ABSTRACT: A secondary analysis of four samples from earlier studies was used to test two hypotheses concerning long-term marriages. First, it was hypothesized that couples from marriages of 30 years or more duration would be characterized by higher levels of relationship quality, with the overall pattern between duration of marriage and relationship quality being curvilinear; across four samples of husbands and wives, only weak support was found for this hypothesis. A second hypothesis, that elements of intrinsic communication including positive regard, empathy, and congruence would be less important for couples from older marriages, received no support. Thus, it appears that relatively intrinsic components of the marital relationship are just as important currently for older couples as they are for younger couples, in spite of popular opinion to the contrary.

Rice (1983: 7–9) has echoed the Maces' observations (Mace, 1972; Mace & Mace, 1974), that marriages have become more intrinsic than in the past, with greater emphasis on love, open communication, and companionship. In recent research (Wampler and Powell, 1982), the latter concepts have been approximated more formally by the concepts of positive regard, congruence, and empathy (Barrett-Lennard, 1962). If Rice and the Maces are correct in their assumption that older marriages are less intrinsic, then we would expect that relatively intrinsic variables such as regard, congruence, and empathy would be weaker predictors of overall marital satisfaction among older marriages as compared to marriages contracted more recently.

At the same time, research (Anderson et al., 1983) often has found a curvilinear relationship between marital quality and stage in the family life cycle with the very youngest and the very oldest couples reporting higher marital quality. In most cases, such research has used only marital adjustment as the dependent variable without evaluating the effect of duration of marriage upon more specific aspects of marital communication such as regard, congruence, and empathy. Therefore,
we elected to test the following hypotheses regarding couples in long-term marriage relationships:

Hypothesis 1

Marital quality will be curvilinearly related to duration of marriage with couples who have been married 30 years or more and those couples married less than 10 years reporting the highest levels of marital quality.

Hypothesis 2

Regard, congruence, and empathy will be weaker predictors of overall marital satisfaction among couples married 30 years or longer as compared to more recent marriages.

METHOD

Measurement

In each of the four samples described below, we had measures of marital satisfaction, positive regard, and congruence. Three samples also included a measure of empathy. Marital satisfaction was measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction (KMS) Scale, a three-item measure which has shown high internal reliability (Schumm, Nichols, et al., 1983; Schumm, Scanlon, et al., 1983; Grover et al., 1984) and test-retest reliability (Mitchell et al., 1983), as well as concurrent validity with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier and Filsinger, 1983; Grover et al., 1984). Positive regard, empathy, and congruence were measured by abbreviated subscales from the Barrett-Lennard (1962) Relationship Inventory (Schumm et al., 1980; Schumm et al., 1981; Schumm, Benigas, et al., 1983).

Samples

The aforementioned measures were administered in a variety of surveys of the general population of married persons residing in various communities within Kansas. Data were available from a sample of 83 rural families surveyed in the fall of 1977, a sample of 98 urban families surveyed in the spring of 1978, a sample of 212 wives surveyed in 1979, and a sample of 79 married couples surveyed in 1981, as described respectively in previous reports (Schumm et al., 1980;