

A Developmental and Relational Perspective on Marital Closeness in Older Adulthood

by

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Abstract

Although research has generally found that marital closeness is a vital resource for older adults, the literature has focused minimal attention on this key construct in older marriages. Even less attention has been focused on the experience of closeness for remarried, older couples that are experiencing both a successive marital relationship and the unique developmental tasks of older adulthood (e.g., retirement, caregiving). To understand this critical intersection between couples' relational and developmental experiences, the current paper will draw upon two competing theories to reveal the complexities of marital closeness and how that may differ based on an individual's developmental and marital stage: socioemotional selectivity theory and self-expansion theory. Utilizing a sample of 64 higher-functioning, well-educated older couples, we utilized dyadic data to examine how husbands' and wives' experience of marital closeness changes over a year and to what extent this varies according to spouses' marital histories and efforts to maintain the relationship. Overall, our findings revealed that older spouses are enjoying close relationships within marriage—regardless of marital history or efforts to maintain the relationship. However, there was some evidence that wives' feelings of closeness are diminishing over time. Explanations for these findings and future directions are provided.

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Introduction

The increase in life expectancy coupled with the rise in divorce rates over the past century has resulted in a large number of individuals entering their later years with diverse marital histories (Brown & Lin, 2012; Cooney & Dunne, 2001). In fact, close to 500,000 adults over the age of 65 remarry every year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) a trend that is forecast to increase as a result of the increasing marital instability now occurring in the second half of life (Brown & Lin, 2012). The growing rate of remarried older adults is important not only for its increasing prevalence, but for the effects of these marital histories as well. Marital history has been found to impact current marital outcomes, as spouses develop attitudes and expectations in their prior marriages that impact their current ones (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Koren, 2011). With each partner bringing a different marital history and its accompanying experiences to the current marriage, the number of underlying dimensions potentially contributing to marital functioning also increases (e.g., introduction of/relationship with stepchildren, attachment to/conflict with former spouse, increased role ambiguity).

One challenge to understanding marital functioning and its determinants in remarriages is that this area of research is still developing to account for the growing heterogeneity of the remarried population. In fact, the increased complexity within this population may account for the seemingly contradictory results of marital satisfaction found for higher order marriages. Early studies found remarried spouses to be less happy than those in their first marriages, perhaps due to issues of selection or the presence of stepchildren in the home (Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, & Cooper, 1989; White & Booth, 1985). Yet, other researchers have found positive

outcomes for spouses in remarriage, such as increased levels of positive communication in second marriages (Prado & Markman, 1999) and wives perceiving the second marriage as more equitable than the first marriage (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Clarke, 2005). These seemingly conflicting results highlight the complexity found within remarried couples and raise the question of which determinants are most influential for marital satisfaction in higher-order marriages. Unfortunately, the research exploring the effects of marital history is largely limited to middle-aged couples in newer remarriages—leaving a gap in the literature surrounding the experience of remarriage for older adults.

As individuals in higher-order marriages age and older adults choose to remarry later in life (Brown & Lin, 2012), the number of determinants of marital satisfaction in remarriage will continue to increase. In particular, the more abbreviated marital duration of remarried couples may influence couples' experience and perception of marital closeness, an essential element for maintaining and evaluating a relationship (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007; Hess, Fannin, & Pollom, 2007). Although the definitions of closeness have varied in the literature, many accepted definitions include common themes of intimacy, trust, and feelings of connectedness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Ben-Ari, 2012; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Despite the importance of marital closeness, the literature has focused minimal attention on this key construct in older marriages as compared to others (e.g., equity, conflict). Even less attention has been focused on those experiencing both a successive marital relationship and the unique developmental tasks of older adulthood (e.g., widowhood, retirement, caregiving, grandparenting). To understand this critical intersection between couples' relational and developmental tasks, the current research will draw upon two competing theories that seek to reveal the complexities of marital closeness and how it

may differ based on an individual's developmental and marital stage: socioemotional selectivity theory and self-expansion theory.

Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) uses a developmental perspective to describe the experience of closeness for older adults, focusing in particular on older adults' increasing desire for emotional intimacy and companionship. According to SST, older adults perceive their time as limited, which motivates them to seek positive interactions within their close relationships (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Li & Fung, 2011). By deliberately focusing on their most intimate relationships, older adults are able to maximize their emotional rewards, such as feeling close to one's partner. Therefore, SST suggests that older adults will report more closeness with a spouse, regardless of their marital history, due to this proposed developmental shift to focusing on intimacy in current relationships.

Whereas SST takes a developmental perspective to explain how closeness might be experienced by older adults, self-expansion theory (SET) takes a relational perspective, suggesting that individuals are motivated to have close relationships in order to have new experiences to enrich their own lives (Aron & Aron, 1986; Li & Fung, 2011). The new opportunities that characterize the beginning stages of relationships (e.g. meeting a partner's friends) are when partners tend to have the most potential for self-expansion. As relationships persist, SET suggests that there are fewer opportunities for self-expansion for couples (Agnew, Loving, Le, & Goodfriend, 2004; Sheets, 2013). In this theory, closeness due to self-expansion occurs rapidly at the onset of a relationship, but boredom and distance ensue as relationships continue (Aron & Aron, 1986). However, couples should ideally continue to incorporate new, self-expanding opportunities into their relationships to remain close. Thus, SET would suggest great variability in reports of closeness among married, older adults based on their marital

history and efforts to maintain their relationships. Older couples that are remarried may experience more closeness than those in longer first marriages due to the susceptibility to boredom over the course of a relationship. Couples who work to maintain their relationship, however, may be able to preserve their closeness, regardless of marital history.

Despite the importance of closeness for relational and individual well-being (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007), there is a clear gap in the understanding of closeness in later-life marriages and how that may differ based on marital histories. It remains unclear if couples in older adulthood have a tendency to get closer due to their developmental stage, per socioemotional selectivity theory, or if closeness depends on relational stage as self-expansion theory would suggest, such that more newly married couples (e.g., remarried older adults), would enjoy greater closeness than their first-married counterparts. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of SST and SET, the current study utilizes two waves of data from a sample of 64 higher-functioning older couples to examine how husbands' and wives' experience of marital closeness changes over a year and to what extent this might vary according to spouses' marital histories and efforts to maintain the relationship. By utilizing the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000), the study will account for the dependent nature of the data, thus enabling us to estimate how closeness changes over a year both within and across spouses. In light of the importance of marital closeness for older adults' well-being (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006; Pruchno, Cartwright, & Wilson-Genderson, 2009), it is imperative to understand how marital closeness changes during the later years, for whom it changes the most – both within and across couples, and what processes may contribute to these changes.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives on Closeness

Establishing close connections has been considered paramount for individual and relational well-being across the social and human science disciplines (Erikson, 1959; Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007). Dating back to the 1950s, Erikson posited forming close, romantic relationships is essential to the future of young adults—if successful, the individual will have a strong, intimate relationship, but if unsuccessful the individual will be isolated and ultimately disadvantaged moving forward into adulthood. Although this vital experience has received theoretical attention in the literature (Birtchnell, Voortman, DeJong, & Gordon, 2006; Hess et al., 2007), it remains a challenge in empirical research due to varying definitions and conceptualizations of closeness.

Closeness in relationships has been defined in a multitude of different, even conflicting, ways, including physical proximity, psychological closeness, and emotional closeness (Ben-Ari, 2012). To clarify these various concepts surrounding closeness, Ben-Ari and Lavee (2007) conducted in-depth interviews with 22 middle-aged married couples ($M_{\text{Duration}} = 18$ years). They found that the meaning of closeness included three themes—closeness as (a) friendship, (b) sharing, and (c) caring. Couples also stated that expressions of closeness included spatial proximity, physical contact, and spending time together. Overall, the authors concluded that closeness can be conceptualized as an experience of emotional and physical closeness, and that closeness can operate as both an overall defining trait of their relationship as well as being featured in particularly poignant experiences.

These differing definitions and conceptualizations of closeness raise the question of how researchers should measure closeness in a relationship. One example of a closeness measure is the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale, which focuses on measuring closeness using a single-item pictorial measure of overlapping Venn-diagrams (Aron & Aron, 1986; see Appendix A). Inclusion of Other in the Self scale has been highly correlated with satisfaction, commitment, investment in the relationship, and the centrality of the relationship in an individual's life (Mashek & Aron, 2004). Further underscoring the value of using such a measure to capture closeness is that the predictors of this measure align nicely with theories on closeness, including shared participation in self-expanding activities, self-disclosure (i.e., emotional intimacy), and physical intimacy (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013). One challenge of employing this measure is that it is unclear how closeness may change over the lifespan, as this remains a topic of theoretical interpretation rather than empirical work.

The Importance of Closeness in Older Adulthood

There are numerous reasons to believe that closeness may operate differently in older relationships. Perhaps most importantly, as individuals age they are faced with unique challenges, such as retirement, grandparenthood, caregiving, and decline in health. Closeness appears to be strongly protective of the physical and mental health of aging adults. For example, in Mancini and Bonanno's (2006) study of 1,532 older, married individuals, high levels of marital closeness were associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher levels of self-esteem, across levels of functional disability. The effects of marital closeness also went over and above those of instrumental support, suggesting that marital closeness in older marriages is a vital resource and highly beneficial. Even more persuasive evidence comes from

Tower, Kasl, and Darefsky (2002) who examined the impact of marital closeness on mortality risk over a six-year period. In their study closeness was defined as naming one's spouse as a confidant or source of emotional support, as well as being named by the spouse on the same dimensions. Interestingly, husbands who were named by their wives, but did not name their wives, were the least likely to die over the six-year span. Wives with the same pattern of being named by their husband, but not naming him showed a similar pattern of effects for mortality, but were more highly protected against death if also a parent.

Although these studies reveal the benefits of experiencing emotional support from a spouse, these operationalizations only reflect a small portion of what closeness likely means for older couples and obscures what may be meaningful differences in couples' experiences. Despite the empirical evidence suggesting the positive nature of marital closeness for older adults, there are currently only theoretical suggestions surrounding how marital closeness may differ based on spouses' marital histories. Understanding these potential nuances in how closeness is experienced both within and across couples is critical, as an increasing number of older adults are entering their later years with complex experiences (Brown & Lin, 2012; Cooney & Dunne, 2001).

Theoretical Framework for Closeness and Marital History in Older Adulthood

Many theories have tried to explain how individuals desire and achieve closeness in their intimate relationships—and how that may depend on developmental stage. These differences and where they converge is perhaps best articulated by Li and Fung's (2011) dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction, which nicely combines the central tenets of both self-expansion theory (SET; Aron & Aron, 1986), and socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 1996).

Utilizing the changing goals found across development, Li and Fung (2011) proposed the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction by integrating research on marital satisfaction from a lifespan development perspective. The theory states that spouses have multiple goals to achieve throughout marriage—including personal growth goals, instrumental goals, and companionship goals—that are prioritized differently across the lifespan based on the developmental stage of the couple (see Figure 1). The completion of these goals at different stages partially determines couples' marital satisfaction, although the authors acknowledge that other factors also play a role in marital satisfaction (e.g., life transitions, cultural values).

According to the dynamic goal theory, personal growth goals are most important during early adulthood when most adults first enter a marital relationship. Personal growth occurs in an attempt for individuals to improve or actualize oneself in the marriage. This idea is supported by SET (Aron & Aron, 1986), which proposes that the expansion of self is essential for the initiation and maintaining of marriage. Closeness that is experienced with a spouse during this period is useful for both spouses to feel affirmed in seeking an ideal self, especially if both spouses' ideal selves are similar to each other. However, personal growth goals decrease over time as individuals are faced with the practical duties of marriage and later increased focus on emotional rewards.

On the other end of the lifespan, couples in older adulthood are faced with companionship goals as explained in SST (Carstensen, 1996). The decline in personal growth goals and increase in companionship goals is due to individuals' perception of limited time. Humans have evolved such that personal growth is important at the beginning of relationships (young adulthood) and companionship is important at the end of life. In fact, “the need to be bonded with the spouse is particularly salient in older adulthood, but less so in the younger age”

(Li & Fung, 2011, p. 249). Although completion of goals at different stages is linked with higher marital satisfaction, it remains unclear how these goals may be different for individuals with diverse marital histories.

Although SET is linked with young adulthood in the dynamic goal theory, it is best explained as a product of relational status and the motivation to form new, close relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986). SET posits that people have a fundamental motivation to make one's life richer and more complex through close relationships—known as self-expansion (Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004). Self-expansion can be defined as the broadening of one's experience by including a partner's characteristics, resources, and perspective into their own self-concept, such that a partner becomes an extension of oneself (Sheets, 2013). The closeness experienced through self-expansion is thought to happen most rapidly at the beginning of a relationship, which facilitates relationship formation and falling in love (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). However, self-expansion begins to diminish as a relationship continues, as the partners become well known and fully integrated.

Beyond relationship formation, SET implies that self-expansion is important to the maintenance and, possible, dissolution of relationships (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Without continued efforts of self-expansion in a relationship (i.e. trying new hobbies together), boredom and distance can occur within a relationship—leading to decreases in relational satisfaction and/or relationship dissolution. Given that self-expansion has been linked to relationship satisfaction for younger and middle-aged adults (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000), it is suggested that couples benefit by including self-expanding activities, thus increases in knowledge, as relationships progress. SET suggests that couples are closest at the beginning of a relationship due to the rapid self-expansion that occurs during that time, and

couples that do not make continued efforts to include self-expanding opportunities would experience less closeness as the relationship progresses.

Whereas SET focuses on the increase of knowledge that occurs through self-expansion, SST (Carstensen et al., 1999) suggests that as individuals age, the intake of novel information is intentionally reduced and emotionally meaningful goals are prioritized. In fact, older adults tend to avoid novelty and shift towards emotionally rewarding relationships (Carstensen & Hartel, 2006). The motivation towards finding emotional meaning in life is driven by the expectations of the future. When the future is perceived as open-ended, knowledge-related goals are prioritized. However, when the future is perceived as limited, individuals prioritize emotionally-meaningful goals. To achieve these goals, individuals systematically prune their social networks throughout their lifespans in order to attain the most satisfying relationships when reaching older adulthood. Thus, SST would suggest that all older adults have a propensity towards increased closeness with individuals within their social network, including their spouse.

Although SET is not specified for one developmental stage, the knowledge goals represented in SET conflict with the emotionally-meaningful goals that SST proposes are operating for older adults. SET would suggest that the beginning of a relationship is characterized by seeking novel information from a new partner (Aron et al., 1995); whereas SST suggests that older adults no longer seek new information but concentrate on maximizing emotional intimacy in their current relationships (Carstensen, 1996). The challenge to reconciling these two theoretical approaches becomes apparent when considering the close to 500,000 adults over the age of 65 who are remarrying every year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Do remarried older adults have similar levels of closeness as first-time married older adults due to their common developmental stage, per SST, or do remarried older adults have greater

closeness due to their shorter marital durations, per SET? To answer this question, we need to empirically evaluate these theoretical frameworks using a sample of older couples with diverse marital histories. In so doing, we hope to tap into the older adults' perception of marital closeness and examine if there are different processes in place based on relational history, or if their developmental stage is central to older adults' experience of closeness.

Current Study

Due to the rapid increase in number of adults in older adulthood with diverse marital histories (Brown & Lin, 2012), it is becoming increasingly important to understand the processes related to marital well-being for this population. Coupled with the previous work surrounding the positive outcomes of marital closeness for older adults (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006; Tower et. al., 2002), this emphasizes the importance of examining the experience of closeness for older adults over time and determining the extent to which this varies based on spouses' marital histories. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of SST and SET, the current study utilizes two waves of data from a sample of 64 higher-functioning older couples to examine whether and how husbands' and wives' reports of marital closeness change over a year and determine to what extent this may depend on spouses' previous marital experiences and efforts to maintain the relationship.

To achieve this we seek to answer the following questions: 1) How do older adults' perceptions of closeness change over a year and how are these perceptions linked both concurrently and over time between partners?; 2) Does this depend on couples' marital history?; 3) Does each spouses' efforts to maintain the relationship help explain the perceptions of closeness between partners? Our hypotheses are based on the principles of two competing theories—SET (Aron & Aron, 1986) and SST (Carstensen, 1996). Our hypotheses hew much

more closely to the relational perspective of SET than to the developmental perspective of SST. For the first question, we hypothesize that perceptions of closeness will lessen or remain constant over a period of a year due to the decrease in self-expanding opportunities for couples in long-term relationships, as based on SET. However, SST would suggest that perceptions of closeness will increase over a year due to the developmental drive to maximize emotional rewards. For the second question, we hypothesize, based on SET, that couples in higher order marriages will report more closeness than those in first marriages. However, SST would suggest that couples will report high levels of closeness regardless of marital history. For the third question, we hypothesize, based on SET, that efforts to maintain the relationship will help explain higher levels of closeness and any differences that might emerge based on marital history.

Method

Participants

Sixty-four heterosexual married couples were recruited as a part of a larger study investigating marital outcomes, such as well-being and intimacy, in older adulthood. Participants were recruited locally through health care agencies, newspaper advertisements, churches, and other organizations in the Southeast United States. For couples to be eligible to participate, they had to meet the following criteria: (1) couples had to be married, (2) couples had to be retired or partially retired (working less than 40 hours a week), and (3) couples had to be able to drive to the research center to ensure they were reasonably healthy and high functioning. Approximately 1 year ($M = 16.4$ months) after the first data collection, participating couples were contacted to complete a second wave of questionnaires.

Husbands and wives were, on average, approximately 71 years old ($SD = 7.4$) and 69 ($SD = 7.0$) respectively, and were almost exclusively European American ($n = 60$ and $n = 61$). Fifty (79%) couples were in their first marriage and couples had been married for 42 years, on average ($SD = 15$). Couples had an average of 2.6 children ($SD = 1.3$; range = 0-6). Couples were highly educated—60 (94%) of the husbands and 54 (84%) of the wives attained at least some higher education. The average income for couples was \$85,875 ($SD = \$64,074$) and average total wealth (i.e., property, pensions, IRAs, and income) for couples was \$1,082,547 ($SD = \$1,277,611$). Forty-seven (73%) couples were fully retired and 17 couples were partially retired (e.g., at least one spouse currently working for pay).

At the second wave of data, 55 of the 64 original couples agreed to participate, yielding a retention rate of 86%. Of the 55 couples that participated at Wave 2, 13 were in remarriages and 41 were in first marriages. Attrition analyses revealed that husbands lost to attrition did not differ based on age ($t(62) = 1.03, p = .70$), interpersonal closeness ($t(62) = .84, p = .97$) and maintenance ($t(62) = -1.15, p = .25$). Attrition analyses also revealed that wives lost to attrition did not differ based on age ($t(60) = 1.39, p = .86$), interpersonal closeness ($t(58) = .08, p = .22$), and maintenance ($t(62) = -.62, p = .53$). Finally, attrition analyses showed that couples that participated at T2 did not differ from those lost to attrition on marital duration ($t(62) = 1.71, p = .16$).

Measures

Marital closeness. Marital closeness was measured using the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale (Aron et al., 1992). This single-item pictorial measure assessed the perception of interpersonal connectedness with a spouse, both objective (behaving close) and subjective (feeling close). Participants were asked to choose from a set of seven increasingly overlapping Venn-diagrams that best described his or her relationship with his or her partner (see Appendix A).

Marital history. Marital history was derived from a single question asking spouses to state whether they were in their first marriage or not. This variable is dichotomized such that spouses who indicate that they are not in their first marriage are coded as a “0” and those who indicate that they are in their first marriage are coded as a “1”. To be considered a remarried couple, at least one spouse had to report being in a higher order marriage.

Relationship maintenance. Relationship maintenance was measured using one item from the maintenance subscale of Braiker and Kelley’s Intimate Relations Scale (Braiker &

Kelley, 1979). The item asked husbands and wives to report the following: “How much time do you and your spouse spend discussing and trying to work out problems between you?” The item was rated on a 9-item scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*).

Plan of Analysis

We plan to first conduct descriptive statistics and correlations to examine the nature of and relations among the study variables. To examine the contributions of self-reported and spouse-reported perception of marital closeness at T1 on both their own and their spouses’ perception of closeness a year later at T2, we will conduct an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) in MPlus Verison 5.0, which allows for the inclusion of participants with missing data by using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). Utilizing a dyadic approach is necessary to account for the dependent nature of the couples’ data. To explore gender differences in the strength of these associations, we will also conduct a series of delta-chi square tests to examine whether the actor or partner effects were stronger for husbands or for wives. Next, to determine if there are any differences in these pathways based on marital history we will conduct a multi-group analysis comparing the experiences of closeness over time for remarried and first-time married couples. Finally, to begin to understand and explain any differences that emerge based on marital history, we will explore if these differences persist once we include spouses’ efforts to maintain the relationship in the model.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for the full sample are presented in Table 1. Means and standard deviations reveal that, on average, husbands and wives reported high levels of closeness at both Time 1 and Time 2. On average, husbands and wives also reported moderate levels of maintenance. Between-spouse paired *t*-tests revealed only one significant gender difference: men reported significantly higher marital closeness than wives at Time 2, $t(50) = -2.39, p = .02$. Within-spouse paired *t*-tests revealed that wives reported significantly lower marital closeness at Time 2 compared to Time 1, $t(50) = 3.32, p < .01$.

Analyses revealed that closeness was fairly stable from Time 1 to Time 2, with correlations of $r = .62, p < .001$ for wives and $r = .61, p < .001$ for husbands. Additionally, husband closeness at Time 2 was correlated with wife closeness at Time 1, $r = .31, p < .05$, and wife closeness at Time 2 was correlated with husband closeness at Time 1, $r = .29, p < .05$, suggesting a moderate across-spouse association over time. Interestingly, husband and wife closeness at Time 1 was significantly correlated, $r = .39, p < .01$, but not at Time 2. Marital duration and wife closeness at Time 1 were marginally correlated, $r = .28, p < .10$, suggesting that wives in longer marriages report higher levels of closeness. Intercorrelations revealed no significant relationships for either husband and wife maintenance variables and any other study variable.

Turning next to the descriptive statistics for the first-married and remarried subsamples (see Table 2), first-married husbands and wives reported lower levels of maintenance than did

remarried husbands and wives. Across-sample independent sample *t*-tests revealed no significant differences between husband and wife closeness at either time point or for the aggregate of husband and wife maintenance. Between-spouse paired *t*-tests reveal one significant gender difference—men in first marriages reported significantly higher levels of closeness than first-married wives at Time 2, $t(39) = -2.11, p = .04$. Within-spouse paired *t*-tests also revealed that first-married wife closeness at Time 2 was significantly lower than at Time 1, $t(38) = 2.38, p < .01$. These differences were not present for the remarried spouses.

Intercorrelations for the remarried and first-married subsamples reveal similar patterns as with the full sample, including the stability in closeness for husbands and wives across time. Interestingly, the first-married subsample revealed associations with wife maintenance that were not evident in the full sample. Wife maintenance is marginally positively correlated with wife closeness at Time 2, $r = .33, p < .10$, and negatively correlated with marital duration, $r = -.23, p < .10$, suggesting that longer marital duration is associated with lower reports of maintenance for first-married wives—yet, no association between marital duration and wife maintenance was found in the remarried subsample. For the first-married subsample, marital duration was marginally positively correlated with wife closeness at Time 1, $r = .28, p < .10$, and husband closeness at Time 2, $r = .27, p < .10$. Maintenance for first-married husbands was not significantly correlated with any other variable in the study. For the remarried subsample, marital duration and wife maintenance were not significantly correlated with any other variable in the study. Husband maintenance was marginally positively correlated with wife closeness at Time 2, $r = .53, p < .10$.

Contributions of Self-reported and Spouse-reported Perception of Marital Closeness

The model examining the contributions of self-reported and spouse-reported perception of marital closeness at T1 on both their own and their spouses' perception of closeness a year later at T2, controlling for duration of the marriage, resulted in a perfectly fitting, fully saturated model, $\chi^2(0) = 0, p < .001$; CFI = 1; RMSEA = 0, SRMR = 0 (see Figure 2). The actor effects revealed significant pathways: husbands' own perception over time, $\beta = .61, p < .001$, and wives own perception over time, $\beta = .66, p < .001$. However, the partner effects were not significant: wives' perception at T1 on husbands' perception at T2, $\beta = .02, p = .881$, and husbands' perception at T1 on wives' perception at T2, $\beta = .03, p = .779$.

To test for gender differences, the fully saturated model was compared with two constrained models with the actor effects constrained to be equal in the first model and the partner effects constrained to be equal in the second model. Delta chi-square revealed there are no gender differences for husbands or for wives for the actor effects, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .082, p = .77$, or the partner effects, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .007, p = .93$. Multi-group analysis showed no differences in the pathways based on marital history, controlling for marital duration. Delta chi-square tests for each pathway were conducted comparing the first marrieds with the remarrieds: husbands' own perceptions over time, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .13, p = .71$; wives' own perceptions over time, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .71, p = .39$; wives' perception at T1 on husbands' perception at T2, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 1.63, p = .65$; and husbands' perception at T1 on wives' perception at T2, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 2.67, p = .44$.

Finally, analyses revealed that maintenance was not a mechanism linking marital closeness over time in the sample. The model revealed stability in closeness over time for both husbands', $\beta = .59, p < .001$, and wives, $\beta = .63, p < .001$. There was no evidence of maintenance as a mechanism for husbands: husbands' perception of closeness at T1 on husband maintenance, $\beta = .07, p = .60$; husband maintenance on husbands' perception at T2, $\beta = -.12, p =$

.26. However, there was partial evidence of wives' own efforts at maintenance being important for wives' closeness at T2, $\beta = .26, p < .05$, though it was not linked T1 closeness, $\beta = -.09, p = .48$. Finally, there were no cross-spouse associations for either spouse, with wives' maintenance not linked to husbands' perception of closeness at T1, $\beta = .01, p = .93$, or at T2, $\beta = -.07, p = .54$. Similarly, we did not find evidence for the importance of husbands' maintenance for wives' perception of closeness at T1, $\beta = .12, p = .36$, or at T2, $\beta = -.07, p = .47$.

Discussion

Closeness is a necessary element in relationship formation and continuation (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007; Hess et al., 2007), and greater closeness can be beneficial for the physical and mental health of older adults (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006; Pruchno et al., 2009). Despite a growing number of older adults in higher-order marriages (Brown & Lin, 2012), there is scant literature examining the experience of closeness for these individuals. To address this gap, the current study compared the utility of socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen et al., 1999) and self-expansion theory (SET; Aron & Aron, 1986) for explaining the experiences of marital closeness over time in a sample of high-functioning older couples with varying marital histories.

Our findings suggest that older adulthood is a time when marriages flourish and spouses enjoy feeling close to one another. In fact, we found that remarriages in older adulthood were nearly indistinguishable from first marriages in this regard, supporting the central tenets of SST (Carstensen et al., 1999). Although older couples enjoy fairly stable marital closeness over time, regardless of marital history, some evidence emerged to suggest that gender differences among spouses become more marked as individuals age. In particular, the within-person analyses of closeness for wives suggest that wives are experiencing less closeness with their husbands over time, which is more consistent with the tenets of SET (Aron & Aron, 1986). Our analyses ultimately suggest that our theoretical frameworks are not mutually exclusive, but perhaps both can be instrumental in explaining the different developmental and relational factors that are salient in older adults' marriages.

Closeness in Older Adulthood: Stable and Developmentally Driven

Consistent with SST (Carstensen et al., 1999), our findings reveal that older spouses in our sample are very close to one another and that this appears to be stable over a one-year period. These findings are inconsistent with SET (Aron & Aron, 1986), which would suggest that older adults would grow distant in their marriage over time. Instead, we find more support for the theory that older adulthood is a time when individuals prioritize emotionally meaningful goals, including experiencing close, intimate relationships (Carstensen et al., 1999). Moreover, when asked to list their personal goals, older adults tend to select goals related to spending time with a spouse (Penningroth & Scott, 2012).

Although some research suggests that marital satisfaction continues to decrease across the lifespan (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993), older adults appear to be experiencing close, intimate relationships with their spouses. These findings suggest that future research on marriages in older adulthood may benefit from understanding the differences between closeness and marital satisfaction over time. If marital satisfaction decreases rapidly across the first ten years of marriage and then slowly declines after that (Glenn, 1998), more robust longitudinal studies are needed to determine if couples are experiencing an increase in closeness over the lifespan, as SST (Carstensen et al., 1999) would suggest, or if the pattern for satisfaction and closeness parallel one another. As life expectancy continues to rise (Christensen, Doblhammer, Rau, & Vaupel, 2009), it is becoming increasingly important to better understand the determinants of marital well-being over the lifespan, especially when considering varying challenges, such as divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012), that are becoming more present in older adulthood.

Similarly Close: Marital History and Closeness in Older Couples

Further highlighting the developmental drive towards closeness during older adulthood, our findings revealed that there were no differences in closeness based on marital history in our sample of higher-functioning, older couples. This finding complements the dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction presented by Li and Fung (2011), which suggests that companionship goals increase and personal growth goals decrease over the lifespan. However, these goals have not been considered for individuals with varying marital histories, as most individuals enter a marital relationship during early adulthood when personal growth goals can be easily recognized through taking on the resources and characteristics of a spouse (Li & Fung). Unclear, however, is the experience of closeness for couples that enter a successive marital relationship at different times across the lifespan. Our findings suggest that the developmental stage of older adulthood is perhaps more salient for the experience of marital closeness than the newer relational stage of higher-order marriages. However, there is some evidence to suggest that couples in longer remarriages may function similarly to those in first marriages, as suggested in Pienta and colleagues' (2000) work on health benefits of marriage. Since most of the couples in our sample were in higher-order marriages that were longer than fifteen years, future research should focus on couples that remarry later in the lifespan, as there may be important differences for spouses in remarriages of shorter duration.

With over 500,000 adults over the age of 65 remarrying every year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), it is becoming increasingly necessary to understand the outcomes related to remarriage for these individuals and how remarriages in older adulthood may be different than those in other stages of adult life. Many scholars have focused on the definition of successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) and the importance of social support for older adults (Baltes & Baltes, 1990); however, this definition has not been examined for those in higher-order marriages. Although

SST (Carstensen et al., 1999) appears to suggest that older adults would avoid the novelty of a new romantic relationship, the focus on emotional rewards through close relationships during this developmental period may encourage those in older adulthood to enter into a new marital relationship. Perhaps remarriage in older adulthood is not focused on the novelty of expanding one's sense of self through another person's characteristics and resources (Aron & Aron, 1986), but simply focuses on maximizing companionship. In fact, many older adults are enjoying relational companionship but are choosing not to remarry because of legal concerns regarding assets (Luxenberg, 2014). In this way, remarriages in older adulthood may function differently than those in early or middle adulthood.

Maintenance: Salient in Older Adulthood?

Contrary to our third hypothesis, our findings reveal that working on problems in the relationship does not affect marital closeness for older spouses. In fact, couples reported spending only moderate amounts of time working on their problems, regardless of marital history. But it is important to note that our use of a single item for maintenance may have masked some of the importance of this construct in this population. Supporting this conclusion was the fact that the Braiker and Kelley's (1979) Intimate Relations Scale's subscale for maintenance was unreliable for our sample, suggesting that perhaps efforts to maintain a relationship function differently for older spouses. There is scant literature surrounding maintenance in older adult relationships, so to help contextualize our findings, we draw from the more robust conflict literature. For example, Birditt and Fingerman (2005) found that older adults want to avoid conflict and enlist more passive tactics in hopes that difficulties in the relationship will resolve or dissolve. Older adults also report having fewer relational problems than younger adults (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003). SST would suggest that older adults avoid

emotionally distressing situations and maximize emotional rewards instead (Carstensen et al., 1999). Further solidifying these ideas, Rauer and colleagues (under revision) found that older couples from the same sample actively avoided negative behaviors such as hostility and denial during an observed problem-solving discussion. Together, these findings suggest that utilizing more developmentally appropriate measures of maintenance may be in order if the goal is to understand how this construct operates later in life.

Importantly, these findings may be specific to our current cohort of older couples, as the goals and values of marriage are ever changing in our culture (Cherlin, 2009). Marriages in the 20th century were defined as companionate—focusing on intimacy and the emotional bond between the spouses. The ideals of companionate marriage can be easily related to the tenets of SST (Carstensen et al., 1999), which suggests older spouses maximize emotional rewards within marriage. However, marriages in the 21st century are defined as individualized—focusing on the self-actualization for each spouse. This new model of marriage prioritizes spouses encouraging one another to recognize their full potential and enjoying genuine friendship within the marriage (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). In a way, this new model of marriage is similar to the tenets of SET (Aron & Aron, 1986), as it would suggest that individuals enter relationships in order to make one’s life richer and more complex by acquiring the characteristics, resources, and experiences of a spouse. Due to this historically shift in marital values and goals, our results may only be significant for this current cohort of older adults that were married during the middle of the 20th century. In contrast, newer cohorts may hold to more stringent ideals of self-actualization in a marriage, instead of prioritizing companionship, and thus these findings may be specific to our sample of older adults.

Role of Gender in Marital Closeness in Older Adulthood

Although our overall findings provide support for SST (Carstensen et al., 1999), gender differences in our sample suggest that the theories we presented are not mutually exclusive—there may also be some support for SET (Aron & Aron, 1986) as well. Our findings reveal that husbands report significantly more closeness than wives as they age and wives report significantly less closeness over time. Interestingly, these results were replicated for the first-married subsample, but not for the remarried subsample, but this may be due to power issues from the small subsample.

Even though gender differences did not appear in the dyadic analyses, these findings are still suggestive of certain trends of closeness for our sample. Perhaps, just as women may require more from a partner to be happy in a marriage (Bernard, 1972), they may consider different aspects when reporting on their experience of closeness. One possible explanation is that, as individuals age, men tend to experience more health concerns (e.g., cancer) which contributes to their shortened life expectancies (World Health Organization, 2003). If the husband's health and quality of life are decreasing during this time, there may be less opportunity for efforts to maintain the relationship. For example, if husbands experience hearing loss there may be increased difficulty for spouses to communicate and feel emotionally close—an important element of closeness according to Ben-Ari (2012). Furthermore, wives experience higher rates of caregiving for husbands, which has been related to higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of life satisfaction (Yee & Schulz, 2000). According to the tenets of SET, this changing relationship dynamic may lead to fewer opportunities to sustain closeness in the relationship. This shift in the relationship coupled with the negative outcomes related to caregiving may result in a decrease in closeness for wives. Perhaps wives are feeling less physically and emotionally close with their spouses as they age due to the health problems of

their husbands. Although caretaking behaviors were not included for the current study, they would be important to consider in future work investigating gender differences in closeness for married older adults.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths. Our study included many notable strengths. First, by capturing closeness for spouses over two waves of data collection, we were able to reveal the stability of closeness within our sample, as well as observe the decrease in closeness for wives over time. Second, our sample included a variety of marital histories among the spouses, allowing us to explore possible differences among groups. Third, the dyadic nature of our data allows us to consider the interactional nature of closeness within spouses, enabling us to see that spouses' experiences of closeness were relatively independent. Finally, although much of the literature on remarriage has centered on remarried couples in middle adulthood (e.g., White & Booth, 1985), our study offers a unique perspective on these relationships in older adulthood. This focus on older adults may explain why we found more similarities in experiences based on marital history.

Limitations. Despite the strengths of our study, there are some limitations to consider when interpreting the results. First, our modestly-sized sample is fairly homogenous (wealthy, European American, highly satisfied), thus does not represent older adults as a whole. Considering that economic hardship has been linked to increases in marital distress (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999) and race has been linked to differences in marital quality (Broman, 2005), our results may not generalize to older adults in the United States. Secondly, our single-item of maintenance may not be the most salient measure of maintenance for older adults, as research suggests that older adults handle conflict in relationships differently than those in younger adulthood (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003). Also, recent literature on closeness has focused

on the importance of both closeness and distance in the continuing and formation of relationships (Birthnell, 2001). The current study only measured marital closeness, not distance. Whereas Hess and colleagues (2007) suggested that the Inclusion of Other in the Self measure developed by Aron and colleagues (1992) accounts for the range of both closeness and distance in a relationship, it is less clear how this measure can be utilized in empirical work to capture the most desired amount of closeness and distance in relationships. Future studies should consider examining both perceived and desired closeness and distance in order to reveal within-person preferences, as Ben-Ari (2012) suggests that every couple constructs a unique framework for closeness and distance within their relationship.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature by examining the experience of closeness for older adults over time and determining the extent to which this varies based on spouses' marital histories. Overall, older adults are experiencing fairly stable and close relationships with their spouses over time, regardless of marital history or efforts to maintain the relationship. However, within-person analyses revealed gender differences among couples as they age, such that wives experience a decrease in closeness over time. Future research should consider using a more salient measure of maintenance for older adults, as well as focus on both distance and closeness in marital relationships to satisfy the recent theoretical advancement in the field of closeness.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that practitioners should be aware that although older couples are enjoying close relationships, there may be important factors contributing to a decline in closeness for wives that could result in an increase in mental health problems as they age. Although older couples have been largely overlooked in therapy (James & Haley, 1995), scholars suggest that as the population becomes more affected by challenges associated with

aging, there is going to be an increase in older adults attending therapy (Zarit & Knight, 1996). Practitioners should be prepared to assess a couple's current feelings of closeness as well as desired closeness in order to tailor interventions to promote closeness (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Pistole, 1994), which in turn may promote the mental and physical well-being of spouses as well (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006; Pruchno et al., 2009).

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Figure 1. Changing priority of the three types of marital goals across adulthood (reproduced from Li & Fung, 2011).

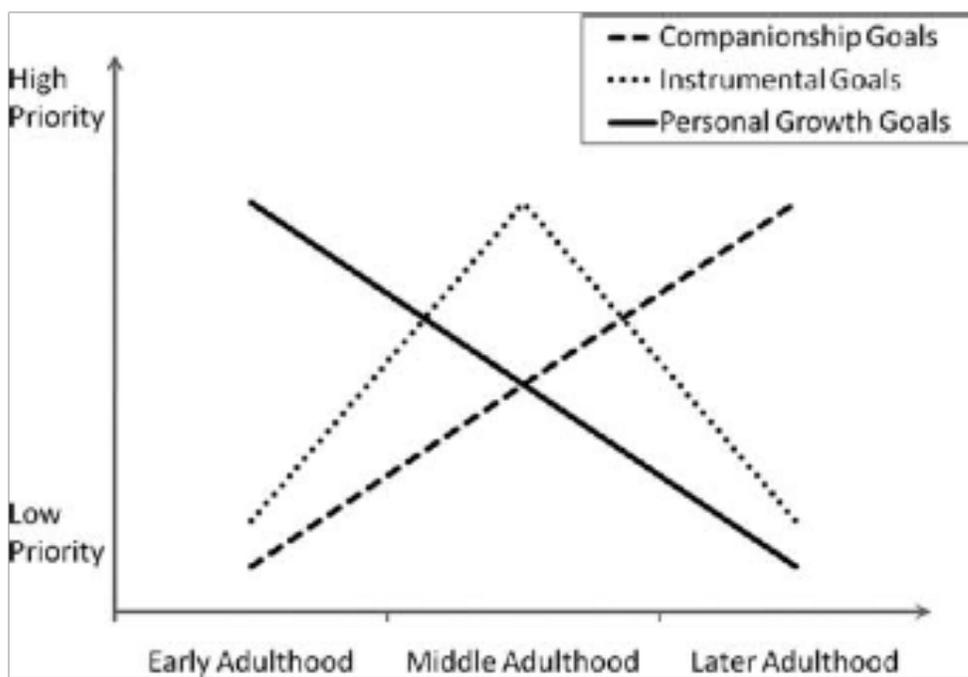


Figure 2. Analyzed model examining how husbands' and wives' reports of marital closeness change over a year.

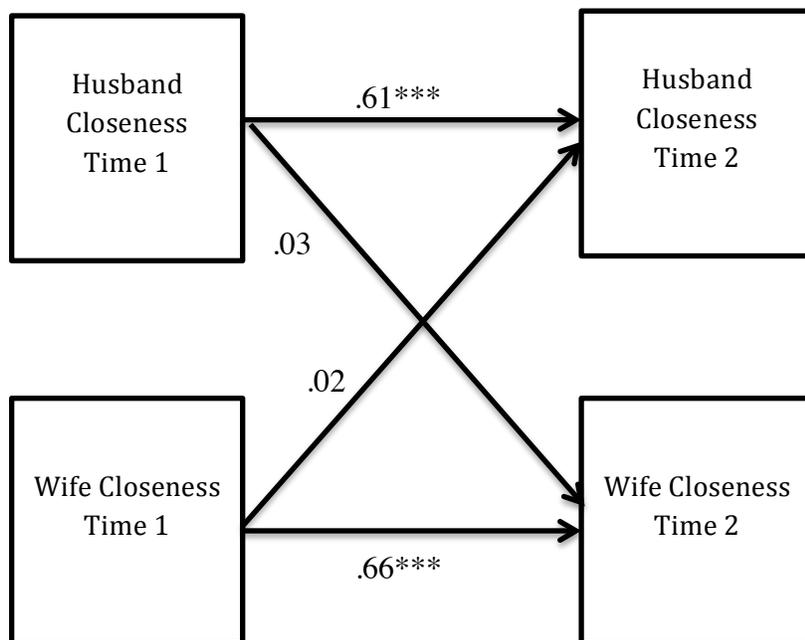


Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables for husbands and wives (N=64)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Wife closeness T1	-						
2. Wife closeness T2	.62***	-					
3. Husband closeness T1	.39**	.29*	-				
4. Husband closeness T2	.31*	.16	.61***	-			
5. Marital duration	.20	.15	.04	.24†	-		
6. Wife maintenance	-.07	.22	-.02	-.12	-.16	-	
7. Husband maintenance	.15	.07	.11	-.05	-.10	.20	-
<i>M</i>	5.72	5.20 ^a	5.77	5.74 ^a	42.4	4.70	4.50
<i>SD</i>	1.19	1.30	1.23	1.29	14.96	2.09	2.00
<i>Range</i>	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-68	1-9	1-9

Note: † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, ^a indicates a significant gender difference

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables for husbands and wives for remarrieds (N=14) and first marrieds (N=50)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Wife closeness T1	-	.57*	.58*	.68*	.13	-.23	.37
2. Wife closeness T2	.63***	-	.33	.50	.40	.09	.53†
3. Husband closeness T1	.36*	.28†	-	.73**	-.14	-.41	.15
4. Husband closeness T2	.19	.01	.55***	-	.08	-.20	.29
5. Marital duration	.28†	.05	.15	.27†	-	.34	.27
6. Wife maintenance	-.03	.33†	.13	-.05	-.23†	-	.07
7. Husband maintenance	.12	-.05	.11	-.15	-.05	.21	-
$M_{Remarried}$	5.54	5.00	5.71	5.37	19.57	5.39	5.10
$SD_{Remarried}$.967	1.41	1.43	1.55	12.42	2.39	2.03
$M_{First\ married}$	5.77	5.26 ^a	5.78	5.85 ^a	48.79	4.51	4.34
$SD_{First\ married}$	1.25	1.28	1.18	1.21	7.51	1.98	1.98

Note: † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, ^a indicates a significant gender difference, remarrieds are above and first marrieds are below

Appendix A

Aron, Aron, and Smollan's (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self Measure

Please circle the picture below that best describes your relationship with your partner.

