



Differentiation of self and its implications for forgiveness and repair in romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

Differentiation of Self (DoS) is a key variable for understanding how individuals relate within the context of romantic relationships. Previous studies have highlighted its role in emotional regulation and conflict management, yet few have explored its connection to forgiveness and reparative strategies following an offense. The aim of this study was to identify psychological profiles based on DoS levels and to examine their implications for the forgiveness process and perceived reparative strategies after a transgression. The sample consisted of 591 individuals. Cluster analysis revealed three distinct profiles (high, moderate, and low DoS). Results showed that individuals with high and moderate DoS reported lower levels of post-offense distress and higher scores in positive dimensions of forgiveness (affect, cognition, and behavior) compared to those with low DoS. Furthermore, participants with low DoS more frequently perceived the use of negative reparative strategies, such as justification or denial, while those in the high and moderate profiles perceived greater use of apologies. These findings highlight the importance of considering DoS levels in understanding forgiveness and emotional repair, with relevant clinical implications for couple therapy.

1. Introduction

The affective relationships individuals establish during childhood and adolescence with primary attachment figures lay the groundwork for later relational patterns (Ramos et al., 2022; Verhage et al., 2016). As individuals mature, it is crucial that they achieve a balance between two fundamental human dimensions attachment and autonomy particularly within familial and intimate contexts. In Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978) this balance is conceptualized as the Differentiation of Self (hereafter, DoS).

Forgiveness is also a central element in relational development and maintenance. Defined as a transformation in thoughts, emotions, and motivations toward an offender, forgiveness enables individuals to reduce hostility, regulate negative affect and restore trust (McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington, 2020). Within the context of couple relationships, *interpersonal forgiveness*-forgiveness directed toward a partner who has caused offense - serves as a critical repair mechanism. This construct differs from self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness, which have received increasing empirical attention in recent years (Fincham & May, 2022), but which are not the focus of the present study. By centering on forgiveness of others, we examine how DoS is related to the

processes through which partners overcome hurtful experiences.

DoS is a cornerstone of systemic thinking and refers to the capacity to distinguish between thoughts and feelings while remaining emotionally connected yet sufficiently autonomous within relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This construct operates on two levels: intrapsychic, involving the regulation of emotional and cognitive processes, and interpersonal, involving the ability to stay connected to significant others without losing one's individuality (Bowen, 1978; Keller & Noone, 2020; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Four dimensions: emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff and fusion with others, are commonly used to operationalize DoS. (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

Bowen (1978, 1991) proposed that individuals differ in their levels of DoS, that is, in their ability to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining emotionally connected to others without losing their sense of self. These differences become especially apparent in emotionally intense contexts, such as romantic conflict. Those with lower DoS are prone to emotional fusion, excessive dependence on external validation, and vulnerability to anxiety and stress-related dysfunction (Keller & Noone, 2020; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In contrast, individuals with higher DoS maintain emotional balance, preserve a well-defined sense of self,

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and regulate their affective responses even in intense relational contexts (Bowen, 1991; Rodríguez-González et al., 2019). Empirical research has demonstrated that higher DoS is associated with better emotional regulation (Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021), relational security (Timm & Keiley, 2011) and overall well-being (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Skowron et al., 2004). It also predicts relationship satisfaction, adjustment, and stability across time (Kim & Woo, 2025; Rodríguez-González et al., 2023). By contrast, low DoS has been linked to relational dysfunction, higher anxiety and greater psychological distress (Murdock & Gore Jr., 2004; Xue et al., 2018).

Bowen's theory represents a systemic framework that has undergone significant theoretical and conceptual development (Nichols & Schwartz, 2016) reflected in a growing body of empirical research focused on DoS as a core construct in family and couple therapy models. However, despite Bowen's rich theoretical propositions and the breadth of research conducted to date, DoS-based personality profiles have yet to be systematically tested or empirically validated. Although prior studies suggest clear differences in relational dynamics between individuals with high versus low DoS, there is insufficient conclusive evidence regarding the number and characteristics of these individual profiles. This study aims to empirically explore Bowen's model and contribute to a better understanding of DoS typologies and their role in forgiveness in interpersonal relationships, a relatively underexplored area in the literature.

It is important to note that, within Bowen's framework, DoS not only influences relational dynamics and symptomatology but also plays a key role in conflict, one of the primary indicators of poor differentiation in romantic relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In emotionally charged conflicts such as relational offenses, the ability to maintain a balance between autonomy and emotional connection becomes crucial to coping with distress and adopting effective relational repair strategies.

Interpersonal forgiveness is one of the ways of dealing with these relational offenses. It is defined as a conscious process in which the victim reduces negative emotions such as anger, resentment, or desire for retaliation, and may even develop more benevolent responses toward the offender (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Fincham, 2020; McCullough et al., 1997). In romantic contexts, this process often requires empathy, perspective-taking, and deliberate emotional regulation (Fincham & Beach, 2002). Forgiveness has been proposed as both a means of emotional regulation and a path to relational repair (Burnette et al., 2014), with various studies confirming its contribution to relational well-being (Fahimdanesh et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2022).

Recent findings (Telli & Yavuz Güler, 2023) suggest a positive association between DoS and forgiveness. Individuals with higher levels of DoS appear better equipped to manage the emotional upheaval caused by relational offenses: their ability to differentiate emotions from cognitions, maintain perspective, and act autonomously facilitates the forgiveness process (Rodríguez-González et al., 2019; Telli & Yavuz Güler, 2023). Conversely, low-DoS individuals often become emotionally overwhelmed, with heightened reactivity leading to prolonged anger, rumination, or avoidance. This makes forgiveness more difficult, as their functioning is dominated by intense affective responses rather than reflective processes (Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021; Keller & Noone, 2020). In this sense, DoS provides a systemic framework for understanding why some individuals are more capable of forgiving relational offenses and maintaining intimacy even under distress (Lampis et al., 2017).

Some authors (Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Thompson et al., 2005) argue that cognitive processes (such as broadening one's perspective, considering the offender's viewpoint, and forming more realistic assumptions about oneself, others, and the relationship) help the offended person adopt a different perspective regain a sense of safety and control. Thus, a higher DoS may facilitate more accurate appraisals of the offense, support autonomous reflection, and ease recovery by promoting forgiveness and reducing distress. In contrast, lower DoS is associated

with emotion regulation difficulties (Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021) and greater emotional reactivity (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which can intensify the experience of offense and lead to either emotional fusion or cutoff, thereby prolonging post-offense distress.

Closely related to forgiveness are repair strategies responses enacted by the offender after a transgression to restore the bond (Morse & Metts, 2011), which may be shaped by each partner's level of DoS. Higher DoS supports both the expression and perception of reparative behaviors during conflict (Rodríguez-González et al., 2019). Yet not all strategies equally foster forgiveness. Explicit strategies, such as apologies that involve acknowledgment and accountability, are more effective (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Kaleta & Mróz, 2021; McCullough et al., 1998; Morse & Metts, 2011) than diversion strategies like justification, minimization of harm, or denial of wrongdoing. Research has largely examined repair strategies from the offender's perspective, linking them to poorer interpersonal outcomes (Schumann & Orehek, 2019; Wood-yatt & Wenzel, 2013).

Nevertheless, from the victim's perspective, few studies have examined the impact of reparative strategies on forgiveness, leaving this an underexplored area the present study seeks to address. Despite the relevance of forgiveness and DoS in romantic relationships, no research has systematically explored differences in forgiveness, post-offense distress, and perceptions of offender's reparative behaviors as a function of DoS. Thus, the present study aims to explore the existence of psychological profiles based on DoS dimensions (emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff) and examine differences in forgiveness and repair strategies across them.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample of the present study consisted of 591 participants who were involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship of at least three months' duration and who had experienced an offense within the context of that relationship. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 86 years ($M = 42.66$; $SD = 17.06$), with 172 men ($M = 49.91$; $SD = 17.48$) and 419 women ($M = 39.57$; $SD = 15.92$). The average duration of the romantic relationship was 18.73 years ($SD = 16.30$) and the mean length of cohabitation was 15.73 years ($SD = 16.24$). More detailed sociodemographic characteristics can be consulted in Table 1.

2.2. Procedure

The study received ethical approval (No. 2022/32). Participation was voluntary, anonymous and unpaid, with informed consent obtained. Questionnaires were administered online via Qualtrics using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method, initially distributed through organizations working with couples in Spain. The order of questionnaires was randomized to avoid bias, and completion took approximately 15 min.

2.3. Instruments

Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI-30; Enright et al., 2021). To measure interpersonal forgiveness, the Spanish adaptation of the EFI-30 (Kasprzak et al., 2023) was used. This instrument includes 30 items across six subscales: positive affect, negative affect, positive behavior, negative behavior, positive cognition and negative cognition. In the present study, scores from the negative subscales were not reverse-coded and are therefore interpreted as post-offense distress. In a Spanish sample, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.80 to 0.92 (Kasprzak et al., 2023). In the present study, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.74 to 0.90 and McDonald's omegas ranged from 0.75 to 0.91.

Marital Offense-Specific Forgiveness Scale (MOFS; Paleari et al., 2009). To assess specific interpersonal forgiveness within the context of a

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

		N	%
Sex	Male	186	29.9 %
	Female	436	70.1 %
Life cycle stage	Stage 1: Independent young adult	140	22.5 %
	Stage 2: Couple formation	109	17.5 %
	Stage 3: Family with young children	99	15.9 %
	Stage 4: Family with adolescent children	92	14.8 %
	Stage 5: Family in midlife with launching children	71	11.4 %
	Stage 6: Family in late midlife	67	10.8 %
	Stage 7: Family at the end of life	44	7.2 %
	None	252	40.5 %
	1	45	7.2 %
	2	171	27.5 %
Number of children	3	88	14.1 %
	4	33	5.3 %
	5	22	3.5 %
	6 or more	10	1.6 %
	Less than 1	38	6.1 %
	1–2	76	12.2 %
	3–5	82	13.2 %
Duration of relationship (years)	6–10	74	11.9 %
	11–20	106	17.0 %
	21–30	87	14.0 %
	31–40	81	13.1 %
	41–50	55	8.8 %
	51–60	23	3.7 %
	Not cohabiting	167	26.8 %
	Less than 1	16	2.6 %
	1–2	20	3.2 %
	3–5	44	7.1 %
Cohabitation period	6–10	67	10.8 %
	11–20	85	13.7 %
	21–30	98	15.7 %
	31–40	52	8.4 %
	41–50	58	9.3 %
	51–60	15	2.4 %

romantic relationship, the Spanish adaptation of the MOFS (Kasprzak & Martínez-Díaz, 2025) was used. The scale consists of 10 items divided into two subscales: benevolence and avoidance/resentment. In a Spanish couples validation, alphas were 0.85 for benevolence and 0.63 for avoidance/resentment (Kasprzak & Martínez-Díaz, 2025). In the present study, alphas were 0.83 and 0.63 and McDonald's omegas were 0.84 and 0.67, respectively.

Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). To evaluate the level of DoS, the Spanish adaptation of the DSI-R by Rodríguez et al. (2015) was used. This version consists of 26 items divided into two subscales: emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff. In the Spanish version, Cronbach's alpha was 0.85 for the total scale, with values of 0.84 for Emotional Reactivity and 0.78 for Emotional Cutoff. In the present study, alphas were 0.88 (total), 0.85 (Emotional Reactivity), and 0.83 (Emotional Cutoff), while McDonald's omegas were 0.88, 0.86, and 0.83, respectively.

Remedial Strategies Scale (RSS; Morse & Metts, 2011). To assess the partner's perception of the offender's use of reparative strategies following an offense, the RSS was used. This scale includes 15 items distributed across four factors: apology, justification, avoidance, and denial. The original version, developed with a non-clinical sample of young U.S. couples, reported Cronbach's alphas of 0.92 (Apology), 0.71 (Justification), 0.65 (Avoidance), and 0.74 (Denial) (Morse & Metts, 2011). In the present study, alphas were 0.92, 0.68, 0.34 and 0.73, and McDonald's omegas of 0.92, 0.69, 0.52 and 0.73, respectively.

2.4. Data analysis

To explore the existence of psychological profiles based on levels of DoS (emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff) cluster analysis was

conducted. Once the groups were identified, descriptive analyses were conducted for each cluster. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the clusters on different dimensions of forgiveness and reparative strategies. Post hoc analyses were then carried out to examine significant differences among the clusters.

All data analyses were performed using SPSS version 25.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the administered questionnaires. A two-step cluster analysis indicated that a three-cluster solution was appropriate, which was subsequently confirmed with K-means. The results for both DoS dimensions in each cluster were classified as low, medium, or high based on previously calculated percentiles (Table 3). ANOVAs revealed significant differences among clusters in Emotional Reactivity ($F(2, 588) = 620.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.68$) and in Emotional Cutoff ($F(2, 588) = 315.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.52$) supporting the distinctiveness of the three DoS profiles.

To perform the one-way ANOVA for mean differences, homogeneity of variances was first assessed using Levene's test. Results indicated equal variances ($p > .05$) for all variables except negative affect and positive behavior (Table 4).

Regarding the post-hoc results, significant differences were found in the variables of positive affect, positive behavior and positive cognition between individuals with high and low DoS, as well as between those with medium and low DoS. In all cases, participants in the high DoS profile scored higher on positive aspects: affect, behavior and cognition compared to those in the low DoS profile. Similarly, individuals in the low DoS profile scored lower in all three domains than those in the medium DoS profile.

For negative affect and avoidance/resentment, significant differences were found across all three profiles. Individuals with high DoS reported lower levels of negative affect and avoidance/resentment compared to those with medium and low DoS. However, individuals in the low DoS profile scored higher on these variables than those in the medium DoS profile.

With regard to negative behavior and negative cognition, the results followed a similar pattern. Significant differences were found between Profiles 1 and 3 as well as between Profiles 2 and 3.

As for the perception of reparative strategies used by the offender (apologies, justification and denial), significant differences were found in the apologies variable between the high and low DoS profiles, as well as between the medium and low DoS profiles. Participants in the low DoS profile reported perceiving a lower use of apologies by the offender.

Table 2
Descriptive analysis of the instruments.

Questionnaire	Scale	M [range]	SD
Ad hoc questionnaire	Time elapsed since offense	2.66 [1–4]	0.95
	Perceived severity of offense	3.74 [1–5]	1.03
	Positive Affect	23.88 [5–30]	5.49
	Negative Affect	11.33 [5–30]	5.39
EFI-30	Positive Behavior	23.88 [5–30]	4.62
	Negative Behavior	11.74 [5–30]	5.15
	Positive Cognition	26.84 [5–30]	3.57
	Negative Cognition	7.27 [5–30]	3.86
MOFS	Avoidance/Resentment	23.75 [6–30]	5.29
	Benevolence	17.56 [4–20]	2.97
	Emotional Reactivity	3.29 [1–6]	0.84
DSI-R	Emotional Cutoff	4.55 [1–6]	0.74
	Differentiation of Self	3.92 [1–6]	0.68
	Apology	23.1 [5–35]	7.56
RSS	Justification	10.15 [3–21]	4.11
	Denial	9.95 [4–28]	4.71

Note. EFI-30- *Enright Forgiveness Inventory*; MOFS- *Marital Offense-Specific Forgiveness Scale*; RSS- *Remedial Strategies Scale*; DSI-R – *Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised*.

Table 3

Descriptive data of the identified DoS profiles.

	Cluster								
	Profile 1 (High DoS)			Profile 2 (Medium DoS)			Profile 3 (Low DoS)		
	<i>N</i> = 218			<i>N</i> = 265			<i>N</i> = 108		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level
Emotional reactivity	4.09	0.44	High	3.01	0.48	Medium	2.22	0.56	Low
Emotional cutoff	5.03	0.46	High	4.55	0.50	Low	3.52	0.63	Low

Table 4

Differences between profiles in forgiveness dimensions and repair strategies.

Variable	Profile	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	Statistic	Contrast	Post-hoc
Positive Affect	1	218	24.44	5.20	<i>F</i> = 5.61**	1 = 2	HDS = 0.58
	2	265	23.88	5.29		1 > 3	HDS = 2.24**
	3	108	22.10	6.26		3 < 2	HDS = 1.78*
Negative Affect	1	218	10.32	5.16	<i>t</i> = 17.50***	1 < 2	GH = -1.16*
	2	265	11.48	5.15		1 < 3	GH = -3.66***
	3	108	13.98	5.71		3 > 2	GH = 2.50***
Positive Behavior	1	218	24.41	4.54	<i>t</i> = 11.23***	1 = 2	HDS = 0.36
	2	265	24.06	4.31		1 > 3	HDS = 2.44***
	3	108	21.97	4.99		3 < 2	HDS = -2.08**
Negative Behavior	1	218	10.86	4.85	<i>F</i> = 17.14***	1 = 2	HDS = -0.64
	2	265	11.50	4.90		1 < 3	HDS = -3.60***
	3	108	14.45	5.47		3 > 2	HDS = 2.96***
Positive Cognition	1	218	27.37	2.88	<i>F</i> = 8.75***	1 = 2	HDS = 0.51
	2	265	26.86	3.59		1 > 3	HDS = 1.97***
	3	108	25.40	4.52		3 < 2	HDS = -1.47**
Negative Cognition	1	218	6.47	2.76	<i>F</i> = 14.25***	1 = 2	HDS = -0.60
	2	265	7.07	3.38		1 < 3	HDS = -3.09***
	3	108	9.56	5.81		3 > 2	HDS = 2.50***
Avoidance/Resentment	1	218	10.4	3.65	<i>F</i> = 40.26***	1 < 2	HDS = -2.26***
	2	265	12.66	5.37		1 < 3	HDS = -5.30***
	3	108	15.70	6.22		3 > 2	HDS = 3.04***
Benevolence	1	218	18.04	2.70	<i>F</i> = 6.81**	1 = 2	HDS = 0.58
	2	265	17.46	2.97		1 > 3	HDS = 1.32***
	3	108	16.71	3.39		3 = 2	HDS = -0.75
Apologies	1	218	23.72	7.31	<i>F</i> = 6.50**	1 = 2	HDS = 0.11
	2	265	23.61	7.15		1 > 3	HDS = 3.30**
	3	108	20.42	8.69		3 < 2	HDS = -3.19**
Justification	1	218	9.07	3.79	<i>F</i> = 18.14***	1 < 2	HDS = -1.20**
	2	265	10.27	3.91		1 < 3	HDS = -2.91***
	3	108	11.98	4.38		3 > 2	HDS = 1.71***
Denial	1	218	9.23	4.25	<i>F</i> = 15.29***	1 = 2	HDS = -0.35
	2	265	9.58	4.35		1 < 3	HDS = -3.29***
	3	108	12.53	5.55		3 > 2	HDS = 2.95***

Note. *F*: *F* de Fischer; *t*: *T* de Welch; HDS: HDS de Tukey; GH: Games-Howell.* *p* < .05.** *p* < .01.*** *p* < .001.

Statistically significant differences were also found between participants in the high and low DoS profiles, as well as between the medium and low DoS profiles, regarding justification, with individuals in the low DoS profile perceiving a greater use of this strategy compared to those in the high and medium DoS profiles. Finally, in relation to denial, significant differences were observed between the high and low DoS profiles and between the medium and low DoS profiles.

4. Discussion

Based on observations from clinical practice, Bowen (1991) qualitatively described individuals' functioning according to their DoS. While Bowen offered valuable conceptual guidelines, these were not empirically tested and research mostly compared extreme groups. In this regard, the aim of this study was to identify profiles based on DoS and examine differences in interpersonal forgiveness and reparative strategies. Recent research supports the importance of couples' joint DoS and relationship adjustment in predicting forgiveness processes (Telli &

Yavuz Güler, 2023) and highlights how differentiation of self may reduce anxiety through forgiveness mechanisms (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022).

Regarding the identified profiles, the cluster analysis revealed three groups: high, moderate and low DoS, showing distinct patterns of functioning within romantic relationships according to DoS level. Such stratification is especially useful in understanding individuals' responses to complex relational situations, such as experiencing an offense within a romantic relationship. Rather than treating DoS as a dichotomous variable, the identification of a moderate profile highlights a middle ground often overlooked. The current study identified three clearly differentiated profiles based on DoS levels; however, statistically significant differences across all three profiles were found only for motivational aspects specifically avoidance/resentment and negative affect, both of which are related to the interpersonal forgiveness process.

For the remaining variables, significant differences emerged between individuals with high and low DoS, as well as between those with moderate and low DoS, but not between high and moderate profiles. These findings suggest that individuals with a moderate DoS profile may

experience an unstable balance between the need for connection and the desire for autonomy. Compared with low DoS, more prone to fusion or cutoff, moderately differentiated individuals may struggle more with regulating negative emotions such as avoidance and resentment. Clinically, this ambivalence can translate into oscillations between closeness and distance, informing tailored interventions. From a clinical perspective, identifying such profiles offers practical implications for therapeutic intervention. While individuals with low DoS may require more intensive and structured interventions, those in the moderate profile may benefit from work aimed at strengthening internal coherence, integrating the need for both closeness and autonomy. Emerging evidence supports that self-differentiation training improves marital intimacy and conflict management strategies in distressed couples (Jafari et al., 2024).

Bowen's theory (1978) posits that DoS is related to how individuals cope with stressful situations. The results of this study support this idea, showing that individuals with high and moderate levels of DoS experienced less post-offense distress than those with low DoS following a relational transgression. This may be explained by the fact that more differentiated individuals regulate their emotions more flexibly and adapt better to ambiguous or uncertain situations, which in turn allows for a more balanced interpretation of reality. In this sense, interpersonal forgiveness functions as a way to reduce post-offense distress by diminishing negative responses toward the offender (Allemand et al., 2013; Mullen et al., 2023). This process is consistent with the self-regulatory capacities involved in DoS (Duch-Ceballos et al., 2021; Yavuz Güler & Karaca, 2021). Therefore, more differentiated individuals are better equipped to explore the offense experience autonomously, seek meaning in it, and recover more easily.

By contrast, individuals with low DoS tend to employ two strategies to regulate anxiety in conflictual: emotional cutoff and emotional fusion. Emotional cutoff involves a reactive withdrawal from others to reduce anxiety and may manifest as distance, isolation or termination of the relationship (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Emotional fusion, on the other hand, refers to a tendency to conform to others' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in order to avoid expressing one's own viewpoint and gain approval (Keller & Noone, 2020; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Both of these strategies hinder the resolution of post-offense distress and obstruct progress toward forgiveness. In such cases, individuals with low DoS may suppress or ignore the offense and fail to complete crucial phases of the forgiveness process, such as deep reflection and the search for meaning.

Furthermore, the current study found that individuals with low levels of DoS perceived greater use of denial and justification as reparative strategies by the offender, whereas individuals with moderate and high levels of DoS perceived greater use of apologies. Although previous research has not specifically examined the use of reparative strategies based on DoS levels, these findings enhance our understanding of the forgiveness process. As several authors have noted (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Bennett, 2022; Forster et al., 2021; Kaleta & Mróz, 2021; Morse & Metts, 2011), apologies can reduce the negative impact of offenses, foster authentic forgiveness, and support emotional repair. In this sense, it is likely that in individuals with moderate and high levels of DoS, apologies are more effective and promote sincere forgiveness toward the offending partner.

In contrast, individuals with low DoS may be more likely to engage in relationships where negative reparative strategies such as minimization and justification are more frequently used. These strategies act as avoidance mechanisms, preventing these individuals from confronting the offense and thereby perpetuating post-offense distress. These findings hold important implications for clinical practice, emphasizing the need to work on enhancing the DoS of both partners in order to help them build healthier relationships. When a mistake or offense occurs, the capacity for employing restorative actions that promote genuine forgiveness and emotional repair becomes essential.

This study offers novel evidence by identifying, three distinct

psychological profiles based on DoS levels: low, moderate and high. Moreover, the results highlight a differentiated functioning in the forgiveness process according to DoS profile. In particular, the findings indicate that individuals with low levels of DoS are more vulnerable to experiencing persistent post-offense distress, which prevents or hinders a satisfactory forgiveness process.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. The analysis focused only on forgiveness and reparative strategies, so the findings cannot be generalized to other dimensions of relational functioning. The cross-sectional design and the focus on a single offense further limit generalizability and longitudinal studies are needed to explore how forgiveness unfolds over time and across offense types. Moreover, the study included the Remedial Strategies Scale, which has not yet been validated in Spanish. One of its subscales (Avoidance) showed low reliability and although it was not considered in the subsequent analyses, future research should examine its psychometric properties in Spanish samples, particularly with couples. Finally, relationship length and life cycle stage may also influence results, as couples with only a few months together likely differ from long-term couples in experience, motivation, and willingness to repair the relationship. This factor may be relevant and should be explored in future research. In addition, the use of a typological approach to identify DoS profiles may be considered a limitation, as dimensional perspectives are increasingly emphasized in psychological research. Nevertheless, in the present study the profiles are understood as heuristic patterns rather than rigid categories and may serve as useful reference points for both future research and clinical practice, for example in helping therapists to situate forgiveness and repair processes within different relational styles.

5. Conclusions

The study identified three profiles of differentiation of self (DoS) and their role in interpersonal forgiveness within romantic relationships. Findings indicate that higher DoS is linked to lower post-offense distress, greater emotional flexibility, and stronger endorsement of apologies as reparative strategies. Conversely, low DoS was associated with maladaptive responses that hinder emotional repair. These results hold important clinical implications and point to future directions for longitudinal research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Agata Kasprzak: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **María Pilar Martínez-Díaz:** Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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