



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTIMACY AND PERCEIVED PARTNER RESPONSIVENESS AMONG MARRIED COUPLES

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Abstract

Marriage relies on emotional intimacy and partner responsiveness, both of which are central to marital satisfaction. This study examined the relationship between intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples in the Indian context. A total of 120 participants (60 males, 60 females) aged 20–35 years completed the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Scale and the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (PPRS). Independent samples t-tests revealed that females reported significantly higher levels of emotional intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness, whereas males reported higher sexual intimacy. Pearson correlation analyses indicated a strong positive relationship between emotional intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), with social, sexual, intellectual and recreational intimacy also showing significant positive relationships. These findings highlight the pivotal role of partner responsiveness in fostering intimacy and indicate that gender and cultural expectations influence marital dynamics in India.

Keywords: Intimacy, Perceived Partner Responsiveness & Married Couples.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a dynamic and multifaceted relationship that thrives on emotional closeness, mutual understanding, and responsiveness between partners. Among the factors contributing to marital satisfaction, intimacy plays a central role, fostering trust, relational closeness, and emotional support. Emotional intimacy, in particular, involves sharing thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities without fear of judgment, which strengthens the emotional bond between spouses (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988). In the Indian context, marriage is shaped by cultural, social, and familial expectations. While Western models often emphasize individual emotional needs, Indian marriages traditionally prioritize relational harmony, collective well-being, and extended family dynamics (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Roland, 1988). However, modernization and evolving expectations among younger Indian couples have increased the emphasis on emotional closeness and partner responsiveness within marital relationships (Gupta & Singh, 2017).

DIMENSIONS OF INTIMACY

Intimacy is a multidimensional construct, encompassing emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational domains (Schaefer & Olson, 1981):

1. **Emotional intimacy** involves sharing one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities, fostering trust, mutual understanding, and emotional security (Prager, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Couples with high emotional intimacy are better able to support each other during stressful situations and maintain relational closeness.

2. **Social intimacy** refers to sharing friendships, social networks, and social experiences, promoting companionship, shared identity, and mutual support (Schaefer & Olson, 1981).

3. **Sexual intimacy** reflects physical closeness, sexual expression, and mutual satisfaction. High sexual intimacy strengthens emotional bonds and contributes to marital stability and happiness (Prager, 1995; Givertz et al., 2013).

4. **Intellectual intimacy** involves sharing ideas, beliefs, and experiences, facilitating meaningful conversations, mutual respect, and collaborative problem-solving (Laurenceau et al., 2005).

5. **Recreational intimacy** pertains to engaging in shared hobbies, leisure, and playful activities, fostering cooperation, positive affect, and shared enjoyment (Prager, 1995).

Together, these dimensions provide a holistic understanding of marital intimacy and its role in relationship satisfaction.

PERCEIVED PARTNER RESPONSIVENESS

Perceived partner responsiveness (PPR) is defined as an individual's belief that their partner understands, values, and supports them (Reis et al., 2004). PPR enhances emotional security, relational closeness, and marital satisfaction (Maisel & Gable, 2009; Feeney & Collins, 2015). It includes three key components:

- **Understanding** – accurately perceiving and comprehending a partner's emotions and needs (Reis et al., 2017).
- **Validation** – acknowledging and affirming a partner's thoughts and feelings (Gable & Reis, 2010).
- **Caring and support** – expressing care and providing tangible assistance, which strengthens perceptions of responsiveness (Collins & Feeney, 2004).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTIMACY AND PERCEIVED PARTNER RESPONSIVENESS

Perceived partner responsiveness is a crucial predictor of emotional intimacy. Partners who perceive responsiveness feel heard, valued, and supported, which strengthens emotional bonds and marital satisfaction (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Selcuk et al., 2016). Conversely, a lack of responsiveness can create emotional distance and dissatisfaction. Empirical studies indicate that higher PPR is associated with increased intimacy, reduced attachment anxiety, and greater marital satisfaction (Girme et al., 2014; Ogolsky et al., 2019; Reis & Carmichael, 2006).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The interplay between intimacy and PPR can be explained through several theoretical frameworks:

- **Attachment Theory** (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) posits that securely attached individuals experience greater emotional intimacy and perceive their partners as more responsive, while insecure attachment can hinder intimacy and responsiveness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).
- **Self-Expansion Theory** (Aron & Aron, 1996) suggests that responsive partners facilitate personal growth and mutual fulfillment, enhancing intimacy and relationship satisfaction.
- **Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy** (Reis & Shaver, 1988) emphasizes that self-disclosure followed by understanding, validation, and care strengthens emotional intimacy, whereas indifference disrupts relational closeness.
- **Social Exchange Theory** (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) frames intimacy and responsiveness as relational investments; high responsiveness encourages reciprocal emotional engagement, while low responsiveness may reduce relational commitment.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Despite the recognized importance of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness, limited research has explored their interrelationship among Indian married couples, particularly young couples aged 20–35. Understanding how emotional, social, sexual, intellectual and recreational intimacy relate to perceived partner responsiveness can provide valuable insights into marital dynamics and inform interventions aimed at enhancing relationship satisfaction. The present study therefore aims to examine the relationship between intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples, highlighting the multidimensional nature of intimacy and its significance in fostering responsive and fulfilling marital relationships.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to examine the relationship between intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples. Specifically, it seeks to:

- To examine gender differences in the dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples.
- To investigate the relationship between dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples.

HYPOTHESES

H1: There will be a significant difference in dimensions of intimacy between male and female married individuals.

H2: There will be a significant difference in perceived partner responsiveness between male and female married individuals.

H3: There will be a significant relationship between dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design to investigate the relationship between dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples.

MEASURES

1. Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR)

The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Scale (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) is a 36-item self-report measure assessing five dimensions of intimacy: emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. Emotional intimacy reflects closeness and the ability to share feelings without defensiveness, while social intimacy evaluates shared friendships. Sexual intimacy measures physical and sexual closeness, intellectual intimacy focuses on sharing thoughts and experiences, and recreational intimacy examines mutual engagement in activities. Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), assessing either current or ideal relationship intimacy. The PAIR scale is widely used in relationship research and therapy to evaluate intimacy levels and their impact on marital satisfaction.

2. Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (PPRS)

A self – report measure designed by Reis and Shaver (1988) for Perceived Partner Responsiveness (PPRS) scale was used to assess the extent to which an individual felt understood, validated and taken care by their partners. It measures the partner's responsiveness to one another needs and preferences. The PPRS is an 18-item scale with two dimensions known understanding items; feelings that one's partner including their thoughts and feelings and the validating items; refers the partners attentiveness and caring. The self – administered instrument has the time limit of 3-4 minutes. It further has revised versions with 5-point likert scale and 7-point likert scale. It also has 9-point ratings ranging from 1-9 (not at all true to completely true). There is no reverse score in the items. The scoring has indicated higher score refers to greater perceived responsiveness and vice versa. The PPRS has the internal consistency with cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .80 to .88 (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Laurenceau et al., 1998) and also had a construct and convergent validity.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, comprising 120 married individuals (60 males and 60 females) aged between 20 and 35 years. They were approached through community networks and social contacts. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data were collected individually using standardized questionnaires: the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) Scale and the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (PPRS). The paper-pencil administration took approximately 20–25 minutes per participant. Completed responses were scored according to standardized procedures, and data were analyzed using independent t-tests and Pearson's correlation to test the study's objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1

Showing Independent sample t-test for dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness based on gender

Variable	Male (M ± SD, N = 60)	Female (M ± SD, N = 60)	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Emotional Intimacy	4.85 ± 0.88	5.20 ± 0.84	2.50	0.014	Significant
Social Intimacy	4.55 ± 0.82	4.70 ± 0.78	1.15	0.252	Not Significant
Sexual Intimacy	4.75 ± 0.93	4.35 ± 1.02	2.80	0.006	Significant
Intellectual Intimacy	4.92 ± 0.87	5.05 ± 0.82	1.00	0.319	Not Significant
Recreational Intimacy	4.65 ± 0.90	4.80 ± 0.86	1.35	0.178	Not Significant
Perceived Partner Responsiveness	5.25 ± 0.78	5.55 ± 0.74	2.70	0.008	Significant

Source: Primary data

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in the dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples. The results indicated a significant gender difference in emotional intimacy, with females ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.84$) reporting higher levels than males ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(118) = 2.50$, $p = .014$. A significant gender difference was also observed in sexual intimacy, wherein males ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.93$) reported higher levels compared to females ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(118) = 2.80$, $p = .006$.

1.02), $t(118) = 2.80, p = .006$.

No significant gender differences were found in social intimacy, $t(118) = 1.15, p = .252$; intellectual intimacy, $t(118) = 1.00, p = .319$; or recreational intimacy, $t(118) = 1.35, p = .178$. Furthermore, a significant gender difference was observed in perceived partner responsiveness, with females ($M = 5.55, SD = 0.74$) reporting significantly higher levels than males ($M = 5.25, SD = 0.78$), $t(118) = 2.70, p = .008$.

With regard to hypothesis testing, Hypothesis 1, which stated that there will be a significant difference in the dimensions of intimacy between male and female married individuals, was partially supported. Significant gender differences were evident in emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy, whereas social, intellectual and recreational intimacy did not differ significantly across genders. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was partially accepted.

Hypothesis 2, which proposed a significant difference in perceived partner responsiveness between male and female married individuals, was supported by the findings. Females reported significantly higher perceived partner responsiveness than males, and hence, Hypothesis 2 was accepted.

Table 2

Showing Pearson Correlation Between dimensions of Intimacy and Perceived Partner Responsiveness among Married Couples

Variables	Emotional Intimacy	Social Intimacy	Sexual Intimacy	Intellectual Intimacy	Recreational Intimacy
Perceived Partner Responsiveness	0.70**	0.55**	0.60**	0.57**	0.56**

** correlation at 0.01 levels (Sig 2-tailed)

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples. The results revealed a strong positive relationship between emotional intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness, $r = .70, p < .01$. Moderate positive relationships were found between perceived partner responsiveness and social intimacy, $r = .55, p < .01$; sexual intimacy, $r = .60, p < .01$; intellectual intimacy, $r = .57, p < .01$; and recreational intimacy, $r = .56, p < .01$. These findings indicate that higher levels of intimacy across emotional, social, sexual, intellectual and recreational domains are significantly associated with greater perceived partner responsiveness among married couples.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined gender differences in intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness, as well as the relationship between various dimensions of intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness among married couples. Results indicated that females reported significantly higher emotional intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness, while males reported higher sexual intimacy. No significant gender differences were observed in social, intellectual or recreational intimacy, suggesting relative similarity across these dimensions.

Correlation analyses revealed that emotional intimacy was positively correlated with perceived partner responsiveness, whereas social, sexual, intellectual and recreational intimacy demonstrated moderate positive relationships. These findings support the Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988), highlighting that intimacy develops through self-disclosure followed by partner responsiveness characterized by understanding, validation and care. High levels of perceived responsiveness foster emotional security, relational closeness and marital satisfaction (Maisel & Gable, 2009; Selcuk et al., 2016).

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence from the Indian cultural context, emphasizing the importance of emotional intimacy and responsive partner behaviours in sustaining marital well-being. The results have practical implications for relationship counselling, marital therapy and interventions designed to enhance emotional closeness and responsiveness in marital relationships. Future research may expand the sample to diverse age groups, employ longitudinal designs and explore culturally tailored interventions to further strengthen marital satisfaction.

LIMITATIONS

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The sample was restricted to young married individuals (20–35 years), limiting the generalizability of findings to older or long-term marriages (Greeff & Malherbe, 2001).

Data were collected using self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability and response biases (Impett, Kogan, English, & John, 2012). In addition, the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions about the relationship between intimacy and responsiveness (Reis & Clark, 2013). Future studies adopting longitudinal and mixed-method approaches could address these methodological limitations.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Longitudinal studies could examine how emotional intimacy and perceived partner responsiveness evolve across different stages of marriage, considering shifts in relationship priorities over time (Ogolsky et al., 2019). Expanding the sample to include diverse age groups, socio-economic classes, and cultural backgrounds would enhance generalizability and provide a broader understanding of marital dynamics (Roland, 1988; Gupta & Singh, 2017). Incorporating qualitative approaches, such as interviews or case studies, could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of couples (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Future research may also evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions for instance, gratitude journaling or mindfulness-based couple therapy that have been linked to enhanced intimacy and responsiveness (Impett et al., 2012; Selcuk et al., 2016). Finally, comparative studies between Indian and Western couples could clarify cultural influences on intimacy and partner responsiveness (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Roland, 1988).

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