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Differentiation of Self, Couple Adjustment and Family Life Cycle: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores differentiation of self (DoS) and its association with couple adjustment across the family life cycle, in a sample of Spanish individuals ($n = 506$). Individuals in stage VII (nearing the end of life) revealed significantly lower levels of DoS than those in other stages, except for V (moving on at midlife). Individuals in stages V and VII also revealed lower couple adjustment than individuals in stage II (couple formation). DoS was positively associated with couple adjustment across all stages, particularly V–VII. Longitudinal studies will confirm the trend for decrease in DoS and couple adjustment. Implications for therapy are discussed.

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Introduction

Bowen's theoretical foundations were informed by his clinical practice, supervision experience, and work with his own family of origin (1978), resulting in a fertile system of ideas and one of the most comprehensive theories in family therapy (Nichols, 2013). Bowen's concept of *differentiation of self* (DoS), in particular, has received great attention for both clinical practice and research. Empirical studies have supported many basic assumptions of Bowen's theory regarding the role of differentiation in social and emotional functioning (Skowron et al., 2014). However, DoS stability across the lifespan has not been addressed so far. At life cycle transition points, individual and family stress is often high, as families must rebalance, redefine, and realign their relationships (McGoldrick et al., 2016). At the same time, there is a reciprocal process between the way an individual uses one's own self during a life event, and the way the family interacts with the individual (Frost, 2014). The main goal of the present study is to explore DoS and couple adjustment across the seven family life

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cycle stages proposed by McGoldrick et al. (2016), and the relationship between DoS and couple adjustment in each of these stages.

Differentiation of self

DoS is the cornerstone of Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST). This concept defines people according to their ability to balance their emotional and intellectual functioning and intimacy and autonomy in their relationships. DoS refers to the ability to distinguish thoughts from feelings and to be guided by one's intellect rather than emotional reactivity (Bowen, 1978; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). It has been described as the capacity to think, reflect, be flexible, and act wisely rather than responding automatically to emotional pressures (Nichols, 2013). Rodríguez-González & Martínez Berlanga (2014) summarized it as “the ability for emotional self-regulation” (p.7) on an intrapersonal level, and interpersonally it is expressed in the degree that a person modulates, in an adaptive way, connection and autonomy in relationships.

Higher levels of differentiation have been associated with improved psychological adjustment (e.g., Hainlen et al., 2016; Murdock & Gore Jr., 2004), as well as psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Ross & Murdock, 2014; Skowron et al., 2009). DoS has shown positive associations with marital adjustment and satisfaction (e.g., Peleg, 2008; Rodríguez-González et al., 2016), and family relations functioning (e.g., Choi & Murdock, 2017; Knudson-Martin, 1996). In addition, DoS is associated with lower levels of familial conflict and violence (e.g., Likcani et al., 2017; Skowron, 2005; Skowron et al., 2010).

The family life cycle

Families are the foundation of our experience of the world, our first relationships, and are often where we first feel a sense of belonging to a group (McGoldrick et al., 2016). At same time, families are challenged to respond to the individual life cycle of their members while simultaneously adapt to community, culture, and society over time. McGoldrick et al. (2016) developed a *family life cycle* scheme using “the concepts of stages and tasks to define the changing relationships, status, and membership in families at transition points over the life course” (p. 23). This framework has been a useful theoretical and empirical tool, for both clinical practice as research (Kapinus & Johnson, 2003). An overview is presented on [Table 1](#).

Couple adjustment and family life cycle

Couple adjustment (or broadly, dyadic adjustment) takes on major importance for individuals in a romantic dyad, as “the ideal itself costs us all a

Table 1. Phases of the family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2016).

Family life cycle phase	Emotional process of transition	Second-order tasks
1. Emerging young adults	Accepting emotional and financial responsibility for self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Differentiation of self in relation to family of origin b. Development of intimate peer relationships c. Establishment of self in respect to work and financial independence d. Parents shifting to consultative role in young adult's relationships
2. Couple formation: the joining of families	Commitment to new expanded system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Formation of couple system b. Expansion of family boundaries to include new partner and extended family c. Realignment of relationships among couple, parents and siblings, extended family, friends, and larger community
3. Families with young children	Accepting new members into the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Adjustment of couple system to make space for children b. Collaboration in child-rearing and financial and housekeeping tasks c. Realignment of relationships with extended family to include parenting and grandparenting roles
4. Families with adolescents	Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to permit children's independence and grandparents' frailties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Shift of parent-child relationships to permit adolescent to have more independent activities and relationships and to move more flexibly into and out system b. Families helping emerging adolescents negotiate relationships with community c. Refocus on midlife couple and career issues. d. Begin shift toward caring for older generation
5. Launching children and moving on at midlife	Accepting a multitude of exits from and entries into the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Renegotiation of couple system as a dyad b. Development of adult-to-adult relationships between parents and grown-up children c. Realignment of relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren d. Exploration of new interests/career, given the freedom from child care responsibilities e. Dealing with health needs, disabilities, and death of parents (grandparents)
6. Families in late middle age	Accepting shifting generational roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Maintaining or modifying own and/or couple and social functioning and interests in the face of physiological decline: exploration of new familial and social role options b. Supporting more central role of middle generations c. Making room in the system for the wisdom and experience of the elders
7. Families nearing the end of life	Accepting the realities of family members' limitations and death and the completion of one cycle of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Dealing with loss of spouse, siblings, and other peers b. Making preparations for death and legacy c. Managing reversed roles in caretaking between middle and older generations

tremendous amount in terms of our ability to be ourselves, find harmony in our relationships, and support the tasks of family life” (McGoldrick et al., 2016, p. 259). This concept has been largely used as a measure of marital quality, and can be defined as a process that expresses the degree of dyadic satisfaction, cohesion, consensus and troublesome differences, and at the same time the interpersonal tensions and personal anxiety (Spanier, 1976). It has been associated with higher sexual satisfaction (Fisher et al., 2015), and better parental adjustment (Bouchard, 2018) At

same time the presence of distress in marriage has been linked to increased risk for mental and physical health problems, including depression and anxiety (Whisman et al., 2018). In later stages of the family life cycle, poor marital quality predicts psychological distress and loneliness (Stokes, 2017; Trudel et al., 2010), explaining why this field of investigation has been so prolific (Graham et al., 2006).

Dating back to the 1920s, the relationship between couple adjustment (or similar concepts) and the family life cycle has received great empirical attention (Spanier et al., 1975). Previous cross-sectional research suggests a curvilinear relationship (concave up) with couple adjustment declining in the early years of marriage and increasing in the later years, with the highest levels in pre-parental and empty-nest phases (e.g., Anderson et al., 1983; Lawson, 1988). Recent longitudinal research suggests that individuals reveal higher levels of marital quality in *couple formation: the joining of families* (Stage II¹), and declines over time (Dush et al., 2008; Tucker & Aron, 1993; Umberson et al., 2005), with the steepest decay occurring during the earliest and latest years of marriage (VanLaningham et al., 2001; Wiltgen Tissot & Falcke, 2017). However, it is important to note that most studies on couple adjustment and happiness over time report average trends from relatively homogenous samples with little attention to unique factors that may influence outcomes, such as cultural context, economic hardship, or generational cohort. Person-centered analyses have revealed more nuanced findings. For example, Anderson et al. (2010) identified five unique marital happiness trajectories based on varying levels of marital problems, time spent in shared activities, and economic hardship. It may be that declines are more acute in families with fewer financial and social resources that may help buffer the straining effects of raising children.

Differentiation of self, couple adjustment and family life cycle

DoS research has expanded to specific questions for individuals in different family life cycle stages. In young adult college students DoS predicts greater psychological and interpersonal well-being over time (Skowron et al., 2009). In couples, a large body of work showed that greater differentiation predicts higher levels of couple adjustment (Gubbins et al., 2010; Lampis, 2016; Lampis et al., 2017; Rodríguez-González et al., 2016; Skowron, 2000), and suggests that DoS is a predictor of desire (Ferreira et al., 2016). When childrearing, parents' higher levels of DoS predict better adjustment for both children (Peleg, 2005; Peleg et al., 2015; Ponappa et al., 2017; Skowron, 2005) and parents (Richards, 1989).

Although differentiation was conceptualized by Bowen (1978) as a highly-stable characteristic, the basic self may change through

psychotherapy or as a result of critical life events as new awareness and knowledge is acquired through life experience. According to Bowen (1978), when the family system is emotionally fluid it can be more amenable to emotional change. This state is more likely to be found in life cycle transitions such as the birth of a child or “family upsets such as deaths, serious illness, reunions, weddings, or other stressful or significant family events.” (p. 496). Despite the fact there is a solid body of research analyzing DoS, as noted by Kim-Appel et al. (2007), very little data exists addressing the DoS trajectory across the lifespan. We found only four studies addressing this in specific life cycle stages transitions (Bell & Harsin, 2018; Hu et al., 2015; Kim-Appel et al., 2007; Peleg, 2014).

Peleg’s (2014) results indicate that higher numbers of stressful life events in childhood and adolescence are correlated with higher levels of fusion with others in adulthood. Her findings suggest that positive childhood experiences may strengthen family members’ relationships and increase levels of DoS later in life.

Kim-Appel et al. (2007) focused on individuals age 62 years or older, were interested in the elders’ psychological symptoms in response to developmental tasks (past or present), such as dealing with the *empty nest transition*, the post-parental marital relationship adjustment, and death of a spouse, illness, or grandparenthood. Results showed an inverse relationship between differentiation and symptomatology, empirically supporting Bowen’s perspective that self-differentiation would be related to psychological adjustment or symptomatology even across later life stages (Kim-Appel et al., 2007).

While they did not assess DoS directly, Hu et al. (2015) examined differences in Bowenian concepts and marital quality across life stages. They found that family-of-origin triangulation of both husbands and wives predicted marital satisfaction, but couples in Stage III reported higher family-of-origin triangulation and less satisfaction and cohesion than couples in Stage IV. Even though differentiation was not explicitly assessed, according to Bowen, both triangulation and fusion are related to a lack of differentiation. This is a first step in comparing individuals on different stages of the family life cycle.

Bell and Harsin (2018) evaluated marital relationship *connection* and *individuation* at midlife (ages 38–53) and again 25 years later (i.e., later life). They defined connection as “affection and a supportive family climate, nurturing trust and self-esteem,” and individuation as “respect and clear interpersonal boundaries within the family, nurturing personal autonomy and self-differentiation” (p. 12). Results revealed significant relationships between marital functioning at midlife and both connection and individuation in later life. Additionally, individuation at midlife was associated with less conflict in later life. This study gives empirical support for the association between differentiation and marital relationships in different stages of

family life cycle, suggesting that higher levels of differentiation predict less conflict in subsequent stages.

The present study

In sum, research has supported the importance of DoS in both social and emotional functioning, as well as in couple adjustment. The scarce empirical studies published showed this relevance in different stages of the family life cycle, even though not all lifespan stages have been addressed so far. The present study aimed to (a) explore DoS across the seven stages of the family life cycle; (b) analyze differences in couple adjustment between stages II through VII of the family life cycle; and (c) test whether higher levels of differentiation of self are associated with higher levels of couple adjustment in each family life cycle stage.

Methods

Sample

Our sample ($N = 506$) was derived from the respondents of a larger study (Rodríguez-González, 2016) addressing the relationship between DoS and other variables. Participants were Spanish adults (271 women and 235 men). From the original sample of 669 respondents, we excluded individuals that did not meet criteria for any of the family life cycle's seven phases ($n = 163$; e.g., single or divorced parents, senior couples without children, remarried families). The remaining participants were assigned a life cycle phase according to their transitional tasks and suggested ages (McGoldrick et al., 2016), using the following criteria:

1. *Emerging young adults* ($n = 51$): singles with a partner but no cohabitation, aged 30 or under and no children
2. *Couple formation: the joining of families* ($n = 94$): individuals with partner and cohabitation for less than 15 years, aged 50 or under and without children
3. *Families with young children* ($n = 133$): people with partner and cohabitation, with all children aged 12 or under
4. *Families with adolescents* ($n = 72$): participants with partner and cohabitation, with at least one child aged more than 12 and less than 18
5. *Launching children and moving on at midlife* ($n = 61$): subjects with partner and cohabitation for more than 18 years, all children are adults (youngest aged 18 and upper) and at least one of whom still lives at home

6. *Families in late middle age (empty nest)* ($n = 55$): participants with partner and cohabitation for more than 18 years, aged more than 50 and less than 70, and all offspring have left home
7. *Families nearing the end of life* ($n = 40$): participants aged 70 years or more.

Procedures

The original study (Rodríguez-González, 2016) recruited participants using a non-probability (convenience) sampling procedure through professional networks (e.g., universities, companies, NGOs, community groups), who received an e-mail asking for their participation. All participants received an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study and its anonymous and voluntary nature. Eligible participants identified as Spanish, resided in Spain, and were 18 years of age or older. Participants received full study instructions, a socio-demographic questionnaire, a complete set of measures, and a pre-paid envelope for returning their responses (via mail or hand-delivered). Measures were presented in random order to mitigate fatigue effects on any given questionnaire, and the assessment took approximately 50 minutes to complete. This project followed the human subjects research guidelines statement by the university granting Institutional Review Board approval.

Measures

Differentiation of self. The Spanish-Differentiation of Self Inventory (S-DSI; Rodríguez-González et al., 2015) assessed participants' levels of differentiation. This instrument was adapted from the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) to be used with Spanish samples. Like the DSI-R, the S-DSI is a 26-item self-report measure that assesses the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of DoS using four subscales: emotional reactivity, "I" position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Item responses ranged from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*), and higher scores indicate greater differentiation of self. Rodríguez-González et al. (2015) reported good internal reliability ($\alpha = .85$). In the current sample, S-DSI showed high reliability ($\alpha = .92$).

Couple adjustment. A Spanish version (Soletto & Carrasco, 1997) of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), a 32-item questionnaire, was used to assess the quality of the relationship between married or cohabiting couples. Thirty items are scored on five- or six-point Likert-type scales, and two items in a yes/no response. Global scores range from 0 to 151, with higher values indicating greater couple adjustment. In their initial validation of the Spanish

measure, Soletto and Carrasco (1997) reported high internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$). The alpha coefficient for our sample was .96.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 25). Sex differences and socio-demographic bias were analyzed using independent samples *t*-tests. A bivariate association between DoS and couple adjustment was estimated to determine the absence of multicollinearity ($r = .710$; Field, 2009). Mixed-design analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were then used to assess the differences in DoS and couple adjustment between participants in each of the family life cycle stages. Pearson correlations were used to explore the relationships between DoS and couple adjustment in each family life cycle stage. Finally, the effects of DoS on couple adjustment across the family life cycle were evaluated with ANCOVA analyses.

Results

Demographic and descriptive results

Participants ($N = 506$) had a mean age of 44.6 years ($SD = 14.51$) ranging from 19 to 81 years old. On average, men were 46 years old ($M = 46.31$; $SD = 14.98$), and women were 43 ($M = 43.12$; $SD = 13.94$). The majority of these individuals were employed (70.8%) and had a university or higher education degree (58.5%). Table 2 summarizes the sample demographic characteristics per life cycle stage.

Participants reported an overall mean DoS score of 3.93 ($SD = 0.91$). No significant gender differences were found in DoS levels between men ($M = 3.99$; $SD = 0.95$) and women ($M = 3.88$; $SD = 0.88$), $t(504) = 1.32$, $p = .188$. Similarly, there were no significant differences between men ($M = 112.84$; $SD = 23.71$) and women ($M = 113.41$; $SD = 23.42$) on couple adjustment ($M = 113.14$; $SD = 23.54$), $t(489) = -0.27$, $p = .791$. We also assessed for gender differences in the study variables within each stage. Significant differences were found only in stage I (emerging young adults), with men ($M = 4.36$; $SD = 0.79$) reporting higher levels of DoS than women ($M = 3.87$; $SD = 0.81$), $t(49) = 2.18$, $p < .05$. Overall mean values and standard deviations for study variables in each of the life cycle categories are presented in Table 2 and illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Differentiation of self across family life cycle

DoS mean scores are illustrated in Figure 1. We found significant differences in DoS between family life cycle stages, $F(6,499) = 4.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

Table 2. Demographic statistics, S-DSI and DAS by family life cycle stage.

		Total	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV	Stage V	Stage VI	Stage VII
Participants	<i>n</i>	506	51	94	133	72	61	55	40
Sex (%)	Men	46.4	45.1	39.4	46.6	47.2	47.5	50.9	55.0
	Women	53.6	54.9	60.6	53.4	52.8	52.5	49.1	45.0
Age	<i>M</i>	44.60	26.24	32.51	38.15	47.24	55.20	61.40	73.90
	<i>SD</i>	14.50	2.85	5.19	5.78	5.05	4.82	5.39	3.46
Education (%)	No formal education	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.8	1.4	0.0	1.8	10.0
	Middle school (11–13 age)	12.5	9.8	1.1	12.0	11.1	13.1	21.8	32.5
	High school (18–19 age)	27.5	29.4	28.7	14.3	29.2	36.1	38.2	35.0
	Higher education	58.5	60.8	69.1	72.9	58.3	50.8	38.2	22.5
Job Situation (%)	Employed	70.8	80.4	84.0	80.5	81.9	78.7	43.6	0.0
	Unemployed	17.0	19.6	13.8	19.5	15.3	18.0	23.6	5.0
	Retired	12.3	0.0	2.1	0.0	2.8	3.3	32.7	95.0
Relationship duration (years)	<i>M</i>	17.60	.00	3.60	9.53	19.29	29.16	35.53	48.48
	<i>SD</i>	14.79	.00	3.46	4.79	4.04	4.42	6.69	6.92
Number of children	<i>M</i>	1.74	.00	.00	1.88	2.69	2.43	2.69	3.52
	<i>SD</i>	1.62	.00	.00	.84	1.70	1.04	1.49	1.78
S-DSI	<i>M</i>	3.93	4.09	4.08	4.00	4.01	3.70	3.96	3.31
	<i>SD</i>	.91	.83	.71	.80	.88	1.02	1.08	1.15
DAS	<i>M</i>	113.14	121.57	121.31	111.90	115.18	104.67	113.12	94.14
	<i>SD</i>	23.54	15.73	17.57	17.85	22.43	28.13	27.24	35.96

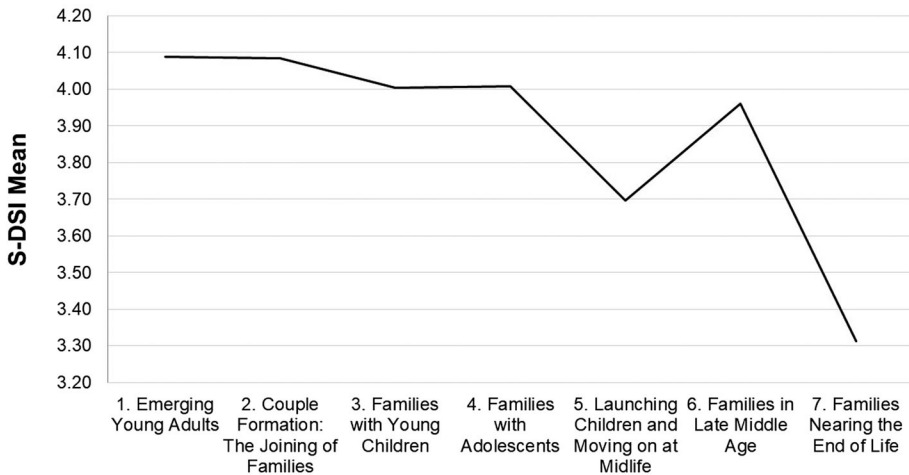


Figure 1. S-DSI mean scores across family life cycle.

Post-hoc *Scheffe* tests revealed that individuals in Stage VII (families nearing the end of life) have significantly lower differentiation levels than individuals in the other stages ($p < .05$), except for Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). To assure that stage VII results were not masking other differences, we conducted a second analysis for the first six stages, and no significant differences were found $F(5,460) = 1.78, p = .116, \eta^2 = .02$. To assess for measurement issues, mean score comparisons were done for each item of

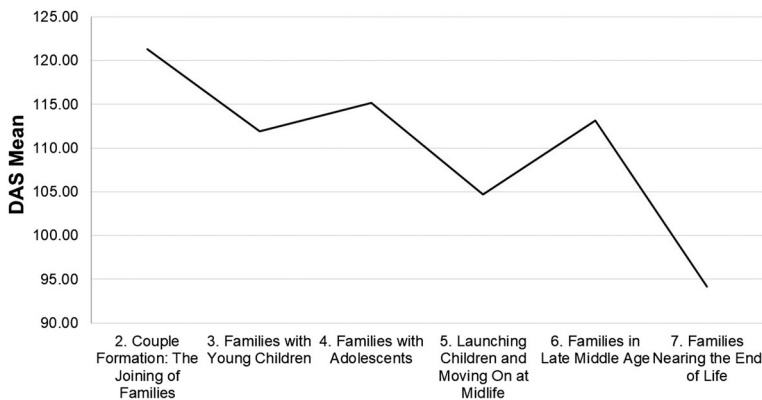


Figure 2. DAS mean scores across family life cycle.

the S-DSI scale between Stage VII and the other stages. Only in item 4 “*When someone close to me disappoints me, I withdraw from him/her for a time*” individuals in stage VII revealed significant lower scores than individuals in the other stages $t(504) = -2.06, p = .04$. As some of the S-DSI scale items concern a partner relationship, global S-DSI mean scores were compared between married and widowed participants in stage VII, resulting in non-significant differences $t(38) = .19, p = .85$.

Couple adjustment across family life cycle

Our second research question asked whether couple adjustment declines from Stage II (couple formation: the joining of families) to stage VII (families nearing the end of life) of the family life cycle. We excluded from this question Stage I (emerging young adults), as these participants have no cohabitation with their partners, therefore could introduce too much bias comparing with the other stages. Accordingly, individuals in stage II reported the highest levels of couple adjustment ($M = 121.31; SD = 17.57$), as seen in Figure 2. ANOVA analyses shows significant differences between stages $F(5,435) = 8.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. A post-hoc *Scheffe* test revealed that individuals in Stage II have significantly higher couple adjustment levels than individuals in Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife) and Stage VII ($p < .05$), whereas individuals in Stage VII have significantly lower couple adjustment levels than individuals in the other stages ($p < .05$), except for Stage V. Moreover, observing stages on a continuum, results revealed that couple adjustment declines in stages Stage III (families with young children), Stage V and Stage VII, although significant only in VII.

DoS and couple adjustment association in family life cycle stages

Our third research question asked whether there were positive associations between DoS and couple adjustment across all family life-cycle stages, as

Table 3. Bivariate correlations between S-DSI and DAS by family life cycle stage.

	Total	1. Emerging young adults	2. Couple formation	3. Families with young children	4. Families with adolescents	5. Launching children	6. Families in late middle age	7. Families nearing the end of life
<i>r</i>	.710**	.641**	.488**	.659**	.497**	.821**	.818**	.903**
<i>n</i>	491	50	91	131	70	61	55	33

** $p < .01$.

shown in Table 3. Our findings revealed a positive, significant relationship between these two variables across all family life cycle stages. An ANCOVA analysis revealed that there are significant differences in couple adjustment across life cycle stages after controlling for DoS, $F(5,434) = 4.86$, $p < .001$, $partial^2 = .05$. Moreover, the amount of unexplained variance reduced to 117,574.69 units, from 232,880.90, when analyzing couple adjustment alone.

Discussion

Using a cross-sectional design, the main goal of this study was to explore DoS and couple adjustment, independently and in association with one another, across the life cycle. Our first research question examined whether DoS varied across different life stages. The results revealed differences in DoS across the family life cycle, specifically showing that individuals in Stage VII (families nearing the end of life) presented significantly lower levels of differentiation than individuals in all other stages, except for Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). Although there is research suggesting age and gender differences on differentiation, other studies suggest age (Rodríguez-González et al., 2015) and other demographic variables play no role (Kim-Appel et al., 2007). Interestingly, our results were consistent with Major et al. (2014) showing that individuals in the elder group scored significantly lower levels of differentiation than younger groups. One possible explanation could be the concept of societal emotional process, one of the eight interlocking concepts of Bowen's (1978) theory. In this study, birth and childhood of participants in Stage VII took place in a historical context particularly different from other participants. They were born between 1934 and 1947, and in 1936 the *Spanish Civil War* started and lasted until 1939, precisely the year that *World War II* commenced and endured until 1945. These events had a major impact on Spain, and likely on our participants' and their parents' lives, suggesting that these circumstances could have resulted in a cohort effect on differentiation levels. Bowen (1978) proposed that "all things being equal, you emerge with about the same basic level of differentiation your parents had. This is determined by the process before your birth and the situation during infancy and early childhood" (p. 409). Another explanation could be that an increase of dependency on others and diminished control of one's life at this stage

(McGoldrick et al., 2016) could result in lower DoS scores. Additionally, this life stage may invite heightened stress about nearing the end of life, and lower DoS scores may be more reflective of unique stressors than they are the participants' actual DoS levels. In fact, higher DoS may actually facilitate increased dependence on others when the life cycle calls for such a transition.

Further, even though lower DoS scores in Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife) were non-significant, in this stage, children leave their parents' homes, which can encourage differentiation for their families of origin. According to Bowen (1978), parents' DoS levels impact children's levels of differentiation. Our results suggest this process may be more reciprocal, in that young adults renegotiate the self, but so might parents in their individual identities and perhaps in the dynamics of the couple dyad. Again, higher DoS may actually facilitate increased dependence on others (couple) and, moreover, facilitate this new family re-alignment. In this stage, parents deal with launching their children, but also with their own parents' health needs, disabilities, or death. It seems of major interest for future studies to focus in this intergenerational nexus.

Our second research question examined whether couple adjustment varied across life cycle stages. Our results showed that couple adjustment generally declined from Stage II (couple formation: the joining of families) to Stage VII (families nearing the end of life), consistent with previous research (e.g., Dush et al., 2008; Tucker & Aron, 1993; Umberson et al., 2005). In line with previous studies (VanLaningham et al., 2001; Wiltgen Tissot & Falcke, 2017), individuals in Stage III (families with young children) reported lower couple adjustment than individuals in Stage II (couple formation: the joining of families); individuals in Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife), revealed lower couple adjustment than Stage IV (families with adolescents); and also individuals in Stage VII (families nearing the end of life) registered lower couple adjustment than individuals at Stage VI (families in late middle age). However, when evaluating couple adjustment across all stages of the family life cycle, our results shows that significant differences between stages are likely to be explained by the significant lower scores of couple adjustment in Stage VII, comparing with the other stages, except for stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). Likewise, individuals in Stage V reported significantly lower couple adjustment than individuals in Stage II. These outcomes seem to suggest that some life cycle transitions could predict a more severe decline in couple adjustment rather than the duration of the relationship. We propose that these are the stages most challenging for a couple system because of the entrances and exits of family members. In Stage III one of the second order tasks is adjusting the couple system to make space for

children, whereas in Stage V the couple system is renegotiated as a dyad (McGoldrick et al., 2016). At Stage VII, couple satisfaction relies on a conjugation of multiple factors (Davey & Szinovacz, 2004) such as retirement, loss, dependency, illness (McGoldrick et al., 2016). Additionally, in this stage individuals have to deal with the potential of their own or their spouse's death, thereby ending the dyad.

Our third research question examined whether differentiation and couple adjustment were positively associated across the lifespan, in accord with previous research (e.g., Gubbins et al., 2010; Lampis, 2016; Lampis et al., 2017; Rodríguez-González, 2016; Skowron, 2000), suggesting that more differentiated individuals are likely to experience better couple adjustment across all stages of family life cycle. This association remains significant and positive in every stage of the family life cycle, with particularly strong correlations at stages V, VI and VII, complementing preceding studies (Bell & Harsin, 2018; Hu et al., 2015; Kim-Appel et al., 2007; Richards, 1989). These results provide new empirical support for Bowen's hypotheses about the relationship between greater DoS in couples and their couple adjustment throughout the lifespan.

Implications for therapy

Our study highlights the importance of working with differentiation in clinical practice, essentially on couple and family therapy, as it may be relevant to improve couple adjustment through all the family life cycle. Lower scores of DoS in stage VII should be considered by clinicians, suggesting that differentiation could be of great significance on therapeutic practice with this age group. According to Bell and Harsin (2018) and Kim-Appel et al. (2007), higher levels of differentiation in this particular stage predict better couple adjustment, lower levels of depression, and fewer psychological symptoms. Our results show that couple adjustment has a tendency to decline in stages III, V and VII, therefore couple therapy or counseling would be of great value to this individuals, and should be broadly considered on community or primary care. As previous findings suggest that higher couple adjustment in preceding stages predicts a less severe decline later on (Bell & Harsin, 2018), it would be critical to develop intervention programs to support couples adjusting to changes along the life cycle. Efficacy evaluation could provide a better understanding of the processes that play a role in this decline and how to approach it from intervention or clinical perspectives.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. First, as a cross-sectional study, we were able to compare individuals in different family life cycle stages but

were unable to fully address DoS development within the study participants. It may be that the results represent a cohort effect. For example, those presently in stage III may respond differently to those who would have been in stage III several years ago but are now in a later stage. Collecting data from participants across multiple time points would allow researchers to estimate DoS and couple adjustment development over time. The cross-sectional design also limits the degree to which we can infer causal relationships between variables. Sample dimension ($N=506$) and discrepancy between sub-samples (e.g., stage III ($n=133$) and stage VII ($n=40$)) constrain group comparisons. Lastly, in order to assess DoS and couple adjustment in the life cycle stages outlined by McGoldrick et al. (2016), we only included participants that could be categorized into one life stage, resulting in a sample that excludes more diverse family forms, such as remarried families or those who did not have children. Furthermore, families may be in more than one life stage at any given time. For example, a couple may have both adult and adolescent children. Participants in multiple family life stages or those who are not continuously partnered, who may represent populations that would report lower levels of couple adjustment, are not represented in our study.

Additional research is needed to explore whether these findings are observed with different populations and historical backgrounds, and to better understand the lower DoS levels founded in Stage VII. Future implementation of longitudinal studies will be essential to provide a better understanding of DoS development and change through the life cycle and its relationship with couple adjustment. Research designs focusing relations between participants, should also be considered, in order to fully address interpersonal dimension (e.g., genograms, intergenerational interviews).

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable information regarding DoS across seven life cycle stages and its association with couple adjustment. In sum, our results suggest that DoS remains highly stable along the greatest extent of family life cycle, although there could be differences linked with life-cycle transitions in later stages of life. Specifically, individuals in stage VII (families nearing the end of life) reported significantly lower levels of differentiation than in earlier stages, except for Stage V (launching children and moving on at midlife). Concerning couple adjustment, our findings showed a global decrease throughout the family life cycle, particularly evident in Stage V and VII. Higher levels of DoS are associated with higher levels of couple adjustment across all life cycle stages, with a particularly strong association at stages V, VI and VII.

Note

1. The use of roman numerals to identify stages was intended to facilitate correspondence with previous studies.

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