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## INFLUENCE OF LENGTH OF MARRIAGE, GENDER AND AGE ON MARITAL STRESS AMONG MARRIED WORKERS

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### **Abstract**

*Marital stress seems to affect every marriage though in various ways and at different levels of the marriage as seen in this research. This study investigated the influence of length of marriage, gender and age on marital stress. The study involved 186 married people selected from non-teaching staff of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) Agbani. They ranged between 20 - 55 (i.e.,  $x = 40.32$ ) in years. The Marital Stress Inventory (MSI) by Omoluabi (1994) was used for data collection. Three-way analysis of variance F-test revealed that the three main factors of length of marriage, gender and age on marital stress were significant. The result also showed a significant interaction of length of marriage and age; gender and age. The result yielded non-significant outcome between length of marriage and gender, and among length of marriage, gender and age on marital stress. It was recommended that females, married people in their old age and those in their long length of marriage should guide themselves from marital stress since this study proved that they are prone to marital stress unlike males, married people in their young age and those who are young.*

**Keywords:** Marital Stress, Length of Marriage, Gender, Age and Married Workers.

### **Introduction**

Marriage is the coming together of two people from the same or different cultures, socio-economic background, religious beliefs, educational background and age differences who have agreed to live as husband and wife after performing the necessary marital rites. In some cultures including Nkanu in Enugu State of South East Nigeria the two people usually are adult male and female who have agreed to become husband and wife. These marital rites are culture bound, therefore it depends on the culture(s) of the intended couples. Marriage is an essentially private, intimate, emotional relationship created by two people for their own personal reasons to enhance their own personal well-being (Drucilla, 1998). Also according to Dukeminier, Krier, Alexander, and Schill (2006), marriage is a social union or legal contract

between individuals that create kinship. It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged in a variety of ways, depending on the culture.

Interestingly, marriages seem to encounter numerous challenges immediately after the marital rites are performed. Some perceived challenges faced by married people can be positive such as bearing children, and parenting etc. such are regarded as eustress (Selye, 1975). Sadly, some of these challenges like verbal and physical abuses, nagging, insufficient funds, etc, are detrimental to health of the couples they are regarded as a 'distress' (Selye, 1975). Whether these challenges are seen as eustress or distress, all of them are regarded in marriage as sources of marital stress and adequate adjustment is needed in order to be safe from ill health and even death. Most of these difficulties can come from the spouses themselves, their children, their sex roles, their relatives, friends or neighbours (Nwatu, 2018). It can also occur as a result of differences in religious beliefs, cultural background, social status, educational gap and age gap, all these difficulties may culminate in marital stress (Nwatu, 2018). Marital stress is the spousal unresolved conflict, disaffection, misunderstanding, quarrel and fighting which may lead to separation or divorce in marriage (Nichosen & Smith, 2010 cited in Okeke, Abamara, Okoye, Eze & Ozoude, 2019). Marital stress here entails a condition where marriage related factors interact with the individual to change (disrupt or enhance) his or her psychological conditions such that the person is forced to deviate from normal functioning (Denga, 1991, Beehr & Newman, 1998 cited in Nwatu, 2018). Marital stress is being fueled when there is lack of adequate adjustment in a marriage relationship. It may affect married ones in the following ways: chronic sickness, misperception, and uncontrolled crisis that may lead to divorce or separation. In this study, the author wants to look at influence of length of marriage, gender and age on marital stress of non-teaching married workers of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) Agbani.

Length of marriage refers to the number of years a couple has stayed together as husband and wife. Studies have shown that couples seem to be happy at early and later stages of their marriage than in the middle stage (Rollins & Feldman, 1970). This may be due to the reduced number of time people in the middle stage spend on interaction and on bearing and

rearing of children. Moreover, the age of the couple has effect on marital stress. According to Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu and Needham (2006), marital strain appears to matter for health as individual's get older. They also found that as individuals get older, they lose key social figures in their lives and rely more on their spouse as a source of meaning in their lives. Komasi and Saeid (2016) in their study found that age did not have a role in marital stress among men. Another factor that has been found to have significant effect on marital stress is gender. In a study by Potter (2006), it was found that marital quality had a larger impact on women than on men. Balog, Janszky, Leineweber, Blom, Wamala and Orth-Gomer (2003) in their study found women are more sensitive to familial stress than men and marital arguments affect their psychological health more prominently. Also, Robrbaugh, Shoham and Coyne (2006) found in their study that due to stronger emotional responses in women, they report higher level of marital stress than men do. In order words, marital stress has been shown to be influenced by length of marriage, gender and age. Since in the extant literature, these variables have not been investigated in Igbo culture, the present researcher attempts to explore them. Some theories have been postulated to explain the phenomenon of stress, marital stress and marriage:

### **Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory**

Hobfoll, Freedy, Green and Solomon (1996) assumes that stress occurs in any of this three contexts: when people experience loss of resources, when resources are threatened, or when people invest their resources without subsequent gain. Four categories of resources are proposed: object resources (i.e., physical objects such as home, clothing, or access to transportation), condition resources (e.g., employment, personal relationships), personal resources (e.g., skills or self-efficacy), and energy resources (means that facilitate the attainment of other resources, for example, money, credit, or knowledge). In my opinion, loss of resources might affect both men and women, those in short marriages and also those in long marriage even people of all ages, thus the menace of marital stress.

### **Interaction (Transactional) Theories**

Transactional theories incorporated the importance of both stressors and stress responses in explaining the linkage between stress and illness or disease. Lazarus and Folkman

(1984) proposed a transactional theory of stress that has received considerable attention over the years. According to their perspective, it was not the initial stressor per se that was critical in linking stress to disease, but the individual's response to the stressor that determined whether a cyclic stress reaction developed.

Focusing upon the acute cognitive stress response system, Lazarus (1966) suggested that three types of cognitive appraisal occurred in determining the magnitude of the stress reaction: primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and reappraisal. Primary appraisal focused upon the degree to which a person detected a stressor as being harmful (it leading to potential injury or illness), threatening (causing anxiety, fear, or damage to self-esteem), or challenging (leading to potential gain or growth). Lazarus (1966), noted that individuals determine whether a stimulus was irrelevant, positive or stressful; only stimuli appraised as stressful elicited ongoing stress responses. Primary appraisal was conceptualized as being accompanied by secondary appraisal, which focused upon a person's determination of his or her resources to cope with the stressor perceived during primary appraisal. The process of reappraisal involved any change in the primary appraisal as a result of the assessment of coping resources that occurred during secondary appraisal.

Olexy and Herring (2006) conducted a study to determine how positive and negative aspects of marital quality affect physical health and whether these effects vary with age or gender. One thousand and forty-nine married people between 24-96 years participated in the study. It was found that marital stress affects married people at older age than people at younger age. There was no evidence of gender differences.

In another study conducted by Herrick (1998), with a total participants of 20 married couples between the ages of 20 and 55 with mean age = 34.2 years. The study was to find out the best predictors of marital interaction among age of the couple, their length of marriage and number of children. It was found that those couples who have been married for a relatively long time (16 years or more) have few to no negative statements and disagreements. A shorter length of marriage (11 years or less) is predictive of the occurrence of more disagreements and more negative statements. So they concluded that length of marriage is what predicts marital interaction, while age does not.

Peleg (2008) carried out a study on 121 Israel men and women to explore relationships between differentiation of self and marital satisfaction at various stages of married life. It was found that level of marital satisfaction and duration of the marriage were negatively correlated for women and positively correlated for men.

In another study conducted by Luo (2006) to explore the parenthood transition in a Chinese cultural context, three hundred and sixty-four parents participated in the study. It was found that women reported higher stress than men.

Finally, evidences have shown that length of marriage, gender and age affects marital stress. According to Lefton (1946), in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, very few people were divorced, but today more than one in three marriages are terminated through divorce. The current state of affairs in marriages seems to suggest that marriages are under stress hence the present study intends to find out answers to the following problems:

- Will there be a statistical significant influence of length of marriage on marital stress among ESUT married workers?
- Will there be a statistical significant influence of gender on marital stress among ESUT married workers?
- Will there be a statistical significant influence of age on marital stress among ESUT married workers?

The main aim of this study was to determine whether there will be statistical significant influence of length of marriage, age and gender on marital stress particularly among ESUT married workers. In this study,

For the purpose of this study, the following hypotheses were proposed and tested, such as:

- There will be no statistically significant influence of length of marriage on marital stress.
- There will be no statistically significant influence of gender on marital stress.
- There will be no statistically significant influence of age on marital stress.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 186 participants comprising of 95 males and 91 females drawn from ESUT married workers took part in this study. Using stratified random sampling technique, they were drawn from the non-teaching married workers in the administrative offices thus: 94 (49 males and 45 females) from Registry department, 46 (23 males and 23 females) from Bursary department and 46 (23 males and 23 females) from Vice Chancellor's office all at ESUT permanent site Agbani. The age range of the participants was between 20-55 years (young 20-39 years versus old 40-55 years) with a mean age of 40.32 and standard deviation of 8.884. The minimum level of education was Senior Secondary Certificate Examination and its equivalent while the maximum is Bachelors degree. Also only the participants that are currently married, living with their spouses and have at least one child participated in the study. They were all Christians and from Igbo ethnic group.

### **Instrument:**

Omoluabi (1994) Marital Stress Inventory (MSI) was used for the study. It is a 50-item Likert inventory which contains list of issues that cause disaffection in marriage. The inventory was used in this study to determine the level of marital stress experienced by married workers. The response format of the scale ranged from 1 (slight effect) to 5 (very severe effect).

The psychometric properties for Nigerian samples as provided by Omoluabi (1994) are as follows: Sample Norms – the norms are the mean scores obtained by the general population. M(n=275) 77.83; F(n=282) 74.49 and M&F(n=557) 76.20. Reliability: Cronbach alpha coefficient = .92, Spearman-Brown split-half coefficient = .9238, Gutman split-half coefficient = .92 and Beta coefficient = .96. Validity: A concurrent validity coefficient of .32 was obtained by correlating Marital Stress Inventory (MSI) with Marital Satisfaction Index (MSI) by Hudson (1982). The researcher re-validated the instrument in another study (Nwatu, 2018) and obtained a split-half reliability index of 0.72 corrected with Spearman Brown Formula to obtain an index of 0.84. For the validity, a convergent validity index of 0.78 was

obtained by correlating Marital Stress Inventory (MSI) by (Omoluabi, 1994) with Marital Conflict Behaviour Checklist (MCBC) by (Omeje, 1998).

**Procedure:**

Marital Stress Inventory was administered individually after establishing adequate rapport with the participants. They were asked to read and follow the instructions at the top of the test form. There was no time limit for completing MSI. The test was administered by going to their offices and collected immediately after the participants responses. For each participant, the scores were obtained by adding together the values of the responses as shaded for all the items. The administration of the questionnaire took three weeks.

Out of the 312 copies distributed, 51 copies which form 16.2% were discarded for lack of inclusion criteria, 75copies (24%) were dropped on grounds of no marital stress. Thus 186 copies (59.52%) properly filled were used for data analysis.

The Nigerian norms or mean scores are the basis for interpreting the scores of participants. Scores higher than the norms indicate high stress level or reaction and general unhappiness with the marriage. Scores lower than the norms indicate that the participants are coping adequately with existing stressors in the marriage and such scores were discarded.

**Design/Statistics:**

A survey design was adopted as the research design while a 2 (length of marriage: short vs. long) x 2 (gender: male vs. female) x 2 (Age: young vs. old) three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)F-test involving Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.00 was used for data analysis



## Results

**Table 1:** Descriptive Summary Table of Means on Influence of Length of Marriage, Gender and Age on Marital Stress among ESUT Married Workers.

Length of Marriage	Gender	Age	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Short Length of Marriage	Male	Young age	120.6364	23.86778	22
		Old age	146.6207	24.60461	29
		Total	135.4118	27.33509	51
	Female	Young age	134.2813	37.80701	32
		Old age	187.4615	25.90565	13
		Total	149.6444	42.24074	45
	Total	Young age	128.7222	33.28007	54
		Old age	159.2619	31.22543	42
		Total	142.0833	35.64612	96
Long Length of Marriage	Male	Young age	134.7143	26.74503	14
		Old age	124.5333	22.70764	30
		Total	127.7727	24.22843	44
	Female	Young age	137.8387	29.78825	31
		Old age	146.6000	23.90696	15
		Total	140.6957	28.04668	46
	Total	Young age	136.8667	28.60912	45
		Old age	131.8889	25.14704	45
		Total	134.3778	26.89872	90
Total	Male	Young age	126.1111	25.61113	36
		Old age	135.3898	25.96351	59
		Total	131.8737	26.08914	95
	Female	Young age	136.0317	33.87118	63
		Old age	165.5714	32.02017	28
		Total	145.1209	35.85893	91
	Total	Young age	132.4242	31.35416	99
		Old age	145.1034	31.26743	87
		Total	138.3548	31.86666	186

From table 1 above, the participants in their short years of marriage (1-10 years) obtained a group mean of 142.08 in marital stress, and then participants in their long years of marriage (11-25 years) who obtained lesser group mean of 134.38. Females obtained a group mean of 145.12 in marital stress, while males obtained a group mean of 131.87.

Participants in their old age (40-55 years) obtained a group mean of 145.10 in marital stress, while those in their young age (20-39 years) obtained a lesser group mean of 132.42. Thus, females between the ages of 40-55 who have been married for 1-10 years obtained a group mean of 187.46 in marital stress, followed by males between the ages of 40-55 years who have married for 1-10 years ( $X=146.62$ ). Females of 40-55 years that have been married for 11-25 years obtained a group mean of 146.60; then Females of 20-39 years who have been married for 11-25 years obtained a group mean of ( $X=137.84$ ). Males of 20-39 years, married for 11-25 years were the next ( $X=134.71$ ). Others were Females of 20-39 years married for 1-10 years ( $X=134.28$ ), males of 40-55 years married for 11-25 years ( $X=124.43$ ) and lastly Males of 20-39 years married for 1-10 years ( $X=120.64$ ).

Also among Males and Females, marital stress was observed to increase for participants in young age (20-39 years: short vs. long length of marriage). While it decreases for participants in old age (40-55 years: short vs. long length of marriage).

Generally, the highest level of marital stress was observed among the females of 40-55 years old who have married for 1-10 years indicating that older females in short marriages experience more marital stress than older women in long marriages. While the lowest level of marital stress was observed among the males of 20-39 years old who have married for 1-10 years indicating that males between 40-55 years married for 1-10 years, experience more marital stress than younger men in short marriages.

**Table 2:**

ANOVA Summary table showing influence of Length of Marriage, Gender and Age on Marital Stress

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	47712.845 <sup>a</sup>	7	6816.121	8.657	.000
Intercept	3274598.594	1	3274598.594	4158.911	.000
LengthofMarriage	5240.761	1	5240.761	6.656	.011
Gender	16203.279	1	16203.279	20.579	.000
Age	15427.064	1	15427.064	19.593	.000
LengthofMarriage * Gender	2190.359	1	2190.359	2.782	.097
LengthofMarriage * Age	16574.464	1	16574.464	21.050	.000
Gender * Age	5433.257	1	5433.257	6.901	.009
LengthofMarriage * Gender * Age	173.875	1	173.875	.221	.639
Error	140151.735	178	787.369		
Total	3748288.000	186			
Corrected Total	187864.581	185			

a. R Squared = .254 (Adjusted R Squared = .225)

From table 2 above, the factor of length of marriage was found to be significant  $F(1, 178) = 6.656$ , sig. .011. Thus the first hypothesis which stated that “there would be no significant influence of length of marriage on marital stress”, was disconfirmed. Couples in their long length of marriage (11-25 years) had higher marital stress. Moreover, the table shows that gender was significant  $F(1, 178) = 20.579$ , sig. .000. The second hypothesis which stated that “there would be no significant influence of gender on marital stress”, was disconfirmed. Females had higher marital stress. In addition, the factor of age was significant  $F(1, 178) = 19.593$ , sig. .000. This also disconfirmed the third hypothesis which stated that there would be no significant influence of age on marital stress. Participants in their old age (40-55 years) had higher marital stress.

The table also showed that there was a significant interaction of length of marriage and age  $F(1, 178) = 21.050$ , sig. .000. This is graphically represented in figure 1. This suggests that intensity of marital stress depends on how long the couple have been married and how old they are. Thus participants in their long length of marriage and at young age had higher marital stress. Moreover, there was significant interaction influence of gender and age on marital stress  $F(1, 178) = 6.901$ , sig. .009. This is graphically represented in figure 2. The influence of gender is manifest as the people grow older. Females in their old age had higher marital stress. Thus, the table showed that there was no interaction influence of length of marriage and gender on marital stress. There was also no interaction influence of length of marriage, gender and age on marital stress.

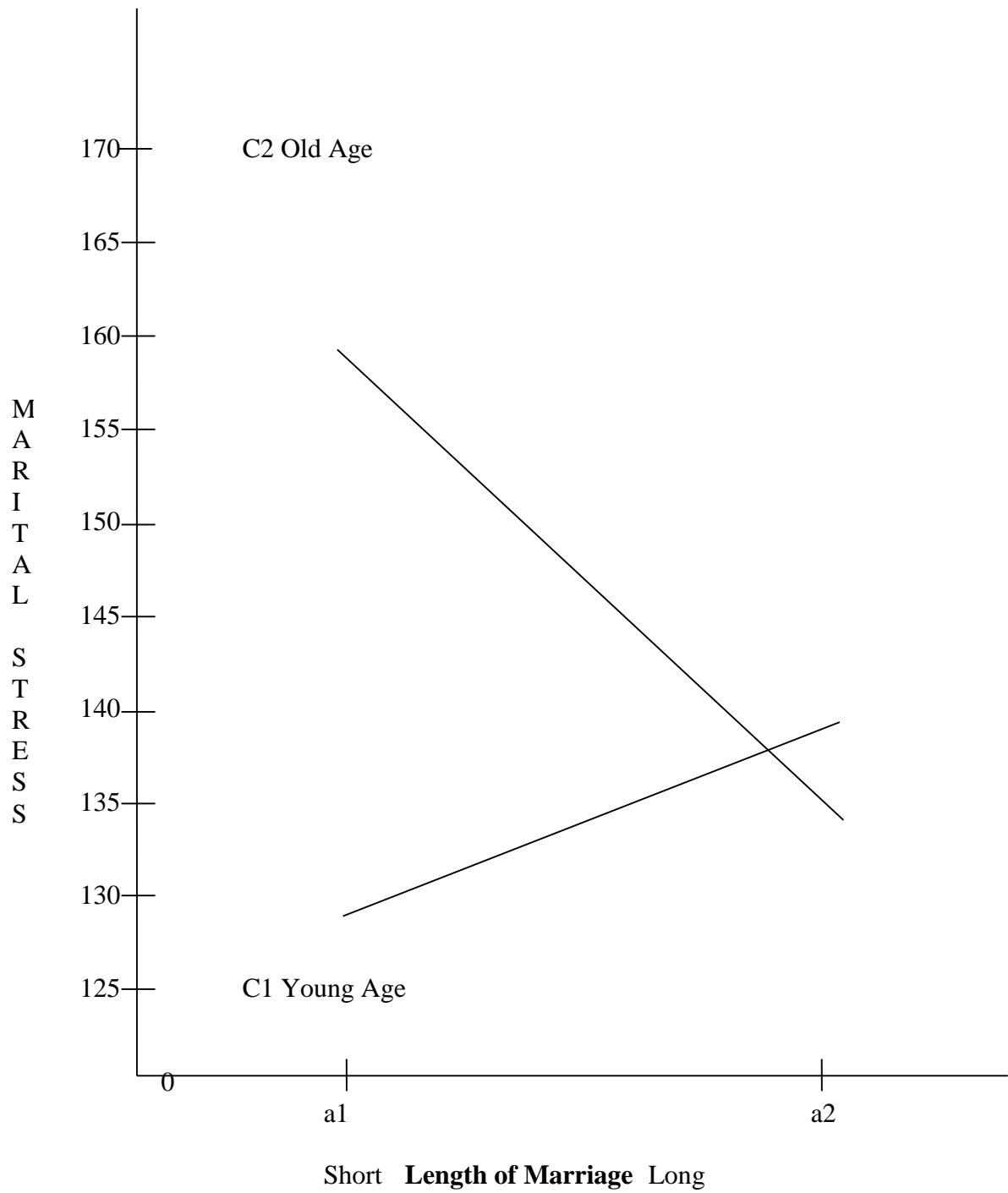


Fig. 1: Length of Marriage X Age Interaction Effect

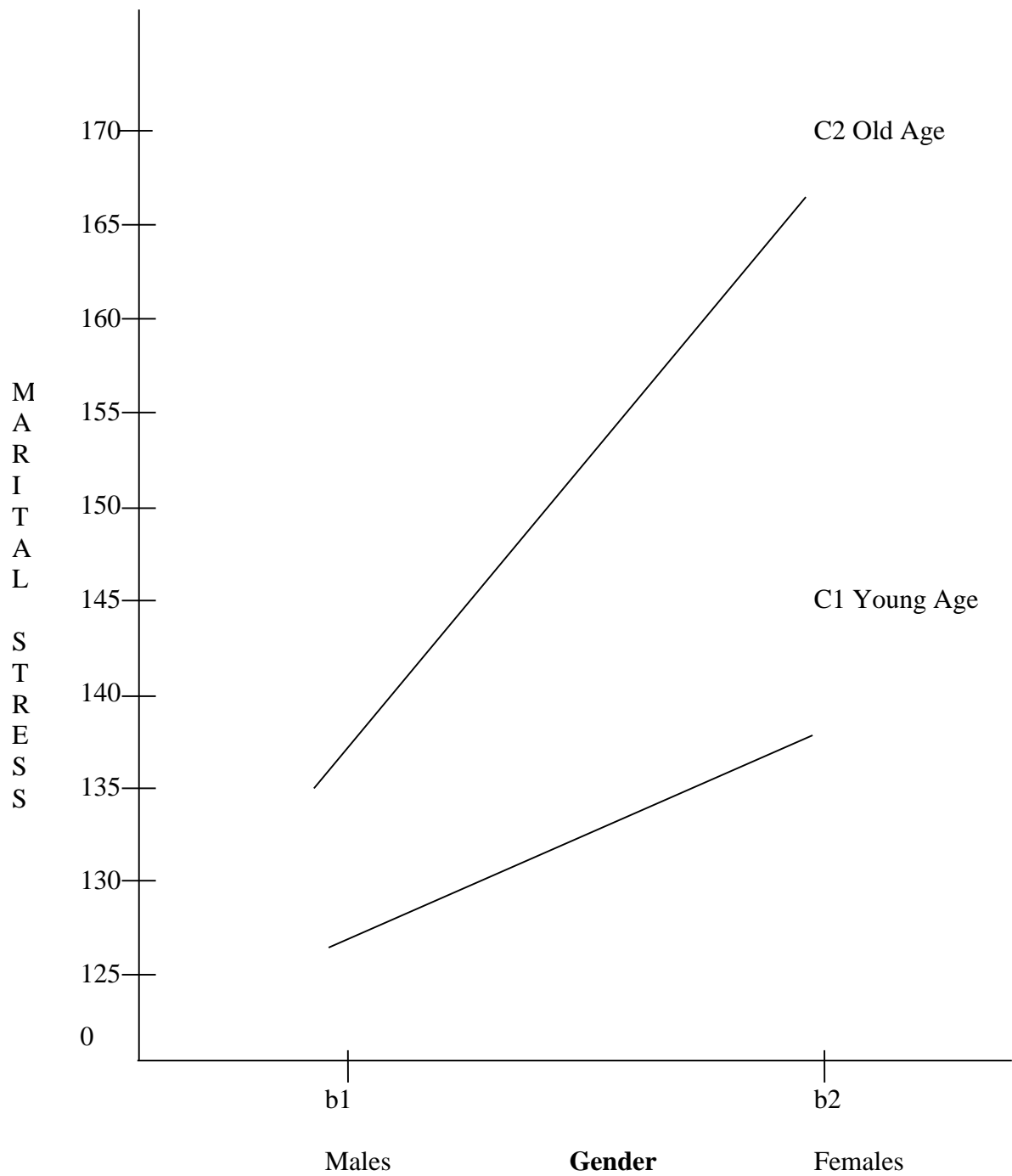


Fig. 2: Gender X Age Interaction Effect

## **Discussion**

The first hypothesis tested in this study which stated that “there would be no significant influence of length of marriage on marital stress was disconfirmed. This means that participants in their short length of marriage (1-10 years) experience marital stress more than those in their long length of marriage (11-25 years). The result of this study supported the study conducted by Herrick (1998) which stated that couples who have been married for a relatively long time (16 years and more) have few to no negative statements and disagreements, while a shorter length of marriage (11 years or less) is predictive of more disagreements and more negative statements. In contrast, study conducted by Peleg (2008) showed that length of marriage whether short or long affects couples the same way. The reason may be that the responsibilities associated with early years of marriage like child bearing and rearing may pose other forms of stress to couples in their short years of marriage thereby leading to marital stress.

Moreover, the second hypothesis tested in this study which stated that there would be no significant influence of gender on marital stress, was disconfirmed. This means that gender influences marital stress; such that females were more affected than males. Luo (2006) in his study stated that women experience higher stress than men. In contrast study carried out by Olexy and Herring (2006), found no evidence of gender differences. The reason for the outcome of the contrast study may be because women seek for social support while men control most of the resources in the family. The third hypothesis tested in this study which stated that there would be no statistical influence of age on marital stress, was disconfirmed.

This means that age influences marital stress among ESUT married workers. Thus, married people at older age (40-55 years) were mostly affected by marital stress than married people at younger age (20-39 years). The study carried out by Umberson et al. (2006) was supported by the above finding. They stated that negativity may be detrimental to health, but only at older age. Another study carried out by Olexy and Herring (2006) state that marital stress affects married people at older age than people at younger age. In contrast, Herrick (1998) found no effect of age on marital stress. The reason for these findings may be because at older age someone's physical attraction declines especially for the women and so married partners are less attracted to each other. Again, some of the participants who were 40-55 years were also within their first ten years of marriage thus they manifest marital stress.

Moreover, significant interaction of length of marriage and age indicate that influence of marital stress depends on how long someone has been married and also how old he/she is. Significant interaction influence of gender and age on marital stress was also observed, this means that both males and females are influence more as they get older.

Like any other survey study in Social Sciences, this study has some limitations. The size of the population used is a factor that may affect the generalization of the findings of this study to a large population. Other variables such as self-concept, depression, anxiety, etc, should be studies in relation to marital stress.

To this end further research should try and find out other factors not studied in this research on marital stress among ESUT married workers such as: to sample married people in other sectors and other professions; to study on the relationship among the variables in this

study; to sample married people from other ethnic groups, religion, and educational background.

Since it has been established in this study that length of marriage, gender and age; interaction effects of length of marriage and age and also gender and age yielded remarkable outcomes on marital stress among ESUT married workers, we cannot run away from being married. It is recommended that females, married people in their old age and those in their long length of marriage should guide themselves from marital stress since this study proved that they are prone to marital stress unlike males, married people in their young age and those who are young. Also, married people are encouraged to seek the services of mental health workers like clinical psychologists in the face of marital stress. Hence, married workers should always seek for measures on preventing stress in their marriages or reducing it so as not to affect their health in general. Thus, we should be vigilant at any stage of our marriage in order to face the challenges associated with each stage positively.

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