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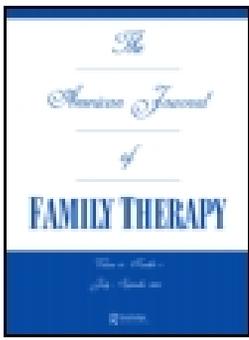**72** PUBLICATIONS   **2,537** CITATIONS

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Differentiation of Self and Its Relationship with Emotional Self-Regulation and Anxiety in a Spanish Sample

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the relationship of differentiation of self with emotional self-regulation and anxiety, and the differences in these variables based on the sex and the age of the participants. The study involved a Spanish sample of 216 subjects who answered the Differentiation of Self Scale (DSS), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). The results show that differentiation is related to emotional regulation and anxiety. Furthermore, differences in differentiation of self, emotional self-regulation and anxiety depending on sex and age are observed. Implications for clinical practice and suggestions for future lines of research are discussed.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST) is one of the most important explanations of the psychological development from the systemic and multigenerational perspective (Rodríguez-González & Martínez, 2015). Most of the research based on this theory has been carried out with U.S. samples, whereas little research has included Spanish samples. According to the togetherness-individuality continuum stated by Bowen (1978), Spanish people seem to be more collectivistic, prioritize the mutual support and interdependence, and follow indulgent and endogamic family patterns (e.g., Elzo, 2006). The aim of this study is to test the links between differentiation of self and its dimensions, emotional self-regulation and anxiety in a Spanish sample. Another goal is to analyze if there are differences in differentiation of self, emotional self-regulation and anxiety depending on sex, age and residential situation.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST) makes great contributions to clinical practice with families from a systemic perspective. This theory

comprises eight constructs or basic concepts, of which differentiation of self is the most relevant (Bowen, 1979).

Differentiation of Self is defined by Bowen (1978) as the ability to achieve emotional autonomy with respect to the family of origin, maintaining a certain degree of connection with it. It is constructed of two dimensions or levels: one intrapsychic and one interpersonal. The first one refers to the ability to distinguish the feelings from the thoughts, with the second being the ability to experience intimacy and independence from others (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

Differentiation of self can be understood from five dimensions: Emotional Reactivity, I Position, Fusion with the Others, Emotional Cutoff and Dominance over the Others (Oliver & Berástegui, 2019; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Emotional Reactivity reflects the degree to which the person responds to the environment with great emotional flood, emotional lability or hypersensitivity. I Position refers to a clearly defined sense of self and the ability to stand firm in one's convictions despite being pressured to do the opposite. Fusion with Others is defined as an emotional over-involvement with others, through triangulations or excessive identification with parents. Emotional Cutoff refers to the act of distancing oneself from others by feeling a threat to one's own intimacy or believing oneself vulnerable in relationships with others, which leads to defensive behaviors such as the denial of the need for attachment. Finally, Dominance over the Others is defined by Oliver and Berástegui (2019) as the propensity to put pressure on others so that they adapt to their own interests and implies little tolerance for differences of opinion and power struggles.

Bowen (1979) pointed out that childhood and adolescence were the most important periods for achieving autonomy and emotional regulation. In the transition from adolescence to adulthood, there are some basic tasks to consolidate a solid identity and a way of living that allows intimate relationships with others. It is the time of the evolutionary cycle in which young adults differentiate their self from the family of origin (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). In such a way that they will go from being dependent children and/or selfish or rebellious, to being mature people, with more symmetrical relationships with parents, capable of having their own desires and ideas, thus making their own decisions and tolerating conflicts and states of tension better (Oliver, 2010).

According to Bowen (1979), differentiation of self plays a central role in the mental health of adults and in their relationships. Several studies show the relationship between higher levels of differentiation and greater mental health and personal satisfaction, as well as better family functioning, family communication and family satisfaction (e.g., Jankowski et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014, 2015; Skowron et al., 2009).

Bowen (1979) also stated that people with higher level of differentiation feel more comfortable with their emotions and possess great ability to adapt and cope with the stresses of life, they can face uncertainty and ambiguity and are emotionally calm in intimate relationships. On the other hand, people with lower differentiation of self have emotional imbalances, are dominated by the automatic emotional system and are emotionally more reactive; they tend to respond to environmental stimuli with great emotional flood, emotional lability and hypersensitivity.

Emotions impact on a wide range of mental processes (e.g., memory, decision-making, attention) and on different human behaviors, so that the processes that regulate emotions are fundamental for good functioning and adequate psychological health (Gross, 1999). *Emotional regulation* can be defined as a set of behaviors, strategies and abilities, conscious or unconscious, that serve to inhibit or modulate emotional expressions (Ribé, 2008). Two of these emotional regulation strategies are *expressive suppression* and *cognitive reappraisal* (Gross, 2001). Emotional suppression refers to the inhibition of emotional expression after the emotional response has been generated, for example, in a tense meeting with onés boss, maintaining a neutral face, despite feeling great anger. Cognitive reappraisal is the cognitive change that occurs before the emotion is generated, modifying the emotional impact it would cause. For example, during a discussion with a partner, taking into account the point of view and the argument of the other and offer a new perspective, instead of considering the situation as a personal attack (Cabello et al., 2013).

Several studies have found that cognitive reappraisal is related to a successful regulation of mood, optimal coping strategies, an adequate social functioning, and certain personality variables, such as high extraversion and low neuroticism (e.g., Cabello et al., 2013; Gross & John, 2003; Limonero et al., 2012). On the other hand, expressive suppression has been related to emotional neglect and confusion, worse coping skills, less positive relationships with others, a less positive personality and more psychopathology (e.g., Aldao et al., 2010; Cabello et al., 2013; Navarro et al., 2018).

Some studies have also observed the existence of a relationship between differentiation and emotion regulation. For example, Thorberg and Lyvers (2010) found that differentiation and emotional cutoff were moderately related to the ability to calm negative emotions. In the same way, Rodrigues (2016) observed that more differentiated people had a better emotion regulation.

On the other hand, Bowen states that most differentiated people present lower levels of *trait anxiety* (1979). Anxiety is a frequent human emotion in certain situations. When it exceeds in intensity, it stops being adaptive and can cause great discomfort. Two types of anxiety can be distinguished:

trait anxiety and state anxiety. *Trait anxiety* is an anxious propensity, relatively stable, in which events are perceived as threatening, thus raising state anxiety. *State anxiety* is understood as a transitory emotional period of the organism, characterized by an overactivity of the autonomic nervous system, in which feelings of tension and fear are consciously perceived (Seisdedos, 1986).

Hainlen et al. (2016) observed significant relationships between anxiety and avoidance of attachment, positive emotionality and emotional cutoff. In addition, anxiety has been associated with high levels of concern and symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bradford et al., 2017). Trait-anxiety and state-anxiety have been related to school failure and fear of public speaking, as well as an unstable, apprehensive, submissive, sober, calculating and frustrated type of personality and can be a predictor of low self-esteem (e.g., Bradford et al., 2017; Núñez & Crismán, 2016; Seisdedos, 1986).

Regarding differentiation, some studies have observed that people with higher levels of differentiation, I position, lower levels of emotional reactivity and fusion with others had lower anxiety (e.g., Isik & Bulduk, 2015; Rodrigues, 2016). Murdock and Gore (2004) state that stressful events cause more psychological impact in individuals with low levels of differentiation, and that, in the face of similar levels of stress, people with a low differentiation present higher levels of psychological dysfunction than those who are differentiated. It can be asserted that differentiation of self functions as a moderator when experiencing stress, that is, more stressors are needed to trigger symptoms if there is a high differentiation of self (Krycak et al., 2012).

As we have stated, despite the importance of differentiation of self in the clinical field, its relationship with mental health, personal well-being, family and couple satisfaction, and the numerous studies that have been carried out in the international field about this construct, there are very few studies on the differentiation of self with Spanish samples (e.g., Oliver, 2020; Rodríguez-González et al., 2016; Rodríguez-González, Schweer-Collins, et al., 2019; Rodríguez-González, Martins, et al., 2019). For this reason, it is relevant to investigate this construct and the variables, theoretically related to it, in a Spanish sample.

The main objective of our study is to learn about the links between differentiation of self and its dimensions, emotional self-regulation and anxiety in the collectivistic Spanish culture. Other objective is to analyze if there are differences in differentiation of self, emotional self-regulation and anxiety depending on sex, age and residential situation.

The hypotheses of this work, therefore, are the following: a) Differentiation of self is positively related to cognitive reappraisal and

negatively related to expressive suppression; b) Differentiation is negatively related to anxiety; c) Women have higher emotional reactivity (ER), cognitive reappraisal, state-anxiety and trait-anxiety, and men have higher emotional cutoff (EC) and expressive suppression; d) Adults will show greater differentiation and emotional self-regulation and lower anxiety than adolescents; e) Differentiation of self is not associated with the residential situation.

Method

Sample

216 subjects of Spanish nationality participated in this research, of which 140 were women (64.80%) and 76 men (35.20%). Their ages ranged between 18 and 71 years ($M = 31.79$, $SD = 14.61$). Specifically, according to Rice (1997), 48 subjects (22.22%) were adolescents, whichaged between 12 and 19 years old; 105 subjects (48.62%) were young, with an age range of 20 to 39 years old; 53 subjects (24.53%) were in the middle age, with an age range of 40 to 59; and 10 subjects (4.63%) were 60 years old or older. As this last group was only composed of 10 subjects and it presents different characteristics from the others, it was removed from the difference analysis. Regarding the level of education, 169 participants (78.20%) reported having college education, 37 (17.10%) had high school, 6 (2.80%) had secondary education and 4 (1.90%) had elementary education. Of the totality of the participants, 84 (38.90%) lived with their parents whereas 84 (61.10%) lived away from the family of origin; specifically, 84 (38.90%) lived with a partner or their own family, 27 (12.50%) with other people and 21 (9.70%) lived alone.

Instruments

Socio-demographic questionnaire
A self-prepared questionnaire in which the participants had to indicate their age, sex and with whom they resided: with their parents, with their partner or with their own family, alone or with other people.

Differentiation of self scale (DSS)
This scale, created by Oliver and Berástegui (2019), is composed of 74 items, of which 28 are originals of the Differentiation of Self-Revised (DSI-R, Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). The instrument evaluates the differentiation of self in five coherent factors with the theory: I Position (IP), Emotional Reactivity (ER), Fusion with Others (FO), Dominance over the Others (DO) and Emotional Cutoff (EC).

IP is the sense one has of oneself, if it is well defined, the possession of personal goals and the distinction between onés own thoughts and feelings (13 items). ER is an emotional form of uncontrolled response, with autonomous emotional responses (12 items). FO requires refusing one's own thoughts, opinions and feelings, acting like others to avoid conflicts (14 items). EC refers to the avoidance of intimacy through physical and/or emotional distance from others (21 items). DO refers to the action of pressuring others to adapt to what one wants, to the fact of not tolerating different opinions and entering into power struggles (14 items).

Every participant answered each item using a Likert-type scale, in a range of 1 to 6 (being 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree). On the global scale and on the IP subscale, the higher score, the greater the differentiation. However, on the subscales ER, FO, EC and DO, the higher the score, the less the differentiation.

The psychometric properties of the scale have been tested, obtaining a high internal consistency both in the total scale (EDS=.93), and in all the subscales (ER=.89, IP=.86, FO=.90, DO=.89 and EC=.90). In the present study, the internal consistency indices were also high, both in the total scale (DSS=.93), and in their subscales (ER=.86, IP=.85, FO=.88, DO=.87 and EC=.88).

Emotion regulation questionnaire (ERQ)

Created by Gross and John (2003), the adaptation of the scale to Spanish elaborated by Cabello et al. (2013) was used. It evaluates the emotional regulation strategies with ten items, through two scales: Expressive Suppression (ES) and Cognitive Reappraisal (CR).

Expressive Suppression (4 items) refers to the way an emotional response is modulate (inhibition of expression). Cognitive Reappraisal is defined as a form of cognitive change that involves constructing a new situation that has less emotional impact (6 items).

It is a Likert scale with a range of 7 points (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). It allows to obtain a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 7 in each subscale.

The psychometric properties of the scale have been tested, with adequate temporal stability (Test-Retest of Expressive Suppression=.66 and of Cognitive Reappraisal=.64) and a high internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha of Expressive Suppression=.75 and of Cognitive Reappraisal=.79). Concerning the convergent validity, a positive correlation between Cognitive Reappraisal and several theoretically associated variables are observed; and a significant negative correlation between Expressive Suppression and Attention to Feelings, Clear Expression of Feelings and

Emotional Coping Strategies. In the present study, high internal consistency indices were obtained: ES=.83 and CR=.78.

State-trait anxiety inventory (STAI)

Original scale of Spielbrger et al. (1970), a Spanish adaptation of Seisdedos (1986) was used. It determines the current levels of intensity of anxiety and is used in research to select subjects with different predisposition to respond to psychological stress.

It is comprised of two scales: state-anxiety and trait-anxiety. State Anxiety (S/A), composed of 20 items, it is defined as a temporary emotional condition of the organism, composed of subjective feelings (tension and apprehension), and a hyperactivity of the autonomic nervous system. It is considered that it can vary in time and change in intensity. The Trait Anxiety (T/A), also composed of 20 items, is an anxious stable trend, in which situations are perceived as threatening therefore there is a rise in State Anxiety (S/A).

Both scales are Likert-type, with a range of 3 points (0 = Not at all/ Almost never to 3 = A lot/Almost forever). The score for each scale can range from 0-60 indicating higher scores, higher levels of anxiety.

The internal consistency is high (Cronbach's Alpha: .83-.92) and the temporary stability Test-Retest of .73-.86 (subscale Trait). Our study obtained high internal consistency indices for each scale (S/A=.94 and T/A=.92).

Procedure

The sample collection was carried out with students from the Comillas Pontificial University of Madrid and the University of Málaga, from Spain. Subsequently, the participants were invited to propose to others the possibility of participating in the study.

The participants completed all the instruments, in an online format, via Google Form, or in a printed format. It explained that it was an investigation carried out by the Comillas Pontificial University of Madrid and the objective of the study. Likewise, they were told that the questionnaire was anonymous and confidential.

The study carried out is of a cross-correlation type, with a non-probabilistic sampling. In order to contrast the hypotheses of our study, a series of statistical analyses were carried out, entering the data into the SPSS 22.0 program. Firstly, after checking all the assumptions, several Pearson correlations were performed to test the relationships between differentiation of self, emotional-regulation and anxiety. Secondly, a simple linear regression was performed to check the predictive power of differentiation of self in

trait anxiety. Finally, several MANOVA, Student's t, one-way ANOVA, MANCOVA and ANCOVA tests were carried out to check if there are differences in differentiation of self on sex, age and residential situation.

Results

In first place, in order to fulfill our main objectives, it was analyzed to see if there were relations between the differentiation of self and emotional self-regulation and also between differentiation of self and anxiety.

As it can be seen in Table 1, significant relationships were observed between *differentiation of self* and *cognitive reappraisal* (r=.19, p=.005, r^2=.04); and a significant negative relationship between the *differentiation of self* and *expressive suppression* (r=-.32, p<.001, r^2=.10). In addition, a significant relationship was found between *EC* and *expressive suppression* (r=.65, p<.001, r^2=.42), of a rather high magnitude. On the other hand, it was observed that *differentiation of self* was negatively related to *trait anxiety* (r= −.78, p<.001, r^2=.62) and *state anxiety* (r=-.63, p<.001, r^2= .40) also with high magnitudes. Likewise, it was observed that *ER* was related to *trait anxiety* (r=.73, p<.001, r^2=.53), with a rather high magnitude, and *state anxiety* (r=.55, p<.001, r^2=.31).

Also, to know the predictive power of differentiation of self in trait anxiety, a simple linear regression analysis was carried out. The analysis revealed that differentiation of self accounts for 61% of the variance of trait anxiety (R^2=.61, $F(1,214)$=337.395, p<.001, β=-.782, p<.001).

Next, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to check if there are differences in differentiation of self according to sex. As can be seen in Table 2, significant differences were found in the combined variable of the differentiation of self as a function of sex ($Lambda$=0.850, F (5,210)=7.434, p<.001, *Partial Eta^2*=.15), in particular, differences of moderate size in *ER* ($F(1)$=21.052, p<.001, *Partial Eta^2*=.09), with higher scores found in women.

Table 1. Matrix of correlations between the total DSS score and variables theoretically associated with the differentiation of self.

	Trait Anxiety	State Anxiety	Cognitive reappraisal	Expressive Suppression
DSS	**-.78**	**-.63**	**.19**	**-.31**
ER	**.73**	**.55**	-.06	-.01
IP	**-.48**	**-.41**	**.23**	-.13
FO	**.58**	**.43**	-.10	**.26**
DO	**.36**	**.30**	-.16	.11
EC	**.49**	**.45**	-.11	**.65**

Note. Pearson's correlation coefficient. DSS = Differentiation of Self Scale; ER = Emotional Reactivity; IP = I Position; FO = Fusion with the Others; DO = Dominance over the Others; EC = Emotional Cutoff.
In bold, significant correlations are specified for a level of p<.05.

Table 2. Difference in means between women and men in differentiation of self and its dimensions.

	Women (N = 140)		Men (N = 76)							
	□	S.D.	□	S.D.	Lambda	F	gl hyp	gl error	p	Partial Eta^2
DSS	4.31	0.54	4.42	0.54	0.850	7.434**	5	210	<.001	.15
ER	3.46	0.89	2.87	0.89	——	21.052**	1	210	<.001	.09
IP	4.67	0.69	4.79	0.64	——	1.569	1	210	.212	<.01
FO	2.57	0.82	2.48	0.77	——	0.570	1	210	.451	<.01
DO	2.53	0.76	2.57	0.75	——	0.116	1	210	.733	<.01
EC	2.51	0.74	2.71	0.80	——	3.605	1	210	.059	.02

Note. Multivariate analysis of variance test. DSS = Differentiation of Self Scale; ER = Emotional Reactivity; IP = I Position; FO = Fusion with Others; DO = Dominance over the Others; EC = Emotional Cutoff.
*p<.05; **p<.01.

Likewise, the Student's t test was applied to examine if there are differences in emotional regulation and anxiety depending on sex. As shown in Table 3, significant differences were observed according to sex in *cognitive reappraisal* ($t = 3.182$, p=.002, $d = 0.46$) and in *expressive suppression* (t=-4.429, p<.001, $d = 0.64$), with a large effect size and with higher means in women in emotional reactivity and cognitive reappraisal and higher in men regarding in expressive suppression.

Later, the one-way ANOVA test was applied to observe the existence of differences in the variables of the study according to age. Statistically significant differences were found according to *age* in *DO* ($F(203,3)$=2.224, p=.019, *Partial Eta^2*=.04), *state anxiety* ($F(203,2)$=4.556, p=.012, *Partial Eta^2*=.04) and *trait anxiety* ($F(203,2)$=4.592, p=.011, *Partial Eta^2*=.04), all with a low effect-size.

The post-hoc contrasts (Tukey) revealed that the adolescent group presented significantly higher levels of *DO* than the middle age group (I-J=.3994, p=.020). Likewise, the adolescents also had significantly higher levels of *state anxiety* than the young group (I-J = 5.1887, p=.017) and the middle age group (I-J = 5.6647, p=.025). The adolescents also had higher levels of *trait anxiety* than the young (I-J = 4.9220, p=.026) and the middle age people (I-J = 6.0232, p=.016).

Finally, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed to check if there are differences in differentiation of self on residential situation, after controlling the age of the participants. No significant differences were observed between the participants who live with their families of origin and the participants who live away from their families of origin in *differentiation of self* ($F(1,143)$=10.229, p=.003, *Eta^2*=.18), *state anxiety* ($F(1,213)$=.131, p=.718, *Eta^2*<.01), *trait anxiety* ($F(1,213)$=.068, p=.794, *Eta^2*<.01), *cognitive reappraisal* ($F(1,213)$=.629, p=.429, *Eta^2*<.01) or *expressive suppression* ($F(1,213)$=.792, p=.374, *Eta^2*<.01).

Table 3. Difference in means between women and men in anxiety and emotional self-regulation.

	Women (N = 140)		Men (N = 76)				
	◻	S.D.	◻	S.D.	t	p	d
STAI-S	18.83	11.38	15.84	10.59	1.891	.240	0.33
STAI-T	19.88	11.51	16.35	9.64	2.275	.124	0.33
Cognitive Reappraisal	4.88	1.07	4.40	1.01	3.182**	.002	0.46
Emotional Suppression	2.98	1.43	3.86	1.29	−4.429**	<.001	0.64

Note. Student's t test of independent samples. STAI-S = State Anxiety; STAI-T = Trait Anxiety.
*p<.05; **p<.01.

Discussion

In the present study, some assumptions of Bowen's theory were verified with a Spanish sample. First, it was expected that *differentiation of self*, the central concept of Bowen's theory, would be positively related to *emotional self-regulation* and to the *reappraisal cognitive* dimension, and negatively to *expressive suppression*. The results seem to indicate that the greater the differentiation of self, the greater the cognitive reappraisal; and the higher the level of differentiation of self, the lower the expressive suppression. Taking into account that a greater use of the cognitive reappraisal and a lower use of expressive suppression have been related to a positive emotional self-regulation (Cabello et al., 2013), the people with high differentiation of self are able to distinguish their own feelings, regulate better their emotions and feel more comfortable with them, without needing to eliminate them, deny them or run away from them (Bowen, 1979; Rodrigues, 2016; Skowron et al., 2003; Thorberg & Lyvers, 2010).

In addition, *expressive suppression* is related to the *EC*, a dimension of the differentiation of self. As Hainlen et al. (2016) concluded in their research, the EC mediated the associations between problems in interpersonal relationships and avoidance of attachment and expressive suppression. In the same way, Thorberg and Lyvers (2010) observed that the EC was moderately related to the ability to calm the negative emotions.

Another confirmed hypothesis is the existence of a negative relationship between the *differentiation of self* and *trait* and *state anxiety*. From the study, it is deduced that the higher levels of differentiation of self, the lower scores in state and trait anxiety. In this line, Krycak et al. (2012), Isik and Bulduk (2015), and Rodrigues (2016), supporting Bowen's prediction, confirmed that stress would have a greater impact on people with low differentiation levels, reaching high levels of anxiety. With a high differentiation of self, more stressors are needed to have anxiety symptoms. Rodríguez-González and Kerr (2011) consider that the higher the level of differentiation of self, the lower the vulnerability to chronic anxiety, since the person is more capable of facing stressful events. In the same way, Skowron and

Friedlander (1998) concluded in their study that high levels of differentiation of self predicted lower levels of state anxiety. Moreover, the results of Priest (2015) suggest that differentiation of self processes can promote that trait anxiety is maintained over time. The main finding of the Peleg-Popko study (2002) was that differentiation of self correlated negatively with social anxiety.

In addition, the results indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between *ER* and *anxiety*, supporting the results of studies that show that high levels of psychological symptoms (anxiety among others) are related to high levels of emotional reactivity (Bartle-Haring & Probst, 2004; Rodríguez-González et al., 2015).

On the other hand, statistically significant differences were found in *ER* according to the *sex*, with women being more reactive. These results coincide partially with those obtained by Rodríguez-González et al. (2015), who also observed a lower level of differentiation in women. In the present study women also scored higher on *cognitive reappraisal*. Women tend to build new situations that have less emotional impact (Cabello et al., 2013; Gross & John, 2003). However, no significant differences were found in anxiety, according to sex, as would be expected according to Seisdedos (1986).

In relation to the EC, no significant differences were found between women and men. Similarly, Rodríguez-González et al. (2015) did not find them in the validation of their differentiation of self scale. However, Oliver and Berástegui (2019) observed a higher EC in Spanish men and, according to gender roles, it would be expected that men tended to distance themselves from others more than women, feeling a threat against them. In *expressive suppression*, a negative emotional regulation strategy, men obtained higher scores, as Cabello et al. (2013) stated.

Some authors found that men and women differ in the forms of expression of the differentiation of self; men report problems in EC and women in ER (Oliver & Berástegui, 2019; Skowron et al., 2003; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). These results, that show differences between men and women could have to do with the gender roles to which we are socialized in. In Spain the gender roles of women are characterized by prioritizing the aspects that relate to the emotional, social relationships and care for others (Polo, 2014).

No significant differences were observed with respect to age in the differentiation of self and in none of the subscales except in *DO*. The differentiation of self seems to crystallize in early youth, so this could be a reason for not finding age differences in this variable. Rodríguez-González et al. (2015), in their study of differentiation of self, also found no statistically significant differences according to age, in any variable, except in EC. Oliver and Berástegui (2019) also did not observe significant relationships

between the differentiation of self and age. According to the results of our study, it seems that children under 19 years of age have less tolerance to differences of opinion than people between 40 and 59 years. Márquez-González et al. (2008) did find statistically significant differences in emotional self-regulation according to age, in particular, the elderly used expressive suppression more often than young people. In our study, however, no statistically significant differences were found. In the research by Seisdedos (1986), no statistically significant differences were found in state and trait anxiety. In our study, however, the adolescents presented higher state and trait anxiety than young people and middle and third age people. Fonseca-Pedrero et al. (2012) concluded the same in their research: the group of 17 to 19 years had higher scores in state and trait anxiety than the group over 20 years. The absence of age differences could also be due to the fact that in our study there was no equivalent representation of people for each age group.

Finally, no significant differences were observed between the participants who live with their families of origin and the participants who live away from them, in differentiation of self and in none of the study variables. This may be due to fact that they are heterogeneous groups, but it is important to remember that cultural differences may have unique effects on differentiation (Rodríguez-González et al., 2020). Spanish culture is characterized by presents strong intergenerational proximity and contact with family members, even if they do not live with the family of origin (Lampis et al., 2019).

Implications for family therapy/practice

As it has been described, differentiation of self can be a common factor in various circumstances or the developments of a person's life, and to different alterations and psychological disorders; specifically, in this study, the relationship of this variable with emotional self-regulation and anxiety has been demonstrated. Rodríguez-González et al. (2016) suggest that it is possible to increase the level of differentiation of self through therapy. In fact, assessing differentiation levels may be relevant to the therapeutic process, since it gives clues to family dynamics, hypotheses may be created, and, above all, helps to understand certain behaviors of the individual and his family. In addition, if some psychological problems and vital processes, share as a common factor the low differentiation of self, if we managed to increase this differentiation, it would increase therefore the well-being of the person in several areas of his life. Also, we would be carrying out a preventive function of other psychological alterations (Murdock & Gore, 2004), such as anxiety and low emotional self-regulation.

It seems that both the individual, the couple and the family problems, especially the emotional ones, are somehow usually related to the family of origin, so a therapeutic goal could be helping the clients to differentiate themselves from their families (Kim et al., 2015). This objective could be a priority in Spain because, according to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020), in 2019 52.8% of young people between 25 and 29 years old still lived with their parents or one of them in Spain.

Murdock and Gore (2004) suggest that, if interventions directed at stress or coping are ineffective, those directed at differentiation of self should be considered. Similarly, Priest (2015) states that, in people with generalized anxiety disorder, who continue to present clinically significant symptoms after treatment with individual therapy and have low levels of differentiation, the model proposed by Bowen could be applied. Also, Peleg-Popko (2002) suggests that therapists might consider the level of differentiation of self when the client presents social anxiety disorder.

Limitations and future research

As limitations of the study, we could highlight possible bias with the type of non-probabilistic sampling used (convenience and snowball sampling) have been produced, being less representative of a specific population, taking the risk of excluding a large proportion of the population that would be of interest to study, since in part there is a lack of control over how the sample is constituted. It should also be mentioned that the use of snowball sampling takes the risk that the participants resemble the characteristics of the researcher (e.g., age, sex, studies). Another consequence of this type of sampling is the greater participation of women, although this can also be explained according to the literature, because they usually have greater availability and initiative to participate in studies.

It is recommended to carry out more research that tests Bowen's postulates in other cultures, such as Spanish. As a possible line of future research, it could be of interest to study if our hypotheses are met in the clinical practice, that is, to check if the level of differentiation has increased in a group of patients after a therapeutic process and subsequently, to measure the presence or absence of certain symptoms related to the differentiation, such as those raised in this study (emotional self-regulation and anxiety).

Despite these limitations, this study is the first to analyze the relationship of differentiation with anxiety and emotional regulation in a Spanish sample (a collectivist culture) and to compare differentiation of self levels between adolescents and adults. It was found that differentiation had an

important predictive power on trait anxiety. In addition, there were differences between men and women in differentiation, specifically women had higher scores in emotional reactivity. Finally, it was observed that adolescents had higher scores in dominance over the others than adults.

Disclosure statement

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