is recognized that the treatment of people with heart disease should also include their marital relations (Birditt et al., 2016; Tulloch et al., 2021).

The average age is also when the assessment of one's life so far is made, and its negative balance may contribute to dissatisfaction, blaming the partner and even the breakup of the relationship (Brzezińska et al., 2016; Szelendak, 2015).

The conducted research also authorises the conclusion that the quality of close relationships decreases with the duration of the relationship. This is confirmed in previous longitudinal studies. Lavner, Karney, Bradbury (2014) showed a decrease in satisfaction with marriage even in couples with short 4-year experience. Birditt, Wan, Orbuch, Antonucci (2017), based on a 16-year study, found that the tension (between husbands and wives) resulting from conflicts and disappointments increases with the duration of their marriage. Also, other research studies (Mandale et al., 2019; Umberson et al., 2006) confirm greater tendencies to negative behaviours and tensions between partners along with the duration of the marriage, which reduces its quality. In contrast, VanLaningham, Johnson, Amato (2001) pointed to the existence of a curvilinear relationship between the length of time and the quality of the relationship. They reported that marital happiness was lowest in the early and late years of the relationship.

In the authors' own research, young people with short experience together achieved the most favourable parameters of relationship quality. Empirical research has consistently shown (Hülür, Castano, 2019; Kamp Dush, Taylor, 2012; Leonhardt et al., 2020) that a higher-quality marriage, are conducive to the partnership and egalitarian nature of the relationship. This type of relationship is more popular with young couples than with older couples. This may explain its low quality in older people, who more often prefer the traditional division of roles – which places an excessive burden on the woman, especially when she is engaged in professional work.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the age of the partners and the related period of the relationship may lead to changes in its quality. However, they cannot be treated as the only reasons and sufficient for the evaluation of close relationships. They should be considered in the context of developmental changes and a wide range of conditions.

The results of these studies can be used in couple therapy and counselling. Communication, intimacy and conflict behaviour are usually the subjects of therapeutic interventions. They should be considered in relation to the age of the partners and the tenure of their relationship.

The presented research is not free from limitations. The study of the quality of close relationships would be more complete if couples were included. This type of research should be of a longitudinal nature, which would allow the dynamics of changes in the quality of relations to be captured.

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