Differentiation of Self and its Relationship with the Quality of Friendship, Anxiety and Depression

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Abstract

In the present study, the relationships between differentiation of self, the quality of friendship, anxiety and depression were analyzed. In addition, it was analyzed which dimensions of differentiation of self significantly predicted anxiety, depression and the quality of friendship. The sample comprised 221 Spanish adults, 160 women and 61 men, who completed the Differentiation of Self Scale-Revised, two subscales of the Network of Relationships Inventory, the Beck Anxiety Inventory and the Beck Depression Inventory-II. The results revealed significant relationships between differentiation of self and the other variables. Moreover, I position and emotional cutoff explained 28% of the variance in best-friend social support, and dominance over others and I position predicted 6% of the variance in best-friend conflict and antagonism, whereas I position, emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff predicted 40% of anxiety, and 48% of depression. Implications of these results are discussed and future lines of research are suggested.

Keywords Differentiation of self · Friendship · Anxiety · Depression

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is a core concept of intergenerational systemic therapy, as it is one of the most critical elements in the maturational development of the human being (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). This construct, introduced by Murray Bowen in his Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), refers to the intrapsychic capacity of the person to distinguish thoughts and emotions, and the interpersonal faculty to be intimate with others and to be autonomous.

At the *intrapsychic level*, individuals with higher levels of differentiation can more effectively separate their thoughts from their emotions. This enables them to remain less emotionally reactive, think more clearly under pressure, and maintain a well-defined sense of self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). At the *interpersonal level*, highly differentiated individuals are more capable of adhering to their own values, acknowledging and respecting the perspectives of others, and sustaining meaningful connections with them (Bowen, 1978; Oliver & Berástegui, 2019; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003).

Differentiation of self comprises five dimensions (Oliver et al., 2023; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). *I position* refers to the ability to maintain a clear sense of self and to be congruent with personal values and convictions, even under stress or pressure. *Emotional reactivity* is the tendency to respond to environmental stimuli with automatic emotional responses, flooding, or emotional lability. On the other hand, *Fusion with others* involves the predisposition to feel, think and act in the same way as others, thus yielding to personal convictions to avoid conflict and obtaining the approval of others. *Emotional cutoff* refers to the emotional and physical distance that a person places on his or her most intimate relationships, to avoid intimacy. Finally, *Dominance over others*, was a fifth dimension identified by Oliver and Berástegui (2019) in the Family Systems Theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This dimension refers to the lack of tolerance for diversity of opinions, trying to exert emotional pressure on others to conform to one's interests (Oliver et al., 2023). As Kerr and Bowen (1988) stated, "The less well developed each person's individuality, the more easily threatened each can be by "going

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along" with the other… Each person is attempting to control how the other thinks and acts, each is simultaneously fighting against the other's attempts to control or influence him" (pp. 82–83). The Bowen Center (2021) similarly notes that "People with a poorly differentiated "self" depend so heavily on the acceptance and approval of others that they either quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others or they dogmatically proclaim what others should be like and pressure them to conform. Bullies depend on approval and acceptance as much as chameleons, but bullies push others to agree with them instead of with others". Conversely, Kerr and Bowen (1988) described highly differentiated individuals as those who, "While always sure of his beliefs and convictions, he is not dogmatic or fixed in his thinking… Tolerant and respectful of differences, he is not prone to engage in polarize debates" (p. 107). As emphasized in Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1998), individuals with low levels of differentiation may exhibit controlling or dominant behaviors, whereas those with higher levels of differentiation have no need to assert dominance over others.

Higher I position and lower emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion with others and dominance over others imply a higher level of differentiation of self.

Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) proposed that individuals with higher levels of differentiation typically exhibit fewer psychological symptoms, lower levels of chronic anxiety, and more adaptive familial, and romantic relationships.

Empirical studies support these postulates, showing that higher differentiation is linked with better psychological adjustment (e.g., Álvarez-Hierro & Oliver, 2024; Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2023) and more functional interpersonal relationships across family, and partner contexts (e.g., Dolz-del-Castellar & Oliver, 2021; Kasprzak et al., 2025; Lampis et al., 2019; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Oliver et al., 2023).

Friendships

According to Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), more differentiated people, that is, with more solid selves, better emotional regulation and more adjusted bonding with others, have more functional interpersonal relationships, including friendships. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1989) and Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1950) stated that friendships plays a fundamental role in human development, identity construction and emotional regulation.

Beyond their developmental relevance in childhood and adolescence, high-quality friendships continue to play a

fundamental role across adulthood in supporting differentiation of self (Erikson, 1950). Adult friendships provide emotionally safe contexts in which individuals can negotiate closeness and autonomy without the role-based expectations present in family or romantic relationships (Ainsworth, 1989). Drawing from Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory (1979), friendships represent proximal processes that foster self-regulation, perspective-taking, and mutuality—capacities directly linked to intrapsychic and interpersonal differentiation. From an attachment theory perspective, as described by Ainsworth (1989), secure relationships outside the family can contribute to emotional security and autonomy. Throughout the lifespan, high-quality friendships allow individuals to practice maintaining a clear sense of self as they engage in intimacy, manage conflict constructively, and regulate emotional activation during interpersonal tensions. Finally, consistent with Bowen's Family Systems Theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), high-quality friendships are not only outcomes of a well-differentiated self but also active relational contexts that support its continued development, offering a relational "training ground" for managing fusion, reactivity, and emotional distance.

The quality of friendships can be assessed through social support and negative interaction. Social support refers to companionship, intimacy, affection, and alliance, while negative interaction refers to conflict and antagonism (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985).

Despite the theoretical relevance of differentiation of self for interpersonal functioning, very few studies have examined its role in friendships, and the available research comes from specific cultural contexts, which helps clarify the international scope of the evidence. Importantly, these studies suggest that differentiation is meaningfully expressed in peer relationships and contributes to closeness, communication patterns, and conflict management—dimensions that are central to friendship quality. For example, Cao and An (2018) found in a Chinese college sample that differentiation was related to social closeness in those people who did not have a romantic partner. However, this relationship was not observed in people who had a romantic partner. Cao and An (2018) stated that the partner could bring the emotional support one can find in relationships with peers when one is single. Likewise, Fang and An (2014) reported, also in a Chinese sample that students with higher levels of differentiation of self have closer and more frequent relationships with their friends. Similarly, Castro-Dávila and Oliver (2022) found in a Spanish sample that differentiation was strongly associated with social skills essential for maintaining high-quality friendships, such as assertive communication, emotional expression, and boundary setting. These findings reinforce the notion that differentiation is a relevant

interpersonal resource in friendships, not only in family or romantic contexts.

In relation to conflict and antagonism, there are also few studies, and these too come from diverse national contexts. Choi and Murdock (2017) found in a U.S. sample that people with lower differentiation of self and higher emotional reactivity had more interpersonal conflicts and expressed more anger. Likewise, Skowron et al. (2009) observed in a sample of U.S. youth that higher levels of emotional reactivity, fusion with others, and emotional cutoff and lower levels of I position were associated with more interpersonal problems.

Although this evidence enriches the broader relational context of differentiation of self, it highlights the disproportionate focus on couples and families compared to the limited research on friendships. Thus, although existing studies point toward a consistent association between differentiation and both positive and negative aspects of friendship quality, the empirical base remains small and geographically narrow, underscoring the need for studies conducted in additional cultural contexts.

In the couple's sphere several studies have observed in samples from different countries, such as Spain and Turkey, that differentiation of self is related to relationship satisfaction, marital adjustment and adult attachment (e.g., Borondo & Oliver, 2021; Işık et al., 2020; Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011), and that emotional cutoff predicts couple maladjustment (Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Peixoto-Freitas et al., 2020; Rodríguez-González et al., 2020). On the other hand, Telli and Yavuz Güler (2023) found in a Turkish sample that more differentiated people were more forgiving, less jealous, and had fewer flight and neglect responses. Moreover, the study by Oliver et al. (2023) observed that more differentiated individuals were more assertive, whereas less differentiated people were more aggressive, passive or passive-aggressive. Finally, in the family context, Dolz-del-Castellar and Oliver (2021), and Oliver and Berástegui (2023) found in a Spanish sample that more differentiated people had more cohesive and flexible families, while Hooper and DePuy (2010) observed in a U.S. sample that emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff are associated with family conflict.

In the workplace, Cavaiola et al. (2012) found in a U.S. adult sample that more differentiated and less emotionally reactive participants had fewer work conflicts with bosses and coworkers, and that more differentiated participants with lower emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff had fewer conflicts with customers.

Taken together, contemporary research increasingly highlights differentiation of self as an important interpersonal resource, not only in family or romantic contexts, where it has been traditionally studied, but also across peer and social relationships. However, despite this growing evidence, research on differentiation of self in the domain of friendships remains limited.

This limited attention may be partly explained by the historical development of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, which was primarily formulated and applied within the family unit. Because the theory's empirical testing has traditionally focused on parent–child and couple relationships -contexts in which differentiation-related dynamics such as fusion, emotional cutoff, or dominance are most salient-, research has disproportionately prioritized familial and romantic ties over peer relationships. As a result, friendships have received comparatively little empirical exploration, despite being voluntary, reciprocal, and central forms of social bonding that play a crucial role in emotional regulation, identity construction, and psychological well-being across the lifespan (Ainsworth, 1989; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Importantly, friendships may offer a unique context in which to observe differentiation processes, as individuals must balance intimacy, autonomy, and emotional regulation without the structural obligations inherent in family or couple relationships (Erikson, 1950; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For these reasons, examining differentiation of self within friendships is essential not only to broaden the relational scope of the theory, but also to deepen our understanding of how intrapersonal functioning shapes everyday social interactions beyond the family system.

Moreover, it is important to consider that both friendship quality and the expression of differentiation of self may vary across cultural contexts. Although research conducted in diverse countries suggests that higher differentiation of self tends to promote more functional interpersonal relationships, the ways in which autonomy, emotional regulation, and closeness are negotiated can differ depending on cultural values such as individualism or collectivism. For instance, studies in more collectivistic societies, such as China, indicate that certain forms of fusion with others may be perceived as normative or even adaptive for maintaining group harmony (e.g., Cao & An, 2018; Fang & An, 2014), whereas research from more individualistic cultures shows a clearer association between higher differentiation and healthier relational functioning (e.g., Lampis et al., 2019; Skowron et al., 2009). Spain, the cultural context of the present study, combines strong relational orientations with moderately collectivistic values, which may shape how individuals balance autonomy and connection within friendships. Therefore, examining differentiation of self and friendship quality in a Spanish sample not only extends the cross-cultural literature but also helps determine whether patterns observed in other societies generalize to Southern European contexts.

Anxiety and Depression

Another postulate by Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) states that people with lower levels of differentiation of self would have higher levels of chronic anxiety and psychopathological symptomatology.

Anxiety and depression are the most prevalent mental health problems and are leading reasons people seek psychological treatment (Herero et al., 2019; Rando & Cano, 2019). Anxiety refers to the anticipation of a physical or psychological danger that threatens an individual and puts them in a state of alertness (cognitive-emotional dimension) and tension (physiological dimension) (Rando & Cano, 2019). According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2014), anxiety disorders differ from normal anxiety in that they are excessive, persist beyond developmentally appropriate periods, and are accompanied by certain behavioral disturbances, such as avoidance.

The World Health Organization (2023a) estimates that 4% of the global population experience an anxiety disorder. Furthermore, the Spain Health National Survey 2017 (Encuesta Nacional de Salud de España 2017) estimated that 6.7% of the Spanish population aged 15 years and older experience anxious symptomatology, having prevalence of 4% in men and 9.2% in women (Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social, 2018). These data would have worsened due to the pandemic, increasing worldwide by 25% (World Health Organization, 2022), and according to the results obtained by Zhang et al. (2022), with a sample of 82,024 Spanish people, there would be a prevalence of 20% of anxious symptomatology in Spain.

On the other hand, depressive disorders are characterized by the presence of a sad, empty or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual's functional capacity (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). The World Health Organization (2022) estimates that 5% of adults and 5.7% of adults over 60 years of age suffer from depression. Furthermore, in Spain, 5.21% of the population would have depressive symptomatology (World Health Organization, 2023b). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that the prevalence of depression has increased worldwide by 25% (World Health Organization, 2022), which would explain that, according to the European Health Survey in Spain 2020 (Encuesta Europea de Salud en España 2020), it is estimated that 12.7% of the adult population would present depressive symptomatology, 8.9% in men and 16.3% in women (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020). These data would be supported by the systematic review and meta-analysis of Zhang et al. (2022), in which they estimate that 22% would have depressive symptomatology in a sample of 82,890 Spanish people.

Due to the importance of these disorders, multiple studies have been conducted to test the theoretically postulated relationship of differentiation of self with anxiety and depression (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

In relation to anxiety, several studies conducted in different countries, such as China, Spain, Italy, or Israel, have found that it is related to differentiation of self. The relationships of differentiation of self with trait anxiety (Álvarez-Hierro & Oliver, 2024; Dolz-del-Castellar & Oliver, 2021; Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2023; Peleg & Messerschmidt-Grandi, 2019), anxiety-related disorders (Xue et al., 2018), social anxiety (Peleg-Popko, 2002), separation anxiety (Borondo & Oliver, 2021), test anxiety (Peleg et al., 2016), and psychological stress (Lampis et al., 2020; Rodríguez-González et al., 2018) have been proven.

In relation to depression, multiple studies carried out in different countries, such as the U.S., Australia, and Germany, have observed that it is related to differentiation of self (Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011; Piteo & MacKay, 2021; Simon et al., 2019). Likewise, several studies have found that the different dimensions of differentiation of self are related to depressive symptomatology (Charbonneau et al., 2009; Choi & Murdock, 2017; Hooper & DePuy's, 2010; Piteo & MacKay, 2021).

On the other hand, there is ample evidence on the relationship of social support with anxiety (Shao et al., 2020) and depression (Gariepy et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2020), and the relationship of conflict-antagonism with these symptomatologies (Choi & Murdock, 2017; Hooper & DePuy, 2010).

As has been pointed out, differentiation of self, the quality of friendships and anxiety and depression are key variables for psychological adjustment and well-being. However, there is still little research on the relationships between these variables at the international level and, especially, in Spain, despite the importance of these constructs and the repercussions they have in the clinical field.

For all these reasons, the present study has the following objectives: a) to examine the relationship between differentiation of self, the quality of friendship, anxiety and depression; b) to know which factors of differentiation of self better explain the quality of friendship and anxious and depressive symptomatology.

Based on Bowen's Family Systems Theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and previous empirical evidence linking differentiation of self with interpersonal functioning and psychological adjustment, the following hypotheses were formulated: 1) Higher levels of differentiation of self will be associated with better quality of friendships, reflected in higher social support and lower conflict–antagonism. 2) Higher levels of differentiation of self will be negatively associated with anxious and depressive symptomatology.

3) Higher friendship quality -characterized by greater social support and lower conflict–antagonism- will be associated with lower levels of anxious and depressive symptomatology. 4) Higher levels of *I position* will predict better friendship quality and lower levels of anxious and depressive symptoms. 5) Higher levels of emotional reactivity, fusion with others, emotional cutoff, and dominance over others will predict poorer friendship quality and higher levels of anxious and depressive symptoms.

Method

Participants

A total of 221 Spanish adults participated in the study. 160 were women (72.39%) and 61 were men (27.61%). Their ages ranged between 18 and 92 years ($M=45.62$, $SD=16.37$). Regarding the level of autonomy, 160 participants were emancipated (72.9%) and 61 were not emancipated (27.1%). Moreover, 172 participants were economically independent of their parents (77.8%) and 49 were economically dependent on them (22.2%).

The sample was obtained using the non-probabilistic convenience and snowball method. The only inclusion criterion was that participants were of legal age (+18) and of Spanish nationality.

Instruments

Differentiation of Self Scale-Revised

This scale, developed by Oliver et al. (2023) assesses the differentiation of self in adults. The instrument consists of 25 items with 6 response options. The scale was validated with a sample of 1445 Spanish adults. The exploratory factor analysis with Oblimin rotation, carried out with approximately half of the sample, revealed the existence of 5 factors: I Position (5 items), Emotional Reactivity (5 items), Fusion with Others (4 items), Dominance of Others (5 items) and Emotional Cutoff (6 items).. On the other hand, confirmatory factor analysis, performed with the other approximate half of the sample, revealed that the model with five factors and a second-order factor had an optimal level of fit ($\chi2=895.05$, $p<.001$, $CFI=.92$, $TLI=.91$, $RMSEA=.06$, $SRMR=.07$). The internal consistency indices (Cronbach's alpha) were high: DSS-R=.91, IP=.90, ER=.85, FO=.85, DO=.85, and EC=.81. Adequate consistency indices were also observed in the present study, except for the IP: DSS-R=.85, IP=.66, ER=.87, FO=.77, DO=.80, EC=.75.

Network of Relationships Inventory

This scale, created by Furman and Buhrmester (1985), evaluates the quality of friendships. In the present study, only the subscales Social Support, with 12 items, and Conflict-Antagonism, with 6 items, were used to avoid sample fatigue. Both subscales are Likert-type, with 9 response options (Not at all −1-, More or less −5-, Extremely −9-). The Social Support subscale assesses the time/quality/support/affinity a person feels they have with their best friend. The Conflict-Antagonism subscale assesses the level of conflict/opposition/difficulties present in a significant relationship. Although the Network of Relationships Inventory has not been adapted to the Spanish population, the subscales Social Support and Conflict- previous studies have used the Social Support and Conflict–Antagonism subscales with Spanish samples in research focused on socio-emotional competencies and interpersonal functioning. For instance, Lopes et al. (2011) examined how emotional intelligence relates to the quality of peer relationships, while Cabello et al. (2013) explored the role of emotional abilities in predicting social and emotional adjustment. Both studies reported Cronbach's alphas of.84-.95 and.90-.93 respectively. In this study, Social Support and Conflict-Antagonism have Cronbach's alphas of.92 and.90 respectively.

Beck Anxiety Inventory

This scale, created by Beck et al. (1988), assesses the severity of anxiety and differentiates it from other groups that are not predominantly anxious (e.g., depressive) (Beck et al., 1988). This instrument consists of 21 items with 4 response options. The exploratory factor analysis with Promax rotation revealed the existence of a factor with 21 items reporting the measure of anxiety, except for one of them (terrified), which also saturated in the depression factor of the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1988). Likewise, it was demonstrated that this scale can discriminate between anxious and non-anxious diagnoses, in addition to correlating positively with other anxiety tests, such as the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale-Revised (Beck et al., 1988). The internal consistency index (Cronbach's alpha) is.92 (Beck et al., 1988). Furthermore, this scale has been translated and validated in the Spanish population in different studies with high internal consistency indexes:>.85 (Prieto & Muñiz, 2000; Sanz & Navarro, 2003). In this study, the scale presents a Cronbach's alpha of.93, which indicates a high internal consistency.

Beck Depression Inventory-II

This scale, created by Beck et al., (1961), Beck et al., (1996)) evaluates the depressive symptoms according to the criteria set forth in the DSM-IV (APA, 1994). This instrument has 21 items with 4 response options on the severity of depressive mood or behaviors/cognitions associated with such states in the last two weeks (Beck et al., 1996).

This scale has been translated and validated in the Spanish population in multiple studies (e.g., Sanz et al., 2003; Wang & Gorenstein, 2013), having in all cases a high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > .70). The Cronbach's alpha index of the original scale is 0.93 (Beck et al., 1996). In this research a Cronbach's alpha of .91 was obtained.

Procedure

The study was of a cross-sectional correlational quantitative type.

First, an online questionnaire package was designed using Google Forms. In the presentation, the aims of the study were explained, a minimum age of 18 years was required, precise instructions were given on how to complete the questionnaire, confidentiality was guaranteed, and participants were thanked. All items in the Google Forms questionnaire were mandatory, ensuring that no incomplete responses were submitted.

The sample was recruited through convenience sampling, disseminating the questionnaire through various social networks, such as Linkedin, Facebook and Instagram, as well as through snowball sampling, asking the recipients of the message to disseminate the study among their contacts. Once the survey was closed, the data was dumped into SPSS 26.

The research project was reviewed and validated by the Ethics Committee at the Comillas Pontifical University.

Data Analysis

First, descriptive analyses were carried out and Cronbach's alphas were calculated for all the scales. Next, the data were examined for normality using the Shapiro–Wilk test ($p > .05$). For variables that did not meet this criterion, asymmetry and kurtosis values were inspected following the guidelines of Curran et al. (1996). After confirming the normality assumption, Pearson correlations were then carried out to analyze the relationships between the study variables. For the interpretation of effect sizes, we used Cohen's (1988) cut-off points: r values below .30 for weak, r values between .30 and .49 for moderate, and r values higher than .50 for strong. Finally, after verifying that the necessary assumptions were met, multiple linear regression analyses were performed to identify the dimensions of differentiation of self that best predicted social support, conflict-antagonism, anxiety, and depression. Given that one of the key assumptions of multiple linear regression is the existence of a linear relationship between the dependent variable and each independent variable, only those dimensions of differentiation of self that showed significant correlations with the dependent variables were included as predictors in the regression analyses.

Results

First, descriptive analyses were carried out, including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis, as well as the Shapiro–Wilk normality test. Skewness and kurtosis values were examined following established criteria for univariate normality (Curran et al., 1996). Full descriptive statistics and normality assessments are provided in the Supplementary Material.

Second, several correlational analyses were conducted that revealed numerous significant relationships among the study variables (see Table 1). Significant relationships were observed between differentiation of self, social support, conflict-antagonism, anxiety and depression. Notable for their moderate magnitude were the positive relationships of social support with differentiation ($r = .39$) and I position ($r = .38$), and the negative relationship of this variable with emotional cutoff ($r = -.41$). Furthermore, it is worth highlighting for its large or moderate magnitude the negative relationships of anxiety with differentiation of self ($r = -.54$) and the positive relationships of this variable with emotional reactivity ($r = .58$) and emotional cutoff ($r = .43$), as far as the negative relationships of depression with differentiation of

Table 1 Matrix correlations between differentiation of self, social support, conflict-antagonism, anxiety and depression

	SOC-SUP	CON-ANT	BAI	BDI-II
DSS-R	.39***	-.20**	-.54***	-.65***
IP	.38***	-.16*	-.28***	-.31***
ER	-.16*	.12	.58***	.61***
FO	-.27**	.08	.24***	.37***
DO	-.07	.19**	.09	.17***
EC	-.41***	.08	.43***	.53***
SOC-SUP		-.08	-.11	-.29***
CON-ANT			.17**	.11
BAI				.72***

DSS-R = Differentiation of Self Scale-Revised; IP = I Position; ER = Emotional Reactivity; FO = Fusion with Others; DO = Dominance over the Others; EC = Emotional Cutoff; SOC-SUP = Social Support; CON-ANT = Conflict-Antagonism; BAI = Beck Anxiety Inventory; BDI-II = Beck Depression Inventory-II.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 2 Multiple regression analyses predicting social support, conflict-antagonism, depression and anxiety

	Criterion	Predictors	Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients			
			B	B	t	p	VIF
1	SOC-SUP	(Constant)	5.74		9.22	<.001	
		IP	.54	.32	5.31	<.001	1.09
		ER	.11	.11	1.63	.105	1.35
		EC	-.40	-.34	−4.92	<.001	1.28
		FO	-.15	-.13	−1.95	.052	1.39
2	CON-ANT	(Constant)	3.29		5.05	<.001	
		IP	-.28	-.15	−2.32	.021	1.00
		DO	.27	.19	2.85	.005	1.00
2	BAI	(Constant)	4.01		-.77	.443	
		IP	−1.91	-.13	−2.26	.025	1.09
		ER	4.15	.47	7.59	<.001	1.35
		EC	2.37	.27	3.46	.001	1.28
		FO	-.36	-.03	-.55	.582	1.39
4	BDI-II	(Constant)	-.29		-.08	.939	
		IP	−1.44	-.12	−2.43	.016	1.09
		ER	2.82	.42	7.3	<.001	1.39
		EC	2.35	.29	4.94	<.001	1.31
		FO	.64	.08	1.41	.161	1.39
		DO	.15	.02	.33	.745	1.08

SOC-SUP=Social Support; CON-ANT=Conflict-Antagonism; BAI=Beck Anxiety Inventory; BDI-II=Beck Depression Inventory-II; IP=I Position; ER=Emotional Reactivity; FO=Fusion with Others; DO=Dominance over the Others; EC=Emotional Cutoff

self ($r=-.65$) and I position ($r=-.31$), and the positive relationships of this variable with emotional reactivity ($r=.61$), emotional cutoff ($r=.53$) and fusion with others ($r=.37$). Finally, small positive relationships between anxiety and conflict-antagonism ($r=.17$), and small negative relationships between depression and social-support were observed ($r=-.29$).

Next, several multiple linear regressions were performed to determine which dimensions of differentiation of self better predicted social support, conflict-antagonism, anxiety and depression. Table 2 shows the regression coefficients.

The first regression analysis revealed that IP and EC predicted social support by 28% ($F(4, 216)=20.82$, $p<.001$, $R^2=.28$, *Durbin Watson*=1.86), excluding FO and ER from the model.

Likewise, the second regression analysis showed that IP and DO predicted 6% of conflict and antagonism ($F(2, 218)=7.20$, $p<.001$, $R^2=.06$, *Durbin Watson*=1.97).

On the other hand, the third regression analysis revealed that IP, ER and EC predicted 40% of anxiety ($F(4, 216)=35.23$, $p<.001$, $R^2=.40$, *Durbin Watson*=1.75), excluding FO from the model.

Finally, the last regression analysis showed that IP, ER and EC predicted 48% of the variance of depression ($F(5, 215)=40.19$, $p<.001$, $R^2=.48$, *Durbin Watson*=1.90), with FO and DO being excluded from the model.

Discussion

The present study is grounded in Family Systems Theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and developmental perspectives on human relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1950). Differentiation of self is a central construct in understanding emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning, while friendships are key social relationships that influence well-being during development. Anxiety and depression are prevalent indicators of psychological distress, which may be modulated by social support and conflict in relationships. Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze the relationships between differentiation of self, the quality of friendship, anxiety and depression, and to examine which dimensions of differentiation of self best predicted these variables. Understanding these relationships is important for identifying potential intervention targets to promote healthier social and emotional functioning.

It is important to note that in the present study, social support and conflict–antagonism refer specifically to participants' perceived qualities of their relationship with a best friend, as assessed by the Network of Relationships Inventory. Accordingly, all interpretations related to friendship quality are limited to this specific relational context and should not be generalized to social relationships more broadly.

Theoretical Implications

First, the results showed a positive relationship of differentiation of self with best-friend social support, and a negative relationship of this variable with best-friend conflict-antagonism, anxiety and depression. These results are congruent with previous research which observed that more differentiated people had more social support (Cao & An, 2018; Fang & An, 2014), social skills (Castro-Dávila & Oliver, 2022), partner support (Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011), couple adjustment (Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022; Rodríguez-González et al., 2020), and assertiveness in the couple (Oliver et al., 2023), as far as less conflict-antagonism (Choi & Murdock, 2017; Skowron et al., 2009), marital conflict (Telli & Yavuz Güler, 2023), aggressiveness or submission in the couple (Oliver et al., 2023), anxiety (Dolz-del-Castellar & Oliver, 2021; Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2023; Peleg & Messerschmidt-Grandi, 2019; Xue et al., 2018), depression (Choi & Murdock, 2017; Piteo & MacKay, 2021) and emotional intelligence and emotional regulation (Oliver et al., 2023; Ramos-Luna & Oliver, 2024).

Importantly, the observed associations between differentiation of self and best-friend social support and conflict–antagonism are consistent with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize high-quality friendships as relational contexts in which differentiation-related processes may be expressed. In the present study, high-quality friendships are operationalized as relationships with a best friend characterized by higher perceived social support and lower levels of conflict–antagonism. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), stable, emotionally supportive friendships function as proximal processes that foster self-regulation, mutuality, and boundary negotiation. From an attachment perspective (Ainsworth, 1989), friendships that offer emotional security allow individuals to explore autonomy while maintaining closeness. Consistent with Bowen's (1978) conceptualization, such relationships provide contexts in which individuals practice maintaining a coherent sense of self, managing emotional reactivity, and reducing tendencies toward fusion or emotional cutoff.

However, given the cross-sectional nature of the present study and the absence of age-based or longitudinal analyses, no conclusions can be drawn regarding developmental processes or changes across the lifespan. References to developmental perspectives are therefore intended as theoretically informed interpretations rather than empirically tested mechanisms within the present data.

Taken together, these characteristics describe what we refer to as "high-quality friendships": voluntary, reciprocal, and emotionally balanced relationships that not only reflect existing levels of differentiation but also constitute relational environments that promote its continued development

throughout adulthood. As such, the present findings are consistent with theoretical views suggesting that high-quality friendships, as defined by perceived support and low conflict with a best friend, may be associated with better interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being, without implying causal or developmental mechanisms.

On the other hand, anxiety was positively related to conflict-antagonism, but not to social support, while depression was negatively related with social support, but not with conflict-antagonism, while. These results support previous research that observed relationships of social support and conflict-antagonism with anxiety and depression (Choi & Murdock, 2017; Gariepy et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2020; Hooper & DePuy, 2010; Shao et al., 2020). From the perspective of friendship dynamics, relationships high in conflict and low in emotional safety may amplify vigilance, interpersonal tension, and dysregulated affect, thereby fueling anxious symptomatology. Conversely, emotionally supportive and reciprocal friendships help foster belongingness, self-worth, and co-regulation, acting as recognized buffers against depressive affect.

The results of the present study are consistent with Bowen's theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which states that more differentiated people tend to have more functional relationships and less anxiety and psychopathological symptomatology. Likewise, the pattern of associations observed in this study can be interpreted within the frameworks proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Ainsworth (1989), and Erikson (1950). Although these frameworks emphasize developmental processes, the present findings should be understood as correlational and context-specific, highlighting associations between differentiation of self, friendship quality with a best friend, and psychological well-being, rather than developmental change. From this perspective, high-quality friendships—characterized by emotional availability, reciprocity, and constructive problem-solving—can be conceptualized as relational contexts in which differentiation-related processes and psychological well-being are concurrently expressed, without implying developmental or causal mechanisms.

The relationship observed between anxiety and conflict-antagonism could be explained because conflict is a way to discharge anxiety in people with low differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). At the same time, conflicts are stressful events that can increase anxiety levels. On the other hand, although there is evidence that social support acts as a protective factor against anxiety (Beehr & McGrath, 1992; Shao et al., 2020), the non-observance of relationship between these variables in this study could be explained because of the sample characteristics, or because part of the people with anxiety could prefer to focus on their difficulties and not to lean on their friends, because anxiety and

conflicts could make friends drift away, or because the current global crisis (e.g., post-pandemic, Russian-Ukrainian and Palestinian-Israeli wars, inflation, job insecurity) generates such high levels of anxiety (Fu et al., 2021; Lin, 2022) that they cannot be reduced through social support.

Additionally, it is important to consider that social support may not consistently function as a protective factor in cases of chronic or severe anxiety. High levels of anxiety can interfere with an individual's ability to seek, perceive, or accept support, due to heightened threat sensitivity, fears of burdening others, or avoidance-based interpersonal patterns. These mechanisms may limit the regulatory benefits of supportive relationships, thereby weakening or nullifying the expected negative association between anxiety and social support.

Regarding the negative relationship between depression and social support, it could be understood bidirectionally, that is, the lack of social support promotes hopelessness and depression, and depression promotes isolation. Yet, many studies indicate that social support is an important protective factor of depression (Gariepy et al., 2016). Likewise, the lack of relationship between depression and conflict-antagonism could be because people who express their anger outwardly could be less likely to enter a depressive process (Choi & Murdock, 2017).

On the other hand, the regression analyses revealed that I position and emotional cutoff predicted social support by 28%. Moreover, I position and dominance over the others explained 6% of the Conflict-Antagonism. These results are congruent with empirical research on differentiation of self. Lampis et al. (2019) found that I position explained 13% of dyadic adjustment in men and 10% of the variance in women. Moreover, Rodriguez-Gonzalez et al. (2016) observed that emotional cutoff was 9% predictive of within-couple mismatch in men and 4% in women.

Also, it was found that I position, emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff predicted anxiety by 40%. Moreover, I position, emotional reactivity, and emotional cutoff predicted depression by 48%. These results are consistent with empirical research. Duch-Ceballos et al. (2020) found that differentiation of self explained 61% of the variance of trait anxiety. In addition, Dolz-del-Castellar and Oliver (2021) observed that differentiation of self and family functioning accounted for 50.3% of trait anxiety. Multiple investigations have also found positive relationships between depression and emotional reactivity (Charbonneau et al., 2009; Choi & Murdock, 2017) and emotional cutoff (Choi & Murdock, 2017; Hooper & DePuy, 2010) and negative relationships with I position (Piteo & MacKay, 2021; Skowron et al., 2009).

These results are congruent with the Family Systems Theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which postulates that people with lower differentiation of self would have higher level of chronic anxiety and greater psychopathological symptomatology.

Practical Implications

These findings offer relevant clinical implications. Interventions aimed at strengthening differentiation of self—promoting a solid sense of self, enhancing emotional regulation, and fostering high-quality relational bonds—are likely to contribute to healthier friendships and reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms. Likewise, interventions focused on promoting high-quality and functional friendships may, in turn, enhance differentiation of self and reduce emotional distress.

Bowenian family therapy provides a direct theoretical and clinical framework for enhancing differentiation of self. Core interventions such as coaching (helping clients maintain an "I-position" in emotionally charged situations), detriangulation (reducing reactive involvement in relational triangles), and promoting awareness of multigenerational transmission processes are explicitly designed to reduce emotional reactivity and strengthen autonomous functioning within relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Rodríguez-González & Martínez, 2015).

Complementary therapeutic approaches can also support differentiation. For example, cognitive-behavioral interventions that target emotional regulation, cognitive reappraisal, and tolerance of discomfort help individuals modulate anxiety and reduce impulsive or avoidant reactions, thereby facilitating a more differentiated response to interpersonal stress (e.g., Ellis y Dryden, 1994). Likewise, mindfulness-based interventions enhance present-moment awareness and reduce automatic emotional reactivity, mechanisms highly consistent with Bowen's conceptualization of differentiation (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Taken together, these clinical strategies illustrate practical pathways through which differentiation of self may be strengthened in psychotherapy, with the potential downstream benefits of improving friendship quality and reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Limitations

The study presents several limitations. First, although the sample size was adequate for the statistical analyses conducted, it was relatively modest, which may limit statistical power and the stability of the estimates. Second, data were collected using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method, which may reduce sample heterogeneity and limit generalizability. Third, the sample showed a notable gender imbalance, with a substantially higher proportion of women

than men, which may have influenced the results and restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the broader population. Fourth, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures introduces potential response biases, such as social desirability or common-method variance. Fifth, because all participants were of Spanish nationality, the cultural generalizability of the findings is limited; future studies should examine whether these relationships hold in other cultural contexts. Finally, although the age range of participants was broad, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for the examination of age-related or developmental processes. Longitudinal and age-stratified research is therefore needed to examine whether associations between differentiation of self, friendship quality, and psychological well-being vary across adulthood.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by recruiting larger and more diverse samples, incorporating multi-method assessment strategies, and conducting cross-cultural studies to examine the universality or cultural specificity of the associations between differentiation of self, friendship quality, and psychological well-being.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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