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Emotional Interactions in Couples: A Comparison Between Belgium and Japan

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Summary

Do couples' emotional interactions vary across cultures? In this dissertation, I address this question in a focus group and couple-conflict study across two cultures: Belgium and Japan. Couples in Belgian and Japanese cultural contexts emphasize different relationship goals: independence and autonomy are valued in Belgium, while interdependence and harmony are emphasized in Japan. To the extent that emotions are shaped by cultural relationship goals, Belgian and Japanese couples may engage in different emotional interactions during a disagreement. First, we investigate how Belgian and Japanese partners conceive of couple disagreement. Second, we examine if — in line with culturally specific conceptions of couple disagreement — Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different 1) emotional behaviors and 2) interpersonal emotional sequences during an ongoing disagreement. Finally, we investigate whether engaging in culturally typical emotional interactions is beneficial for the relationship.

In a focus group study (Chapter 2), we examine Belgian and Japanese partners' beliefs and ideas about couple disagreement. Using thematic analyses, we find that Belgian partners conceive of couple disagreement as inevitable and necessary. They value tackling disagreement head on and believe that conflict resolution requires direct communication, disclosing feelings, and asserting personal needs. In contrast, Japanese partners are hesitant to address disagreement and if possible, may avoid it altogether. Disagreement is not viewed as necessary if partners adjust to each other's expectations. Emotional control, perspective taking and mindreading — strategies that prioritize the partner's needs — are considered instrumental for dealing with disagreement, as they reaffirm mutual adjustment.

In the subsequent studies, we propose that Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different emotional interactions during an actual disagreement, in line with varying relationship and disagreement goals. We conducted a large couple-conflict study in which couples were video-recorded while they discussed a disagreement in the lab. In Chapter 3, we use self-report data of emotions (i.e., disengaging emotions such as annoyance, and engaging emotions such as guilt) and emotion suppression to examine if cultural variation in emotion suppression depends on the type of emotional experience. We find that Japanese partners use emotion suppression more than Belgian partners, and that the difference in suppression is especially pronounced when disengaging emotions trump engaging emotions, but not when the reverse is true. This corresponds with the value Japanese partners place on emotional control and suggests that Japanese partners hide those emotions that are harmful for the relationship — disengaging emotions, like annoyance, imply direct confrontation, which may impede mutual adjustment during disagreement. In Chapter 4, we use observed emotion data collected with the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF), and investigate cultural differences in emotional behavior. We find that behaviors that support independent goals — anger and domineering — are more prevalent in Belgium than in Japan. These behaviors highlight personal needs, and influence the partner to change behavior according to one's wishes. Yet, emotional behaviors that fit the goal of interdependence — validation (i.e., showing understanding) and fear/tension (i.e., worry to hurt the partner) — are more prevalent in Japan than in Belgium. These behaviors promote perspective taking and conflict avoidance. Engaging in emotional behaviors that fit the cultural norm also contribute to better relational

functioning, if only in Japan. In a final study (Chapter 5), we investigate cultural variation in couples' interpersonal emotional sequences. We find that Belgian partners engage in sequences that involve anger, which align with self-assertion and autonomy. In contrast, Japanese partners engage in sequences that focus on criticism, which, in pointing out the partners flaws, may encourage the other to change and adjust to relational expectations.

In conclusion, this dissertation provides evidence for the idea that couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures in systematic and meaningful ways; the emotional interactions elicited by a disagreement correspond with the relationship goals emphasized in each culture. This dissertation also highlights the idea that emotional behaviors, especially the culturally valued ones, are crucial relational tools that align couples' interactions with the cultural goals and values, and help couples function in culturally 'right' and healthy ways.

Samenvatting

Variëren de emotionele interacties van koppels tussen culturen? In deze dissertatie proberen we deze vraag te beantwoorden door middel van een focusgroepen en koppel-conflict studie in twee culturen: België en Japan. Koppels in de Belgische en Japanse culturele context benadrukken verschillende relatiewaarden en doelen: in België zijn onafhankelijkheid en autonomie belangrijke waarden en doelen, terwijl afhankelijkheid en harmonie belangrijk zijn voor een relatie in Japan. In de mate waarin emoties gevormd worden door de culturele relatiewaarden en doelen, zullen Belgische en Japanse koppels mogelijks andere emotionele interacties aangaan wanneer zij een meningsverschil hebben. Als eerste onderzoeken we welke betekenis Belgische en Japanse partners verlenen aan een meningsverschil in romantische relaties. Als tweede gaan we na of — in overeenstemming met cultureel specifieke ideeën over een meningsverschil tussen partners — Belgische en Japanse koppels verschillende 1) emotionele gedragingen en 2) emotionele dynamieken laten zien tijdens een meningsverschil. Als laatste onderzoeken we of cultureel typische emotionele interacties voordelig zijn voor de relatie.

In een focusgroepen studie (Hoofdstuk 2), onderzoeken we de ideeën en overtuigingen van Belgische en Japanse partners over een meningsverschil. Gebruik makend van thematische analyse, vinden we dat Belgische partners een meningsverschil onoverkomelijk en noodzakelijk achten. Zij vinden het belangrijk om een meningsverschil meteen aan te pakken en geloven dat open communicatie, jezelf blootstellen, en voor je eigen noden opkomen, nodig zijn om conflict op te lossen. In tegenstelling, Japanse partners aarzelen om meningsverschillen aan te kaarten en vermijden dit waar mogelijk. Een

meningsverschil wordt niet als noodzakelijk gezien als partners zich aanpassen aan elkaars verwachtingen. Emotionele controle, het perspectief van de ander nemen en gedachtenlezen — strategieën die de noden van de partner vooropstellen — worden gezien als nuttige manieren om met een meningsverschil om te gaan, aangezien ze wederzijdse aanpassing bevestigen.

In de volgende drie studies stellen we voor dat Belgische en Japanse koppels verschillende emotionele interacties aangaan tijdens een meningsverschil, in lijn met de verschillende relatie- en onenigheidsdoelen. We voerden een grote koppel-conflict studie uit waarin koppels gefilmd werden terwijl zij een meningsverschil bespraken in het lab. In Hoofdstuk 3 gebruiken we zelfrapportagegegevens over emoties (niet-verbindende emoties zoals boosheid, en verbindende emoties zoals schuldgevoelens) en emotieonderdrukking, en onderzoeken we of culturele variatie in emotieonderdrukking afhangt van het type emotionele ervaring. We vinden dat Japanse partners hun emoties meer onderdrukken dan Belgische partners, maar dat het verschil in onderdrukking vooral uitgesproken is wanneer niet-verbindende emoties de overhand hebben op verbindende emoties, en niet wanneer het omgekeerde het geval is. Dit komt overeen met de waarde die Japanse koppels hechten aan emotionele controle, en suggereert dat Japanse partners vooral emoties verbergen die schadelijk zijn voor de relatie — niet verbindende emoties, zoals irritatie, houden directe confrontatie in, wat wederzijdse aanpassing tijdens een meningsverschil kan belemmeren. In Hoofdstuk 4 gebruiken we observatiegegevens verzameld met de Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF), en onderzoeken we verschillen in emotioneel gedrag. We vinden dat gedragingen die onafhankelijke doelen

ondersteunen — woede en dominantie — meer voorkomen in België dan in Japan. Deze gedragingen benadrukken persoonlijke behoeften, en beïnvloeden de ander om gedrag te veranderen naargelang de wensen van de partner. Echter, emotionele gedragingen die passen bij het doel van afhankelijkheid — validatie (d.w.z. begrip tonen) en angst/spanning (d.w.z. bezorgd zijn om de partner te kwetsen) — komen meer voor in Japan dan in België. Deze gedragingen bevorderen perspectiefneming en conflictvermijding. Het vertonen van emotioneel gedrag dat past bij de culturele norm draagt ook bij tot beter relationeel functioneren, tenminste in Japan. In een laatste studie (Hoofdstuk 5) onderzoeken we culturele variatie in de interpersoonlijke emotionele sequenties van koppels. We stellen vast dat de sequenties van Belgische partners bestaan uit boosheid, een emotie die de autonomie en onafhankelijkheid van partners benadrukt. Japanse partners daarentegen verkeren in sequenties die bestaan uit kritiek, wat, door te wijzen op de tekortkomingen van de partner, de ander kan aanmoedigen om te veranderen en zich aan te passen aan relationele verwachtingen.

Concluderend ondersteunt dit proefschrift het idee dat de emotionele interacties van koppels op systematische en betekenisvolle manieren verschillen tussen culturen; de emotionele interacties die tot stand komen door een meningsverschil, komen overeen met de relatiedoelen die in elke cultuur worden benadrukt. Deze dissertatie belicht ook het idee dat emotionele gedragingen, en met name de cultureel gewaardeerde gedragingen, cruciale relationele instrumenten zijn die de interacties van partners afstemmen op de culturele doelen en waarden, en ervoor zorgen dat koppels functioneren op cultureel 'juiste' en gezonde manieren.

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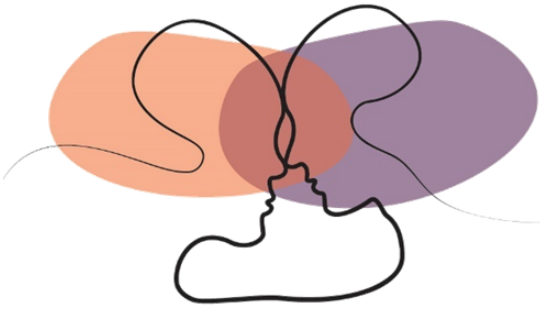
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1

Introduction



This chapter is based on:
Schouten A., Boiger, M., Kirchner-Häusler, A., Mesquita, B. Interpersonal emotions: the role of culture. In De Leersnyder, J. (in press). *Handbook for the social cultural shaping of emotion.* Cambridge: CUP.

1.1. Why Study Cultural Variation in Couples' Emotional Interactions?

Imagine a Belgian couple whom I shall name Susan and Erick. They discuss a disagreement[1] about Erick not spending enough time with his family. Susan feels annoyed and starts the disagreement by attacking Erick: She tells him that he has always been a workaholic and that he has never made family a priority over work. In turn, Erick feels annoyed about Susan's reproach; he thinks he *does* spend enough time with the family. In his defense, he reminds Susan that he spent the whole weekend with the family, as recently as last week. This reaction does not satisfy Susan, who gets even more annoyed, and retorts that one weekend per year hardly counts. "You want your children to be happy, don't you?" Susan rhetorically asks Erick.

Compare Susan and Erick's interaction with that of Kuma and Hiroto, a Japanese couple who discusses a similar source of disagreement. Kuma starts the disagreement gently: "I wish you would spend more time with the family, it doesn't need to be every week, but once a month would be good". Hiroto, who can see that Kuma hides her frustration, feels guilty that he has upset Kuma. He does not want to upset her any further, and so he validates her proposal: "Once a month seems doable," he says. He also makes sure to show empathy towards Kuma, admitting after a pause: "I do work a lot, don't I?", while laughing nervously. Kuma does not escalate the conflict. She nervously laughs along and gives up the argument. She is afraid of hurting Hiroto's feelings — after all he has shown some understanding[2].

These examples vividly show how a similar source of disagreement may lead to very different emotional interactions in

couples. Susan starts the disagreement with an outright attack on Erick's behavior, and she blames him for the lack of family time she gets. As their interaction unfolds, both Susan and Erick become increasingly annoyed with one another. In contrast, Kuma starts the disagreement in a soft and careful, rather than a blunt and obviously complaintive way. Also, Kuma and Hiroto's interaction moves towards emotional experiences and behaviors that imply reconciliation and perspective taking, such as guilt and validation, while escalation, i.e., mutual annoyance, appears to be avoided. Granted, there are probably many differences between couples in how they deal with disagreement emotionally. However, in this dissertation, we suggest that the emotional interactions of Susan and Erick on the one hand, and Kuma and Hiroto on the other, differ in systematic rather than in random ways, because their relationships are embedded in and shaped by different cultural contexts (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Mesquita, Boiger, & De Leersnyder, 2017). The central aim of this dissertation is, therefore, to map out if and how couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures.

Examining cultural differences in couples' emotional interactions is important for a better understanding of the different kinds of relationships and relationship practices that prevail in each culture. Emotions reflect what is at stake during a disagreement, and what we find important in our relationships. For example, a relationship that frequently involves episodes of annoyance between partners, may tell us that partners readily confront each other about behavior they dislike and wish to see changed. In contrast, a relationship that commonly involves episodes of validation and guilt between partners, could inform us that partners take each other's point of view into consideration and feel bad if they do not meet their counterpart's needs and expectations.

As such, emotions are a lens through which we come to understand partners' positions in the relationship. By examining cultural differences in couples' emotional interactions, we thus learn something about and become more sensitive to the different kinds of relationships and relationship practices that exist around the world. Such knowledge allows for revising culturally specific value judgements of what is and what is not healthy for a romantic relationship. For instance, is a certain degree of anger, dissent, and dominant behavior truly healthy for romantic relationships, as is found in studies with Western couples, or is this merely a Western reality that is not borne out in other cultural contexts? And if we take a deeper look at what is relevant to relationships in East-Asian cultural contexts, are we still as quick to dismiss avoidance and emotion suppression as maladaptive strategies? The answers to these questions may, for example, inform couple therapy in non-Western cultural contexts.

Finally, the question if and how couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures is of central interest to emotion researchers. There is convergent evidence for the interpersonal roles or social functions of emotions (Butler, 2017; Levenson, Haase, Bloch, Holley, & Seider, 2014; Randall & Schoebi, 2018); emotions happen first and foremost between people, rather than inside an individual's head. By studying emotions in couple interactions and relationships, we build on the idea that emotions have social functions. Also, by exploring the specific interpersonal roles of emotions in couple interactions across cultures that underline different relationship goals, we shed additional light on what these social functions are (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Mesquita, 2003). Few studies have considered the interdependencies between interactions, relationships and culture that

constitute and shape emotions. The studies that did, oftentimes record positive or negative valence, and fail to examine specific types of emotions (i.e., anger, sadness). The latter reflect more precise social functions, and are therefore more informative about the direction in which emotions may take relationships. In what follows, I will describe our account of emotions as relationship orientations and explain why this account, as well as studying emotions in interactions and relationships, is central to understanding how cultural differences in couple's emotional interactions may come about.

1.2. Emotions as Relationship Orientations

In this dissertation, we started from the idea that emotions are relationship orientations (Parkinson, 2019). This means that we conceive of emotions as more than just feelings: emotions are stances or intentions to act in the relationship (Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011). For example, Susan's annoyance reflects her stance in the relationship with Erick: she feels entitled to more intimacy and closeness (i.e., more family time) than she is receiving, and she thinks Erick should change his behavior accordingly. Her annoyance is not merely a highly aroused state or unpleasant feeling; it is an act in the relationship with Erick, the act of non-acceptance, or "indictment" (Solomon, 2003, p. 88). Different emotions each correspond to a specific kind of relationship stance or act (Fischer & Manstead, 2016). For example, anger, like annoyance, is about setting boundaries and taking control over others in the situation (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, & De Boeck, 2003), sadness conveys a need for comfort, support, and caregiving from others (Hasson, 2009; Keltner, Ellsworth,

& Edwards, 1993), and guilt communicates an awareness of one's shortcomings and a will to make up for any wrongdoings (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). By experiencing and expressing emotions, we thus convey our concerns and needs, and take a position in the relationship.

As relationship orientations, emotions shape the development of the interaction (Parkinson, 2012). For example, Susan's getting angry exerted an influence on Erick's behavior; he responded with defensiveness. If Susan had, instead of being angry, approached the disagreement in a calm and more friendly way, then Erick would perhaps not have taken on a defensive attitude. Susan's anger directed the development of the interaction. Emotions not only shape, but are also shaped by the interaction. That is, how Susan's anger unfolds in the next moments of the interaction, depends on Erick's reaction; for example, had Erick shown remorse or understanding for Susan's point of view, then their interaction would probably have moved towards more positive states, rather than descended into a negative spiral. Emotions are thus important properties of interactions, and together, emotions and interactions form one interpersonal emotion system (Butler, 2011), in which partner's emotions develop dynamically in response to each other (Levenson et al., 2014).

Finally, emotions are goal-directed (Barrett, 2017; Mauss & Tamir, 2014); both emotions and emotion dynamics depend on and are geared towards relationship goals. For instance, by being annoyed and dominant, Susan influences Erick to submit to her point of view and start prioritizing family over work. If Erick changes his behavior accordingly, then Susan achieves what she finds important in her relationship — more closeness and intimacy. In other words, interactions consist of

emotions and emotion dynamics that, by and large, help couples achieve their relationship goals more often than not. There is some evidence for the idea that couples may 'choose' emotions in function of their relationship goals. Gottman (1993) compared the emotional states of couples who may be considered "independent" and "traditional" according to Fitzpatrick's (1988) classification of couple types. These couple types have different relationship goals: independent couples value spontaneity, autonomy, freedom, and high psychological closeness, while traditional couples value stability, connection, relational restraint, and a sense of "we-ness" (Fitzpatrick, 1988). The emotional interactions of independent and traditional couples were found to differ accordingly. Compared to traditional couples, independent couples displayed more anger, and were less likely to agree with or listen to their partners. In turn, traditional couples avoided anger, while both agreeing more with, and actively listening to, their partners. Susan and Erick would seem to fit the category of independent couples. Their interaction gravitated towards mutual annoyance, thus highlighting their respective personal needs: more family time, and more time for work. In addition to more negative emotions, Gottman (1993) found that independent couples also expressed more positive emotions than traditional couples. It is possible that these positive emotions were needed to achieve the goal of psychological closeness, against the background of the partners' negative emotions that aimed to further the couple's autonomy needs. The partners of traditional couples were less emotionally expressive than those of independent couples, which may have further promoted stability and relational restraint. Hence, the interactions of independent versus traditional couples were each

characterized by those emotions that are consistent with their relationship goals.

Not only are couples' emotional *states* geared towards relationship goals, so are their emotion *dynamics*: partners appear to regulate or change emotions that stand in the way of achieving their relationships goals (i.e., Netzer, van Kleef, & Tamir, 2015; Parkinson, Simons, & Niven, 2016). For example, in research with New Zealander couples, Overall and colleagues (2013) found that some emotional interactions were geared towards obtaining the confirmation of relational commitment; especially in couples where one partner was anxious about that commitment. Highly anxious partners who encountered a threat to relationship commitment (i.e., the partner acted in a hurtful way, conflict) were more likely to strategically use, and draw attention to their hurt feelings (i.e., exaggerating emotional expressions of hurt and appealing to the partner's love and concern) than low anxious partners. By drawing attention to their hurt feelings, highly anxious partners induced more guilt in their counterpart than low anxious partners, and considered their partner's guilt as a sign of relational commitment. This restored low anxious partners' confidence in the relationship. Inducing guilt in the partner may, therefore, be seen as a strategy to regulate the partner's emotions towards the goal of commitment. Stated differently, a couple's emotion dynamics, i.e., the ways in which partners influence each other's emotions, navigate their emotional interaction towards those emotional states that help them achieve the kind of relationship they value.

In sum, whether emotions or emotion dynamics are construed as functional depends on the social context — in this case, the interaction and relationship in which the emotions or emotion dynamics

occur (Fischer, Manstead, & Zaalberg, 2003; Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005). Anger is considered functional in independent couples, as it promotes autonomy and freedom in the relationship, but it is seen as dysfunctional in traditional couples, where it hampers relational stability. Along similar lines, partners who are anxious about their counterpart's commitment to the relationship induce guilt in their partner through the expression of hurt feelings, as it soothes their anxiousness around said commitment in the face of relational threat. Yet, partners who are not anxious about their counterpart's commitment, are not as shaken up by threats to the relationship to begin with and steer their partner away from feelings of guilt in the face of threat; guilt may only make the other partner feel unnecessarily worse. Hence, the functionality of an emotion is not an invariant property inherent to the emotion itself but is derived from the interaction or relationship in which it is embedded (Mesquita & Boiger, 2014). Also, emotion dynamics will take on different forms depending on if the resulting emotional end-state fits the relationship goals. Taken together, emotions are constructed differently across varying kinds of couple interactions and relationships, and are therefore afforded or constrained to different extents across these couple interactions and relationships as well (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012).

1.3. Cultural Variation in Individuals' Emotions

Emotions are not only constructed differently across interactions and relationships, but also across cultural contexts; while some emotions

may be functional in one culture, they are not in another culture. This is because different goals, norms and values prevail across cultures (Tamir et al., 2015). For example, shame is considered functional in cultures where people value self-improvement and fitting in with social norms, such as Japan. Shame encourages individuals to reflect upon their shortcomings, correct them, and realign with social norms. Yet, shame is dysfunctional in cultures such as the U.S where individuals are motivated to develop high self-esteem and a positive self-regard (Boiger, Mesquita, Uchida, & Barrett, 2013; Mesquita & Karasawa, 2004). Culture is thus another 'level' of social context that influences how people construe of emotions, and which emotional experiences are commonly afforded.

As a first step in understanding how culture shapes emotions, researchers in the past decade set out to examine cultural variation in individuals' emotions. Most studies compared independent and interdependent cultural contexts because a) they differ maximally in the prevalent cultural practices, meanings, and ideas of relating (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) — i.e., autonomy and high self-esteem are foregrounded in independent cultures, while relatedness and harmony are emphasized in interdependent cultures — and b) both types of cultures distinguish between disengaging and engaging emotions (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). Disengaging emotions are thought to be conducive to the goals foregrounded in independent cultures, while engaging emotions are thought to promote the prevalent goals in interdependent cultures. These studies have yielded substantial evidence for systematic and meaningful cultural differences in emotions. For example, Eid & Diener (2001) found that participants from independent cultures (Australia and the USA) rated pride as more and

guilt as less desirable than participants from interdependent cultures (Taiwan and China). Pride is a disengaging emotion that promotes autonomy and high self-esteem, aspects valued in independent cultures, while guilt is an engaging emotion that underlines relatedness and harmony, two goals that are prevalent in interdependent cultures (Kitayama et al., 2000).

Furthermore, cultural differences in the desirability of emotions were found to mirror differences in the prevalence of emotions. Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa (2006) conducted a daily diary study and asked Japanese and American participants to report the extent to which they experienced engaging and disengaging emotions (both positive and negative) during the 'most emotional episode of the day'; emotional episodes were categorized as either positive or negative. In positive situations, Japanese participants experienced more positive engaging emotions, such as friendly feelings, than positive disengaging emotions. In contrast, American participants experienced more positive disengaging emotions, such as pride, than positive engaging emotions. Similarly, in a negative situation, Japanese participants experienced more negative engaging emotions, such as guilt and shame, than negative disengaging emotions, such as irritation and anger, whereas the opposite was reported by American participants. Taken together, the emotions that were found to be most desirable and prevalent in each cultural context, were also those emotions that fit the culturally prevalent goals, values, and norms (Boiger, Mesquita, et al., 2013a; Boiger, De Deyne, & Mesquita, 2013b; De Leersnyder, Boiger, & Mesquita, 2013).

While this research reveals a cultural logic to which emotions are promoted in a respective cultural context, it comes with the limitation that emotions are primarily studied at the level of the *individual*, thereby

disregarding other levels of social context that also shape emotions, i.e., interactions and relationships (see De Leersnyder, Boiger, & Mesquita, 2021). However, if we take seriously that emotions are relationship orientations that emerge from but also constitute interactions and relationships, then cultural variation in emotions should first and foremost be expected in emotional transactions between people (Mesquita, 2010). Accordingly, cross-cultural research should aim to study cultural variations in emotions at the *interpersonal level*, i.e., in real-life, ongoing couple interactions. Doing so truly considers the interdependencies that exist between the different levels of social context — interactions, relationships and culture — and how these, together, structure couples' emotional lives.

1.4. Cultural Variation in Couples' Emotional Interactions

Emotions and emotion dynamics depend on and are geared towards the relationship goals that couples uphold. Importantly, couples vary considerably across cultures with regard to their relationship goals (Goodwin, 1999; Rodriguez Mosquera, 2015; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). This is because in each cultural context, couples' relationship goals and values are informed by a different set of cultural meanings, ideas, and practices of what it means to have a good relationship. For example, in Western cultural contexts, like Belgium, a good relationship is one in which each partner can be independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and enjoy high self-esteem (Heine, Markus, Lehman, & Kitayama, 1999). In contrast, in East-Asian cultural contexts, such as

Japan (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), good relationships are those in which partners anticipate and attune to each other's needs, i.e., through perspective taking (Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Ma-Kellams & Blascovich, 2012) and mutual adjustment (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). As relational goals vary across cultures, so may the emotional interactions of couples (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Boiger, De Deyne, & Mesquita, 2013b; De Leersnyder, Boiger, & Mesquita, 2013).

The examples at the beginning of this chapter, of Susan and Erick, and of Kuma and Hiroto, illustrate how the emotional interactions of couples may be different in ways that align with the prevalent relationship goals in "Western" as compared to "East-Asian" cultural contexts. In Western romantic relationships, partners achieve independence by focusing primarily on their own goals and needs (i.e. Kim & Markus, 1999), and by readily disclosing them (Chen, 1995; Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Kito, 2005). Remember that Susan criticizes Erick, who then feels annoyed and defends himself, which in turn feeds Susan's annoyance. Annoyance helps partners assert their personal needs and can therefore be seen as conducive to the goal of independence. In contrast, a central relational task for partners in East Asian (Japanese) couples is to maintain harmony and connection in the relationship (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000). Kuma's mild criticism (anger?) prompts Hiroto to experience guilt and empathy, and to display validation and tension (i.e., nervous laughter); in turn, Kuma's annoyance fades away, making room for feelings of nervousness and fear of hurting Hiroto's feelings. Of course, annoyance is best avoided altogether in East-Asian contexts, as it places individual needs above relational concerns. Yet, when annoyance emerges, partners will try to down-regulate it. In the case of Kuma and Hiroto,

Hiroto's guilt communicates his awareness that he has not lived up to Kuma's expectations, and his empathy and validation show that he takes her perspective. These emotions chip away at Kuma's annoyance, and thus help to maintain relational harmony.

There is some empirical evidence to support the idea that couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures. In a couple conflict study conducted at our lab (Boiger, Kirchner, Schouten, Uchida, & Mesquita, 2020), Belgian and Japanese couples discussed a disagreement that was video recorded. Subsequently, each partner separately engaged in a video-mediated recall task, a method by which partners watch the video of their disagreement interaction and report on their emotional experiences. The video was paused every 30 seconds, and at each pause partners indicated the extent to which they had felt three positive emotions (strong, calm and empathy), eight negative emotions (afraid to hurt partner, worried, embarrassed, hurt, resigned, aloof, annoyed, guilty) and one Japanese emotion 'amae' (i.e., like my partner would indulge any of my requests) during the interaction. We were interested in the dynamics of the dyadic emotions during the interaction, and particularly their attractor states[3]: the dyadic emotional states that are recurrent and stable. We found that whereas the interactions of Belgian couples gravitated to attractor states involving one or both partners' annoyance and strength, the interactions of Japanese couples gravitated to the attractor state of mutual empathy. These attractor states seem to be in line with the cultural relationship goals: feelings of annoyance and strength support Belgian partners in expressing personal needs and desires, and consequently safeguard individual autonomy within the relationship, while feelings of empathy help Japanese partners take perspective and mutually adjust to each

other, ultimately supporting the goal of relational harmony. The link between couples' emotional dynamics and their (cultural) relationship goals was also tested explicitly: indeed, Belgian couples who experienced a culturally typical blend of emotions (which frequently involved anger and strength), were found to endorse more autonomy in their relationships. However, for Japanese couples we did not find an association between experiencing a culturally typical blend of emotions and relationship goals. To conclude, while dyadic emotional interactions appeared to gravitate towards those emotional states that support the cultural relationship goals, we only found a direct association between Belgian couples' emotional dynamics and relationship goals. Nevertheless, our couple study provides some first evidence for the central idea of this dissertation, which is that the emotional states and dynamics of couple interactions are scaffolded by cultural meanings, practices, and ideas of how to relate to others.

1.5. Cultural Variation in the Emotional Interactions That Make for Good Relationships

Experiencing and behaving in ways that fit the cultural meanings, practices and ideas of how to relate to others, may be important for relationship outcomes. Because cultural meanings and relationship practices differ across cultures, so may the emotional interactions that contribute to relationship outcomes. For example, some degree of annoyance may help Susan and Erick feel satisfied with their relationship because annoyance serves their goal of independence. In

contrast, annoyance may negatively affect Kuma and Hiroto's relationship satisfaction, because it would impede their goal of relatedness and interdependence. Instead, emotions that underline partners' relatedness and interdependence, such as empathy and guilt, may be key to Kuma and Hiroto's relationship satisfaction. The idea that couples are especially satisfied with their relationship when they engage in culturally valued emotional interactions, is consistent with research conducted at the *individual level*, which yields higher life satisfaction (Choi & Chentsova-Dutton, 2017), and better psychological and relational wellbeing (De Leersnyder, Kim, & Mesquita, 2015; De Leersnyder, Mesquita, Kim, Eom, & Choi, 2014) in *those* individuals who experience emotions that promote the cultural relationship values and goals.

Findings from our couple conflict study described earlier (Boiger et al, 2020; Kirchner-Häusler, Boiger, Uchida, & Mesquita, 2020) provide some support for the idea that couples' emotional experience patterns are associated with relationship satisfaction in culturally dependent ways, and that cultural relationship goals may play a role in this association. We found that Belgian couples with culturally typical emotional patterns — the patterns that involve "cultural attractor states", i.e., mutual annoyance — were more satisfied with their relationship than Belgian couples who had less culturally typical emotional patterns. Moreover, Belgian couples' general endorsement of autonomy goals mediated the association between dyadic emotional patterns and relationship satisfaction: experiencing a culturally typical pattern of emotions was associated with the endorsement of autonomy goals, and in turn, with relationship satisfaction. We infer that couples whose interactions land on a dyadic state of annoyance are more likely to

achieve the culturally valued autonomy goals, and are therefore more satisfied with their relationship. Contrary to our expectations, a culturally typical pattern of emotional experiences did not predict relatedness goals, nor relationship satisfaction in Japanese couples (Boiger et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this study provides some first evidence for the idea that couples are satisfied with their relationship to the extent that they experience emotions that support the cultural relationship goals.

Before addressing the research aims and overview of chapters, a few words of caution are in place. For the sake of clarifying the theoretical framework of this dissertation, we have focused on cultural differences in couples' emotional interactions, which may give the impression that we consider these differences absolute, i.e., "all Belgian couples *are* independent and engage in anger, and all Japanese couples *are* interdependent and engage in validation". However, there is intracultural heterogeneity in couples' endorsement of independence and interdependence, as couples are shaped by many other aspects of the environment, such as religion, socio-economic status, gender, and their own family history (Kashima et al., 1995; Markus & Conner, 2013; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). This means that there is also within-country variation in couples' emotional interactions. For instance, Belgian couples will engage in validation and empathy, and Japanese couples in anger, if this fits the situation at hand. Moreover, couples *are* not independent or interdependent, but rather behave and interact with each other in ways that achieve (or do achieve) independence and interdependence (Markus & Conner, 2013; Adam & Markus, 2003). However, systematic cultural differences in emotional interactions may still arise because the notions of independence and interdependence may be differently accessible across cultures.

1.6. Research Aims

While previous research has provided some evidence for the idea that couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures in line with the cultural relationship goals, cross-cultural research on couples' emotional interactions remains scarce and incomplete. First, very few cross-cultural studies examine emotional behaviors in couple interactions, and those that do, merely focus on behavioral valence. Second, studies that investigate how the emotions of two partners are associated in culturally specific ways, are also scarce. To address these limitations, we study Belgian and Japanese couples' emotional (behavioral) interactions in the context of disagreement, and pursue four aims: We investigate 1) partners' conceptions and beliefs of couple disagreement in each culture, 2) how couples' emotional behaviors vary across cultures — here, we focus on specific emotional behaviors (i.e., anger, validation), rather than on valence — 3) whether emotional behaviors contribute to relationship outcomes in culturally specific ways and 4) if couples engage in different interpersonal emotional *sequences* in each culture.

In what follows, I first explain why we focus on Belgium and Japan as cultures of comparison. Next, I explain why we study emotional interactions in the context of romantic relationships, and more specifically, during couple disagreement. Finally, I describe the research aims in more detail and outline concrete predictions in the chapter overview.

The Two Cultures: Belgium and Japan

Throughout the studies in this dissertation, we will focus on two cultural contexts: Belgium and Japan. These cultures are different in terms of their relationship goals; in Belgium, independent relationship goals are emphasized, while in Japan, interdependent goals are foregrounded (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; 2010). Belgium and Japan are also on opposite ends of the autonomy-embeddedness and the egalitarianism-hierarchy dimensions that are part of the universal circumplex of values (Schwartz, 2008). Belgium is an autonomous and egalitarian culture, which means that people are viewed as autonomous entities who are encouraged to cultivate and express their own preferences, ideas, and abilities, and to recognize others as moral equals, respectively. Cultural values include curiosity, responsibility, and honesty. In contrast, Japan is a culture characterized by embeddedness and hierarchy, which means that people are socially embedded entities who strive for shared goals and comply with fixed role obligations and rules, respectively. Cultural values include security, obedience, social power, and humility. Finally, and as elaborated earlier, previous research has established differences in the emotions that are most prevalent in American and Japanese cultural contexts (Kitayama et al., 2000, 2006) — the American cultural context, like Belgium, is an example of a Western cultural context, and both American and Belgian cultural contexts show a similar focus on individuality and high self-esteem (Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009). Throughout this dissertation, we build on these well-documented differences in emotions between independent and interdependent cultures.

Disagreement in Romantic Relationships

We focus on emotional interactions in romantic relationships because they play an important role in the life of an adult. First, romantic relationships have a profound impact on an adult's wellbeing (Dush & Amato, 2005); high quality romantic relationships are associated with more happiness, fewer negative emotions (i.e., stress) and better health outcomes (Gómez-López, Viejo, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2019). Second, many situations appraised by adults as relevant to their concerns, and hence as emotionally significant, involve their romantic counterpart (Schoebi & Randall, 2015). This means that romantic partners, especially those with long-term relationships, have had ample opportunities to experience and express emotions together, as well as to emotionally attune to each other. As such, romantic relationships provide a useful and rich 'ecology' in which emotions and emotion dynamics can be studied (Levenson et al., 2014). One situation that is believed to be emotionally significant to both romantic partners is couple disagreement, which arises when the goals of the partners clash (Erbert, 2000). For example, in Susan and Erick's case, their goals clearly clash (Susan wants more relational intimacy, while Erick longs for separation and autonomy). During couple disagreement, each partners' goals and concerns are brought to the attention of the other. Because emotions reflect our goals and concerns, couple disagreement is thought of as an emotion-eliciting event that is important for the relationship. Consequently, many previous studies examined couples' emotional interactions in the context of disagreement (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006); they made use of a well-tested and validated couple-conflict paradigm that yields self-reported affect and observational data in situ, during a disagreement interaction

in the lab (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Gottman et al., 1998). As a starting point for examining cultural differences in couples' emotional interactions, we therefore focus on couple disagreement as well.

Research Aim 1: Conceptions of Couple Disagreement in Belgium and Japan

Conflict in couples has been a topic of research interest for decades (Booth, Crouter, Clements, & Boone-Holladay, 2016); examining how couples deal with conflict, i.e., the emotions they experience and the behaviors they display, is considered fruitful for understanding why couples are dissatisfied with their relationship and/or end the relationship (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Stemming from this body of research is the consensus that discussing problems openly, adopting active problem-solving (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), and engaging in respectable degrees of angry and dominant behaviors (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009), are instrumental ways of dealing with conflict and healthy for the relationship. Equal consensus holds that ignoring the partner, withdrawing, criticizing, and being contemptuous are destructive strategies that are unhealthy for the relationship (Gottman, 1994; Papp, Kouros, & Cummings, 2009; Rusbult et al., 1991).

Notably, most research on couple conflict has been conducted in Western cultural contexts, with Western samples (i.e., North American or European couples). This raises the question whether open discussion, problem-solving, and a certain degree of angry behavior, for example, are equally considered instrumental for couple conflict in other

cultural contexts. Given that Belgian and Japanese couples have different notions of a healthy relationship, we seek to examine whether *Belgian and Japanese partners conceive of couple disagreement differently and have different ideas about 'good' and 'healthy' ways of dealing with disagreement.*

Research Aim 2: Cultural Variation in the Emotional Behaviors of Belgian and Japanese Couple Interactions

Emotional behaviors provide a central interface between partners, as they directly and visibly signal partners' attitudes, intentions and relational orientations (Parkinson, 2019; Van Kleef, 2009). They include verbal and non-verbal behaviors, such as saying "I'm angry at you," frowning and raising the voice, which reveal what the partner is about to do, and what they want their counterpart to do (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). For example, the combined behaviors listed above could convey that the partner is angry and disapproves of the other's behavior, and want it to end. This may in turn compel the other partner to change said behavior. As such, emotional behaviors modify and coordinate the direction of an ongoing interaction (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Furthermore, emotional behaviors prompt partners to appraise a situation as emotionally relevant (Hess & Hareli, 2018; van Doorn, van Kleef, & van der Pligt, 2015). For instance, if one partner cries or says they feel hurt during a disagreement, then the other partner will become aware that something is seriously wrong, and that the disagreement is important to resolve (Sanford et al., 2007). The couples' emotional behaviors thus constitute the course of their interaction.

Here we examine whether there are systematic cultural differences in the emotional behaviors of Belgian and Japanese couples. We propose that Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different emotional behaviors, in line with varying relationship goals. Thus far, previous research found cultural differences in couples' positive and negative emotional behaviors during a disagreement: European American couples were found to engage in more positive and less negative emotional behaviors than Chinese American couples (Tsai et al., 2006). In this dissertation, we focus on cultural variation in specific types of emotional behaviors — after all, specific emotional behaviors each reflect different relationship orientations and therefore give more insight in the kinds of relationships that exist across cultures than does general valence. Pertaining to the second aim, we propose that *Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement interactions are marked by different types of emotional behaviors,* and that *these differences can be understood from the prevalent relationship goals in each culture.*

Research Aim 3: Cultural Variation in the Emotional Behaviors that Contribute to Relationship Outcomes

Studies with samples of Western couples have repeatedly shown that emotional behaviors impact relationship outcomes, such as relationship satisfaction and stability (Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002). However, we cannot assume that the emotional behaviors that are healthy for Western couples, are similarly healthy for non-Western couples, given that relationship goals differ across cultures. In this dissertation, we

propose that the emotional behaviors that support the relationship goals, are especially likely to contribute to relationship outcomes. A study by Williamson et al., (2012) provides some evidence for this idea by showing that positive and negative emotional behaviors impact relationship satisfaction differently in American and Chinese couples. Positive emotional behaviors in both partners made American husbands feel more satisfied with their relationship; yet negative emotional behaviors did not affect husbands' relationship satisfaction. The opposite was true for Chinese husbands, who felt less satisfied with the relationship when both partners engaged in negative emotional behaviors, but whose relationship satisfaction was not affected by positive emotional behaviors (the results were not found for wives). While the study by Williamsons et al., (2012) suggests that different emotional behaviors are healthy for a relationship across cultures, it leaves unanswered which types of emotional behaviors in particular contribute to relationship health in each culture. In this dissertation, we explore the role of specific emotional behaviors on relationship outcomes across cultures. We suggest that *engaging in culturally typical emotional behaviors may be associated with better relational functioning, possibly because these emotional behaviors are conducive to the cultural relationship goals.*

Research Aim 4: Cultural Variation in Partners' Interpersonal Emotional Sequences

When two partners interact, their emotions are interconnected. Remember that Susan is angry with Erick, and in turn Erick responds with a defensive attitude, by brushing the situation off. This only feeds

Susan's confrontational stance, as she engages in domineering behavior next when she says, "you want your children to be happy, don't you". Susan's and Erick's interaction is made up of several interpersonal emotional sequences: anger-defensiveness and defensiveness-domineering. Moreover, these interpersonal sequences appear to be in line with Susan and Erick's relationship goals: anger, defensiveness and domineering are behaviors that protect partners' individual rights, and the emotional sequences can be seen as reflecting two partners who each negotiate their individual needs and autonomy in the relationship. The emotional behaviors of two partners may thus be interconnected in ways that support a couple's relationship goals and values. Because relationship goals differ across cultures, so may the interpersonal emotional sequences that constitute a couple interaction. In Kuma and Hiroto's interaction, for example, Hiroto responded to Kuma's critical stance with empathy and validation. Hiroto's understanding of Kuma's point of view steers the interaction away from anger, and to a more positive, lighter atmosphere. This gave rise to different interpersonal emotional sequences, namely criticism-validation and validation-fear/tension (i.e., nervous laughter and giving up the argument), which appeared to be conducive to the goal of relational harmony. In sum, partners' emotional behaviors may be interconnected in culturally specific ways, such that the partners hold each other and the relationship to cultural standards. Pertaining to the fourth aim, we suggest that *Belgian and Japanese partners engage in different interpersonal emotional sequences that are in line with the cultural relationship goals.*

1.7. Chapter overview

This dissertation consists of four empirical chapters that investigate cultural variation in the emotional interactions of Belgian and Japanese couples in the context of disagreement. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 exactly map onto research aims 1, 2 and 4 respectively, and chapters 3 and 4 touch upon research aim 3. Chapter 3 is somewhat different from the other chapters in that its focus is on cultural differences in suppressing emotional *experiences*, rather than behaviors. While each empirical chapter may be read as a stand-alone chapter, there is a logical order, with each chapter building onto the previous one. An overview of the four chapters with related research aims and methods can be found in table 1.1.

Chapter two presents a focus group study in which Belgian and Japanese participants — who were in a romantic relationship — talked about their conceptions of couple disagreement, and the behaviors or strategies they (de)value in dealing with disagreement. Using thematic analyses, we explore in depth the cultural meanings, beliefs, and practices of how to relate to each other *in the context of couple disagreement* (Research Aim 1). The culturally different conceptions of couple disagreement may provide a framework for understanding the research findings reported in the consecutive chapters.

In **Chapter three**, we use self-reported affect data from the large couple study noted earlier (Boiger et al., 2020; Kirchner-Häusler, 2020) to examine if cultural differences in the level of emotion suppression depend on the type of emotion that is experienced. We formulate three concrete hypothesis: 1) Japanese partners suppress their emotions more than Belgian partners, 2) the difference in emotion suppression

between Belgian and Japanese partners is especially large when negative disengaging emotions take prevalence over negative engaging emotions, but not when negative engaging emotions take prevalence over negative disengaging emotions, and 3) emotion suppression is negatively associated with conflict resolution in Belgian, but not in Japanese partners.

In **Chapter four**, we observe the Belgian and Japanese video-recorded disagreement interactions from the large couple study (Boiger et al., 2020; Kirchner-Häusler, 2020) using the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) (Coan & Gottman, 2007). Pertaining to Research Aim 2, we examine if Belgian and Japanese couple interactions are characterized by different emotional behaviors. We suggest that Belgian and Japanese partners interact in culturally specific ways that afford or promote those emotions that are in line with the cultural relationship goals — that of independence in Belgium, and interdependence in Japan. We formulate concrete hypotheses for several emotional behaviors: we predict that Belgian partners engage in more angry and domineering behavior, but in less validating behavior than Japanese partners. Additionally, we test the hypothesis that, in each culture, couples who engage in culturally valued emotional behaviors, report higher levels of conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction (Research Aim 4).

Finally, **Chapter five** presents a study that examines cultural variation in the interpersonal emotional sequences of Belgian and Japanese couple interactions (Research Aim 3). We use the coded SPAFF data from Chapter four to compute temporal sequences between partners' emotional behaviors based on a dynamic network approach (Bodner, Bringmann, Tuerlinckx, de Jonge, & Ceulemans,

2021). We suggest that *Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different interpersonal emotional sequences,* against the backdrop of varying cultural relationship goals. More specifically, we predict that the most prevalent sequences in each culture, revolve around culturally valued emotional behaviors (i.e., anger and domineering in Belgium, validation in Japan). We predict *that Belgian couple interactions are made up of anger-validation, anger-anger, anger-domineering, and domineering-validation sequences.* In contrast, we hypothesize that *Japanese couple interactions are characterized by validation-validation sequences.*

Table 1.1. Overview of chapters, aims, hypotheses, data sources and method.

Chapter	Aim(s)	Study hypotheses	Data source	Method (analysis)
2	1	- The conceptions of couple disagreement differ between Belgium and Japan	Focus group study	Thematic analyses
3	(2), 3	- Japanese couples suppress their emotions more than Belgian couples - The cultural difference in emotion suppression is larger when disengaging emotions take prevalence over engaging emotions, but not when the reverse is true - Suppression is associated with low conflict resolution in Belgium, but not in Japan	Couple conflict study: self-reported affect data (VMR)	MLM dyadic analyses
4	2, 3	- Belgian and Japanese couple interactions are marked by different emotional behaviors (i.e., anger and domineering in Belgium, validation in Japan) - Different emotional behaviors are associated with relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution in Belgium and Japan	Couple conflict study: observational duration data (the SPAFF)	MLM dyadic analyses
5	4	- Belgian and Japanese couple interactions are marked by different interpersonal emotional sequences	Couple conflict study: observational frequency data (the SPAFF)	Dynamic network analyses

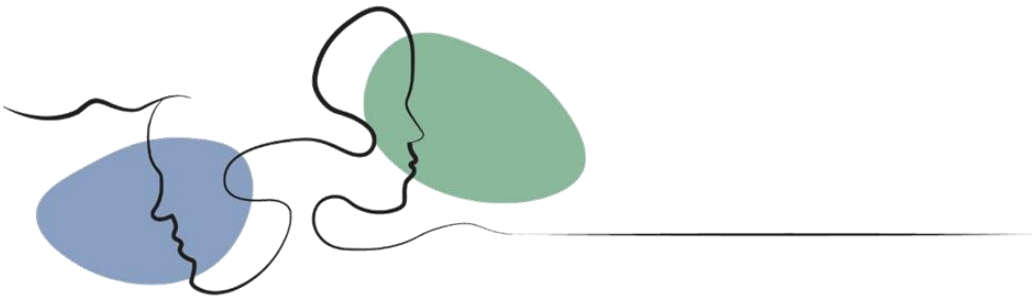
Note. MLM = Multilevel Modelling, SPAFF = Specific Affect Coding System, VMR = Video-Mediated Recall

Notes

1. Throughout the dissertation, we use the term conflict and disagreement interchangeably.
2. The examples given are inspired by our observational lab data, though they do not literally describe any one couple.
3. The term is borrowed from dynamic systems theory.

2

Couple Disagreement: Inevitable and Healthy? Belgian and Japanese Conceptions



This chapter is based on:
Schouten, A., Boiger, M., Uchida, A., Ribbers, N., Uchida, Y., Mesquita, B. (2022). Couple disagreement: Inevitable and healthy? Belgian and Japanese conceptions. *Manuscript submitted*.

2.1. Introduction

The literature on romantic relationships in Western cultural contexts gives considerable weight to couple disagreement when assessing relationship quality, and with good reason (Beach, 2016; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990): dealing with couple disagreement in aversive ways has been associated with poor relational functioning, maladaptive parenting, inadequate child adjustment and bad health (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Kiecolt-glaser et al., 2018; Slatcher, 2010; Warmuth, Cummings, & Davies, 2018; 2020). Consequently, many couple studies aim to identify which conflict behaviors or strategies are particularly good or bad for the relationship (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; 2002), and psychological interventions are often designed to target and improve a couple's conflict management and resolution skills (Baucom, Mueser, Shoham, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998).

This extensive body of relationship research has been guided by two central assumptions on couple disagreement. The first is that couple disagreement is both inevitable and necessary for the relationship (Beach, 2016; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). Relationship researchers have noted that "discord is an unavoidable consequence when two people attempt to integrate their lives", and that "some degree of conflict is typically considered a normative aspect of relationships" (Theiss & Leustek, 2016; Witthon, Neslihan, Rhoades, & Markman, 2018). Couple disagreement is (only) an *"expression*" of the couple's struggles (Ting–Toomey, 1994), which are inherently there. The second assumption is that couple disagreement needs to be addressed, talked about, and solved (Beach, 2016). For example, it has been seen as instrumental for conflict resolution if partners voice their unmet needs and express

underlying vulnerabilities around these needs (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson & Greenberg, 1987). Disagreement, if articulated, offers the partners a chance of understanding and resolving their conflicting views, and is thought to strengthen the bond between the partners (Canary, Cupach, & Richard, 2001; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). In contrast, stifling conflict, or avoiding it altogether, is considered unhealthy for the relationship, as it is a missed chance to gain true insight into the differences that exist between partners (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014).[1]

These two assumptions i.e., that disagreement is inevitable and healthy, and that disagreement ought to be articulated, have guided the majority of couple studies (Beach, 2016; Bradbury, 2016; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). For example, many studies have been designed to examine *how* couples have conflict by observing couples' conflict behaviors and investigating their consequences for the relationship, yet have built on the assumption *that* couples have conflict (Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002; Leuchtmann et al., 2019; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Witthon, 2010). The inevitability of conflict is therefore presumed, rather than made the object of study. As another example, the focus of many studies has been on the open expression of conflict, as is the case for the well-known couple-conflict paradigm (e.g., Gottman et al., 1998) in which couples are to talk about and solve a disagreement in the lab. Extant research designs adopted to study couple conflict thus resonate with Western cultural assumptions about couple disagreement. As psychologist Kenneth Gergen observed: "when researchers select a phenomenon for study, they are giving voice to the traditions of which they are a part" (2015, p. 99). However, would the same assumptions on couple disagreement hold in other cultural

contexts? And would current approaches to couple disagreement capture the prevalent practices there?

Is the Western Reality About Couple Disagreement a Universal Reality?

We suggest that assumptions about couple disagreement may differ across cultures, as they derive meaning form the cultural ideals of romantic relationships (Rothbaum et al., 2000). Case in point: we — the authors of this paper — each with a different cultural background, were designing a quantitative cross-cultural study on emotions in couple disagreement when we found out that we ourselves conceived of couple disagreement differently. Our respective conceptions seemed to stem from our different socio-cultural frames of thought. For example, when asking participants to indicate if they had had a disagreement with their partner on a given day, it made sense to the Western European authors to describe a disagreement to participants as something that can range from a “minor friction to a big argument”. However, the Japanese author noted that describing a disagreement in this way implies that disagreement is explicit, open and under the awareness of both partners. She pointed out that, instead, disagreements in Japan are often implicit, indirect, and one-sided; for instance, a wife may be dissatisfied with the husband without him having to be aware of it, and without her bringing the problem up. The Japanese author thought that by describing the disagreement as involving “friction” or an “argument”, Japanese partners would perhaps be more likely to answer ‘no’ to the question of whether they had had a disagreement, because disagreements do not typically surface like this in Japanese romantic

relationships. She therefore proposed to include implicit disagreement in the description.

This anecdote illustrates that assumptions about the nature of couple conflict vary from one cultural context to the next: while the Western Europeans among us thought of disagreement as two partners confronting each other or arguing, the Japanese author included in her conception of disagreement instances where partners were troubled by something in the relationship without ever broaching the topic. Similarly, the Western assumptions that couple disagreement is both inevitable and should be articulated, may not be shared in other cultural contexts. In the current study, we set out to explore whether Western assumptions on couple disagreement merely reflect a local reality, or whether they are broadly shared across different cultural contexts. To this end, we conducted focus groups on couple disagreement in Belgium and Japan.

What is a Healthy Relationship?

Implicit in the assumptions on couple disagreement are notions of a healthy couple relationship. The little cross-cultural relationship research we have, suggests that those notions are not universal (Rothbaum et al., 2000; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002); this research provides first observations of differences between U.S. and Japanese samples, and thus serves as a jumping board for our study of couple conflict in Belgian and Japanese cultural contexts. On the one hand, this research has suggested that in U.S. cultural contexts, a healthy relationship is one that is marked by a high degree of autonomy and independence between partners (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; 2010). In these contexts, partners focus primarily on their personal needs, and

communicate about these needs in an assertive way, even if their counterpart has conflicting needs. While partners strive for individual autonomy in these ways, they also seek closeness and proximity with their partner; the idea is that partners succeed in striking a balance between these two relational tasks in a good relationship (Rothbaum et al., 2000). On the other hand, in Japanese cultural contexts, a healthy relationship is characterized by interdependence and relatedness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; 2010). Partners are seen as fundamentally connected to each other and to the relationship; the relationship gives meaning and is constitutive of who a partner is. Consequently, one of the central relational tasks for partners is to fit in with the relationship by setting aside, rather than focusing on personal needs (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). Partners are expected to anticipate and adjust to the needs and expectations of their counterpart, and avoid self-disclosure and self-assertion (Heejung S. Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kito, 2005). Such mutual adjustment is thought to help partners achieve a smooth, stable, and harmonious relationship, aspects that are valued in Japanese cultural contexts (Rothbaum et al., 2000). The notions of a healthy relationship thus differ considerably across U.S. and Japanese cultural contexts. We assume that similar differences can be observed when comparing Japan with Belgium, a Western European context.

Because notions of a healthy relationship differ across cultures, Western assumptions about the utility of couple disagreement may not be shared across cultures either. For instance, disagreements between partners in romantic relationships may only be viewed as inevitable in Western cultural contexts because partners strive to meet their respective (independent) needs — as to maintain autonomy. Also,

conflict may be necessary only because there is the expectation that partners violate these needs. In contrast, in East-Asian cultural contexts, couple disagreement may in fact be avoidable to the extent that partners succeed in mutually adjusting to each other. Conflict may not be necessary at all in a culture that views self-disclosure as immature when it risks jeopardizing relational harmony. Finally, partners in Western cultural contexts may think of disagreements as opportunities for *both* self-assertion and mutual connection, as this reconciles the two central relational tasks of autonomy and closeness. However, partners in East-Asian cultural contexts might think that disagreements focus each partner on their personal needs, thereby hampering interdependence and relatedness. Taken together, it is very possible that the assumptions about couple disagreement differ because notions of a healthy relationship differ across cultures as well.

Conversation as a Construction of Cultural Reality

Although some researchers have posited that couple disagreement is enacted differently across cultural contexts *because* of different assumptions or belief systems (Boiger et al., 2020; Kirchner-Häusler et al., 2020), no study has directly investigated partners' assumptions and beliefs on couple disagreement. In the present study, we examine how partners from different cultural contexts talk about couple disagreement, and in doing so, we hope to gain more insight into their assumptions and beliefs. We examine folk understanding or culturally construed meanings of couple conflict in two different cultural contexts — Japan and Belgium — using the focus group method. We use focus groups because they encourage participants to discuss a topic freely and

spontaneously among themselves, rather than with the interviewer (Kreuger & Casey, 2015). The resulting group dynamic is considered a near-to replication of everyday social interactions (Hennink, 2007). As such, focus groups provide a context for participants to negotiate their ideas about couple disagreement, resulting in a conversation from which to infer cultural meaning and assumptions on couple disagreement. By conducting focus groups in Belgium and Japan separately, we shed light on culturally specific assumptions and ideas about couple disagreement through partners' own descriptions and experiences (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, & Davidson, 2007). Given the differences in the notions of healthy relationships, we were interested in the ways partners of romantic couples in Belgium and Japan make meaning of disagreement in their relationship, and what this means for the way they handle disagreement.

2.2. Methods

Participants

17 Belgian and 19 Japanese participants were recruited for the study. In Belgium, participants were recruited by means of flyers, advertisements, and word of mouth, and in Japan, participants were recruited by a recruitment company. Participants were between 25 and 50 years old, in a heterosexual relationship for at least two years, living together with their partner, and native speakers of Dutch (Flemish) or Japanese. The Belgian participant sample consisted of eight men and nine women, and the Japanese participant sample consisted of ten men and nine women, respectively. Belgian participants were on average

36.82 years old, and Japanese participants were on average 39.89 years old. Belgian and Japanese participants' relationship duration did not differ significantly: Belgian participants were together with their partner for an average of 15 years, and Japanese participants had a mean relationship duration of 11.52 years (see table 2.1 for an overview of the demographics).

Table 2.1. Demographics Belgian and Japanese participants

	Gender	**Age (mean)**	**Relationship duration (mean)**
Belgium			
Focus group 1	4 females	46.75	23.5
Focus group 2	5 females	27.40	6.00
Focus group 3	4 males	28.75	10.00
Focus group 4	4 males	46.75	22.75
Japan			
Focus group 1	5 females	29.80	6.80
Focus group 2	5 females	42.20	15.20
Focus group 3	4 males	40.75	9.24
Focus group 4	5 males	47.00	14.4

Data Collection

In each culture, we conducted two all-male and two all-female focus groups consisting of four to five participants. The Belgian focus groups consisted of Belgian participants only, were conducted in Dutch (Flemish) by two Belgian (Dutch-speaking) psychology master students and took place in one of the classrooms of the Psychology department

at the University of Leuven; the Japanese focus groups consisted of Japanese participants only, were conducted in Japanese by the third author, and took place in one of the conference rooms at Kokoro Research Center, Kyoto University. Before the start of the interview, the facilitator informed participants about the research objectives, the topic of the discussion and the procedure of the focus groups. The facilitator also explained that 1) participation was voluntary 2) participants were free to leave the discussion whenever they wanted and 3) the information discussed would remain confidential. Finally, participants signed the informed consent to indicate that they had understood points 1 to 3 and agreed with recording the focus group interview. The focus group interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and participants received a monetary compensation of 20 euros/2500 yen.

Procedure

After participants had filled in a demographic questionnaire, the focus group interview started with a short introduction round. Next, the facilitator explained three ground rules, making use of a PowerPoint slide that remained projected throughout the focus group discussion: 1) let everybody join in the discussion 2) there are no right or wrong answers and 3) turn off mobile phones. Finally, the facilitator emphasized that his/her role was merely to moderate the discussion and he/she hence encouraged participants to discuss the questions among each other, rather than with the facilitator.

Before the actual focus group interview, participants watched an 18-minute video consisting of six three-minute clips from three Belgian and three Japanese couples who discussed a disagreement in the lab.

Clips were taken from longer video recordings that were collected during a previous couple conflict study (Boiger et al., 2020), translated to Dutch or Japanese, and subtitled. The video served as a cue to provoke conversation and reflection; a method adopted from Tobin & Hsueh, (2007).[2] Notably, in assigning codes and themes (see later), we focused only on those parts of the transcript in which participants talked about their own experiences or about the experiences of other couples around them; we thus discarded parts of the transcript that were merely reactions to the video's participants had watched. These reactions were excluded from further analyses because they were redundant with participants' answers to the questions, and did not yield new understandings.

The focus group interview consisted of four sections: 1) opening questions, 2) handling conflict in general 3) emotions during conflict and 4) regulating partner's emotions. The opening questions asked participants about their first impression of the Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement interactions they had watched. The facilitator also asked participants what they found thought-provoking about them, and he/she further probed for cultural perceptions by asking what the differences and similarities between Belgian and Japanese couples were according to participants. The opening questions were meant to 'break the ice'. Question probes in each of the following sections moved from what was observed in the videos (i.e., *'What do you think about the way the couples in the videos handled disagreement?'*) to culture-specific perceptions (i.e. *'If you think about most couples around you, what emotions do you think they typically experience during disagreements?')* and, if participants initiated the sharing of this type of information, to participants' personal experiences. The questions about

emotions and emotion regulation were included because a) emotions are central to and particularly salient during disagreement interactions b) they encourage participants to focus on consequences or outcomes of conflict strategies (i.e., strategy X makes me feel Y), and c) they resonate with previous cross-cultural research which focuses on emotional experiences and behaviors during disagreement (Boiger et al., 2020; Tsai, Levenson, & Mccoy, 2006). The facilitator ended the focus group interview with a closing question, asking participants what final advice they would give to couples in dealing with a disagreement. The interview guidelines can be found in Appendix A.1.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and processed in Nvivo. The Belgian focus group interviews were coded by two Belgian coders in Dutch; the Japanese focus group interviews were translated to English and coded by two English speaking coders (the coders were Turkish and Chinese master students). The first author carefully reviewed the codes and generated the thematic map for both the Belgian and Japanese focus groups. The analysis of the Japanese focus group interviews was complemented by two Japanese coders, who reviewed the Japanese codes and themes thoroughly using the original (non-translated) Japanese transcripts. A code would be assigned to the transcript data when several participants, either across focus groups or within a focus group, talked about a particular way of dealing with a disagreement or expressed a certain idea or belief about disagreements. For example, across focus groups, participants repeatedly mentioned that they listened to their partner

when dealing with a disagreement, so ‘listening’ became a code. Essentially then, codes represented specific disagreement strategies or assumptions. A theme would be assigned to the transcript data when certain codes impacted the disagreement in a similar way or were valued similarly by participants. For example, listening and showing respect were both thought of as ways to engage with the partner, which in turn was considered instrumental for mutual adjustment, at least in the case of the Japanese focus groups. Engaging with the partner thus became a subtheme and adjusting to the partner a theme. A unit of analysis was usually an entire speech turn, or when relevant, consisted of an interaction between participants. Throughout the analytic process, we constantly checked for consistency within and differentiation between codes and themes (Patton, 2002). Reliability was optimized by comparing the findings between coders while also taking the individual perspectives of each coder into account (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000), and by frequent peer-debriefings. An overview of the codes and themes in each culture can be found in Figure 2.1.

2.3. Results

Belgian Conceptions of Couple Disagreement

Disagreement is Inevitable, Necessary, and Healthy

In line with the central assumptions about couple conflict in Western cultural contexts (Theiss & Leustek, 2016; Witthon et al., 2018), Belgian participants indicate that they consider disagreement as an inevitable and undeniable part of the relationship. According to participants, a relationship is between two individuals who each have different and their

own opinions, meaning that, inescapably, there will be situations in which partners do not agree with each other. This idea of disagreement being inevitable is illustrated by several examples:

> As a response to the facilitator's introduction at the start of the focus groups, in which the facilitator says that *almost* all couples encounter disagreements from time to time, female 4 from Belgian focus group 1 says: I was like leave out the 'almost', I mean (says Facilitator's name), in every couple, or problems or I don't know how you said it exactly but leave out the 'almost'. There is no couple that doesn't go through arguments, it can't be.

> An exchange between the facilitator, male 1 and male 3 in Belgian focus group 3:
> Facilitator: Can disagreements be avoided or are they inevitable?
> Male 1: I think that disagreements are inevitable.
> Male 2: I think so too.
> Male 2: But that isn't bad.

Belgian participants even considered disagreement necessary for a healthy relationship, as they give partners insight into their differences. The more partners learn from and about each other through their disagreements, the better they become at dealing with disagreement –– i.e., disagreements may be less turbulent in later stages of the relationship as compared to the start — and the more partners strengthen their bond.

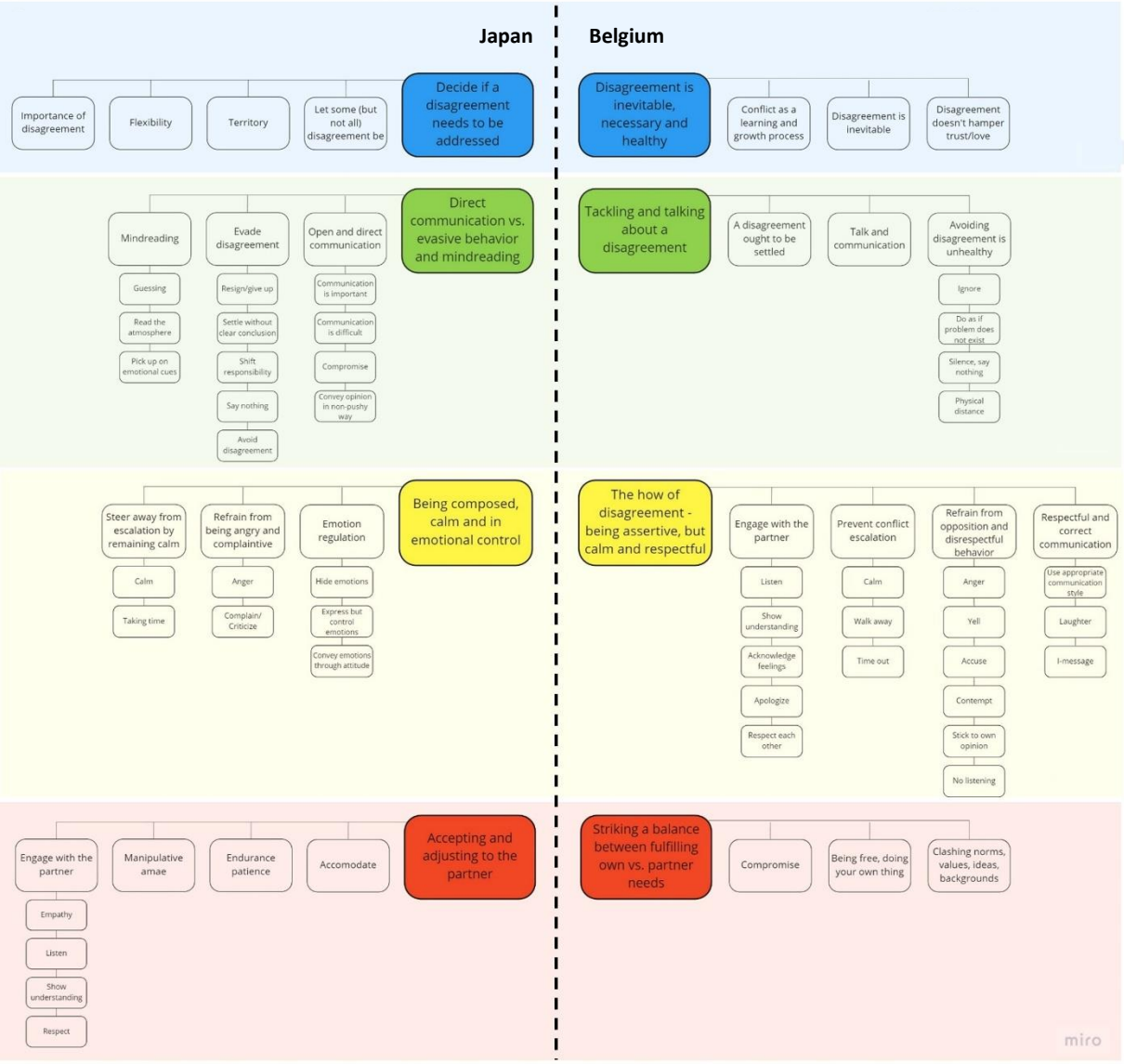


Figure 2.1. Overview of themes and codes in Belgium and Japan

> An exchange between female 4 and female 1 in Belgian focus group 1:
> Female 4: I have the feeling that you also have to go through that period, you have to feel ‘ah, he reacts like that’, or ‘I would have’, you must, it’s like that, that is the experience you gain for the future, you draw from your experience to be able to say, ‘ah no, that’s how we did it once, and that was not good, so we need to find another way’. It happens gradually, that's something, yes you hardly see it changing, but it does evolve.
> Female 1: Until you reach a point where you're like, we're there, but that's a process, a long process and I think you must live through it, I think that it [a relationship] can hardly go without.
>
> Belgian focus group 3, male 3: But in the meantime, she kind of learned that [withdrawal and silence is not something negative] too. Because as I said, with me, that's also just a way to come to yourself, put it in perspective a little bit. And then after that, maybe you can talk about it better. So, I think it's also a little bit about finding each other.
>
> An exchange between male 3 and male 2 in Belgian focus group 4:
> Male 3: But that is difficult, a discussion determines where you stand of course and if you never have a discussion ( ), that may not be healthy either.
> Male 2: That is not healthy either.

These different participants converge on the idea that disagreements are necessary steps in the long process of mutual attunement. How well the couple deals with disagreement is considered a benchmark of where the couple is in this learning process (i.e., “it determines where you stand”). Belgian participants also indicate that disagreements do not

and should not eat away at the fundamental trust or love you have for one another. Even more, it is because of this trust or love that there is room for disagreements.

> Belgian focus group 2, female 3: Yeah, I think that's underlying, that you have confidence anyway. Despite what is said now or not, that it is ok. That you feel safe, yes that may not be an emotion, but I think that trust is emotion. That you love each other, despite what's on the table right now or what you can't agree on.

Tackling and Talking about Disagreement

Following from the idea that disagreement is inevitable and necessary for a relationship, Belgian participants indicate that they find it important to tackle, talk about and solve disagreements. One of the worst ways of dealing with a disagreement is ending the conservation or moving on before the disagreement is truly settled. Participants believe that if disagreements remain unsettled, they linger and will re-emerge.

> Belgian focus group 1, female: Yeah, sure, as long as you settle the disagreement. I'd rather have it that way than when he goes away and then arrives at night and crawls into bed with you, and you do not talk about it, and then you get up in the morning and it remains unsettled. That's no way to go about it either because it will show its face one day anyway.

> An exchange between male 2, male 1 and male 3 from Belgian focus group 3:
> Male 2: Yes, that it is no longer in the air, like… a discussion from before, or the reason of a discussion.

> Male 1: Yeah, that's the worst thing, right. Going to bed or leaving without it being resolved.
> Male 3: […] night discussions: that is usually… With us that's usually the case, if there is something we're arguing about or.... Then it's at night in bed and until, until it's cleared up.

A prerequisite for settling and solving disagreement is talking with each other about any underlying displeasures. The narratives reveal that talking is thought of as a crucial tool for partners to gain insight in each other's point of view, feelings, and thoughts. It is only by talking and being open about one's thoughts and feelings around displeasures that a couple can figure out what lies at the heart of their disagreement and solve it.

> Belgian focus group 2, female 1: And I think if it does come to a discussion, it's important that you say everything that's on your mind. Because it's like you say, I can't see what is going on in your mind, and you can't see what is going on in his mind, and it's much more important to put everything on the table and then you can take your time and talk about it. Instead of bottling it up, and just sitting there, staring at each other angrily, and that nobody is saying anything. Because that won't get you anywhere.

> Belgian focus group 3, male 3: I think talking about it, or learning to talk about it, is really important. Or else, I think you won't understand each other very well at all.

The importance of addressing the disagreement and talking about it is further illustrated by participants' disapproval when somebody avoids

confrontation, such as pretending the problem does not exist or remaining silent:

> Belgian focus group 2, female 1: With us that is silence and then you can tell from his attitude that he is angry and that he, well, that he is not okay with it. And then he just walks out. And, like, that seems the end of it then. We each continue to do what we are doing but in utter silence. Ah, that makes me so nervous. Especially because it's always — sometimes I'm like, you know, it should not always be on me to start the discussion again.

> Belgian focus group 3, male 3: If I notice that she also falls silent, then there's a problem. Yes, then I notice. Yes, then we are in real trouble and then I'm aware that we are stuck. If she stops communicating, then... She is usually very communicative and then I have to make some effort.

These quotes show that Belgian participants feel uneasy when their partner silences the problem, while there is remaining tension. Even more, participants take silence as a prompt to re-engage in or tackle, rather than evade, the disagreement; silence signals a problem that needs to be brought to the surface and discussed. In sum, Belgian partners value addressing a disagreement head on; they are determined to settle a disagreement and try to achieve this by openly discussing it with each other, rather than avoiding confrontation.

The How of Disagreement: Being Assertive but Respectful

Although addressing a disagreement and talking about it is important, Belgian participants underline that the way in which this is done matters, both for disagreement resolution and for the relationship more generally. This is in line with the assumption in Western cultural contexts that what matters is not *if* a disagreement takes place, but *how* it is dealt with (Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). For example, Belgian participants emphasize that disclosing how you feel and asserting your needs should be done in a respectful and calm way. This means that you use the correct tone of voice and choice of words — partners should not shout, become angry, yell, or insult each other, for instance. If partners show disrespectful behavior, then partners are likely to draw clear boundaries, i.e., by demanding a change in attitude, or temporarily ending the conversation.

> Belgian focus group 1, female 2: Yes, that is also a form of respect, like I don't want to be talked to like that, it's perhaps more likely to have this at work rather than at home. I don't hesitate to call it out either, like: "a moment ago in the kitchen when we were sitting at the table, that way you treated me, I didn't think it was okay". You may think that way, but not act that way.

> Belgian focus group 1, female 1: When I get yelled at, I get up and leave. I go for a walk. I won't accept being yelled at. To me you may, yes, you may say anything you want, even be inappropriate, I will still accept it, but on a.... You may tell me the most horrible things, I will respond to them, but when people shout at me, that is the limit. The conversation ends. I get up and I go for a walk or take, I'm in my car and I'm gone. It's not just running away.

> Belgian focus group 3, male 3: Like anger, we also learned ‘don't let that....’ Just stay calm and you need not always express that [anger].

> Belgian focus group 4, male 1: Not getting on your horse, but trying to interact with each other in a respectful way, talking and enabling the conversation, not presenting each other with a fait accompli.

While expressing dissent and asserting personal opinions, partners should engage with and be open to the other’s point of view as well, i.e., by listening to each other, showing understanding, and taking each other’s feelings seriously.

> Belgian focus group 2, female 4: Being open to each other's opinions, to each other's ideas. I think that's always kind of important as a couple. That you're open to what the other person thinks and the other person's vision.

> Belgian focus group 4, male 1: [*Being understanding towards each other*]. From both sides, if you start there, you won’t end with anger and all those states.

Only if it is not possible to be respectful, calm and engaging, Belgian participants will want their partner to take a time-out. A time-out functions to draw a boundary (i.e., walking out to put the disagreement to a halt), to avoid counter-productive escalation, and to return to a state of calmness. Notably, participants emphasize the importance of resuming the conflict discussion at a later stage. Taking a time-out is

thus not the same as avoiding confrontation; instead, a time-out ensures you can return to the disagreement again in a calm way.

> Belgian focus group 2, female 2: Yes, sometimes you do need that distance. With us it is sometimes even physical distance. That we say: "Look, this is totally not constructive anymore. I'm going for a walk." We had to learn to do it. Without it, we ended up shouting at each other, purely out of ‘whaah’. Yes, and now we just agreed that if you feel it coming, go outside and we did agree: No longer than 10 min.

> An exchange between male 1 and 4 in Belgian focus group 3:
> Male 1: For me that always helps. In the beginning... Yes, for some reasons I can get very angry and if I reach that point, I can't even really say why. But I usually calm down if they leave me alone for a while. Whereas after it just happened, it is hard to talk to me. Not because I don't want to, but just… That's very difficult.
> Male 4: But I think with us that is different from avoiding the confrontation.
> Male 1: Yeah, yeah, sure, sure.
> Male 4: Because it's just that you need time for yourself and want to come back to it afterwards.

Taken together, Belgian participants value talking about the problem and disclosing their opinions, but it ought to be done in a respective, calm, and considerate way.

Striking a Balance Between Fulfilling One's Own and the Partner's Needs

The narratives reveal that partners seek to find a compromise during a disagreement. It is difficult to solve the disagreement, and it may even harm the relationship, if partners are not at all willing to give in here and there, and only stick to their own point of view. To reach a compromise, partners clearly lay out their own needs, and their goals for the relationship; again, open discussion is key.

> An exchange between female 2, 3 and 4 in Belgian focus group 1:
> Female 4: You can continue to respect each other's opinions, but not compromising never, that doesn't last, I think, that doesn't last.
> Female3: Someone needs to give in a little because otherwise....
> Female2: Finding the middle ground to a certain extent, because if everyone sticks to their own ideal then you won't get very far.

> Belgian focus group 3, male 2: Yes, we are pretty much on the same page, so we don't have many disagreements, but if we do have one then we are very clear where-, each of us makes clear why they disagree. So, you give your point of view and then see where you can compromise.

> Belgian focus group 4, male 2: [*Or at least do a little bit of a concession*], not always on everything, but you try to give in on something little, right, because otherwise the game won't last, you cannot agree on everything.

When it comes to compromising, the narratives also reveal a tension between fulfilling own needs and focusing on those of the partner.

Participants agree that partners should never completely sacrifice their own needs, as important as it is to compromise. Some participants accept that their needs, values, and norms are not fully compatible with their partner's. They emphasize that each partner has to stay true to themselves in the relationship. Others accept the friction that is the result of standing up for your own needs. None of the Belgian participants valued compromising for the sake of keeping peace.

> Belgian focus group 1, female 1: Within a family or partner relationship, it should be possible to have a strong opinion about one little thing while the others have a different opinion, that should be possible and if you respect each other then that's how, yes.... "That's my husband" or "my wife" and they have their own opinion and that's okay. If it's a political party, or some statement by someone or someone whom you admire, but the other doesn't at all, that should still be possible within a relationship."

> Belgian focus group 1, female 1: But of course, yes it all becomes rosé after a few years, then no one has red wine anymore. So, you can't always stick to your own opinion, but sometimes I do think that you should make sure not to adjust, some things are just too valuable to water down and they have to be pure wine[3]. I also think that should be possible within a relationship.

Participants search for a balance between separation on the one hand, i.e., doing activities in solitude or without the partner, and relational closeness on the other hand, i.e., spending time together, further exemplifying the goal of (some) autonomy within the relationship.

Participants appear to struggle with the tension between two central relational tasks — that of autonomy and that of relatedness.

> Belgian focus group 1, female 4: Yes, that's also a very important feeling, that you don't feel confined. A certain degree of freedom. And that [freedom] even causes us to almost, feel closer to each other — that we give each other so much freedom. So, and if we then have joint activities, those feel very good, whereas before, it was almost more like a feeling of having to spend time together. Now it's really very nice to spend time together, but also to each do our own thing. And that's not a bad thing at all.

> Belgian focus group 2, female 4: Yes, with us it's also rather that he really needs time for himself, but that, I think. Yes, my free time that's when I'm with my girlfriends and when I'm with him and.... He's really like time for himself — is really just going to drive his cars, be on his own and that really took some getting used to at first. Because I was like, "Why don't you want to be with me?" That was a big issue with us in the beginning [of our relationship] that we had to work through. That I couldn't see that we had different opinions about what it means to spend time on your own.

The quotes show that being able to spend time separately, is important in a relationship. Moreover, being able to grant each other such autonomy is considered a strength of the relationship. Belgian couples thus carefully consider how to compromise, while never losing sight of the impact this may have on each partner’s personal needs and desires.

In sum, much like the Western relationship researchers, Belgian participants indicated that they view disagreement as inevitable, necessary and healthy for relationships, and that they consider open

communication as instrumental to dealing with disagreement. Belgian participants focus on their own needs in the first place: they value asserting their needs in a respectful and calm way, and compromising with their partner as long as their personal needs are considered and met as well.

Japanese Conceptions of Couple Disagreement

Decide if a Disagreement Needs to be Addressed

The Japanese focus groups reveal that Japanese partners are, unlike the Belgians, hesitant to address a disagreement head on; instead, partners gauge *if* the disagreement needs to be addressed at all. While some disagreements may indeed be inevitable and require a certain degree of confrontation, this is not true for all disagreements. Unimportant or non-crucial topics of disagreement can be left unspoken, while important topics do need to be addressed:

> Japanese focus group 3, male 1: If this acceptance leads to a big problem or trouble, if it leads to a financial issue, then you have to ( ). But, if the issue is not crucial, like the socks [referring to a video in which a Japanese couple had a disagreement about laundry], each family has their own lifestyle, so I don't think that partners should change from how they were used to doing it in their own family. If you try to do it like 'let's do it this way', 'let's do it like my family', 'do it in my family's style', that wouldn't work, so you can just leave it be.

Moreover, the focus group participants warned against negotiating something partners *know* is non-negotiable, as this may be counterproductive and could only result in more arguing. For example,

partners should avoid crossing the boundaries of each person's territory. This means, quite literally, accepting certain role divisions (i.e., one partner may be responsible for household chores and the other for financial issues), and refraining from complaints or criticisms about the way the partner takes responsibility for their role — after all, the responsible partner knows best. More broadly, respecting boundaries means to avoid actions you've learned will upset your partner. Hence, participants are reluctant to discuss issues that cannot be changed; rather, it is important to accept these issues. Knowing when to accept difference requires flexibility — partners should be sensitive to the specific requirements of the situation at hand.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 3: Because we each know other's territory, we don't go there anymore, therefore, we avoid conflicts, but if you try to negotiate or say something about that, then you'll fight, no?

> Japanese focus group 3, male 3: If you were to summarize it in one word, it would probably be flexibility, you should be flexible. A lot of different things could happen. Yes, I mean [flexible] with each other. Some issues will resolve over time, some will resolve when you take some distance, so you need flexibility. As a couple, we are still not there, and by being exposed to many different people, we come to realize that there are so many ways of looking at things. We are becoming more flexible, and I noticed we have fewer conflicts. We are both becoming very flexible, not just because I'm older. I think we can both accept certain differences already.

Evasive Behavior and Mindreading, Instead of Open Communication

In the cases that Japanese couples do address a disagreement, they may not tackle it head on as Belgian partners say they do. Instead, Japanese partners frequently engage in indirect forms of communication, such as evasive behaviors and mindreading. Examples of evasive behaviors are avoiding disagreement, resigning, and settling without a clear solution. These strategies typify a reluctance to voice or negotiate opposing needs, either because partners want to avoid a clash, or because they feel that the situation cannot be changed anyway.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: If I rant, my partner does the same. Like a girl. So, I don't want to show this attitude to the kids, but when it gets like that, part of me is just like 'it doesn't matter'. So, if it gets like that, I will try to avoid an argument. I try to not to go there. Then I talk less and less, and avoided such a situation. I feel like I haven't been able to say what I really think.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 2: 'If we talk about it even more, we might fight again'. Women become like that, a bit humble. Men think 'it can't be helped even if we talked about it more' and resign.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 2: When we settle on some solution, ill feelings remain needlessly. After all, it's not really a solution then. Because it's just a compromise. It's not a perfect solution. Nobody is satisfied and rather, the relationship becomes strained. I feel that is not a solution. Resigning is a possible solution though.

Mindreading involves ‘reading the atmosphere’ and ‘guessing’. According to Japanese participants, these are both ways of caring about and taking into consideration the partner. Partners try to anticipate what their counterpart needs and feels without asking for it, or without articulating thoughts or feeling into words, by being sensitive to each other’s emotional cues. Once partners have “checked upon each other’s mood” or “gauged each other’s feelings”, they can decide on their strategies for dealing with a disagreement. The partner’s feelings thus serve as an important basis for own behavior.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 4: I think that if your wife, well, your partner, doesn’t express much in words, you should guess it by watching their attitude with all your might.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 5: So, if you try to understand each other, what do you call it, not getting each other mad, but you have to look at each other sometimes and check the
> atmosphere and see how they look. If they are angry, you take it another direction, if they seem happy then you keep going in the same direction, it’s like that, no?

Being able to read the atmosphere and guess each other’s feelings signals a close relationship:

> Japanese focus group 1, female 2: Of course, the bond between two people can improve if we can tell what the other wants by sensing the atmosphere.

While participants engage in indirect forms of communication, they also convey that they do, at times, use open communication. Some participants indicate that a certain degree of open communication is important for dealing with a disagreement:

> Japanese focus group 1, female 2: Also, not stopping the discussion. If someone stops the discussion it just ends like that. Doesn't it? Probably. If that repeats itself, the relationship with that person would also come to an end. If one person stops speaking it would end. If one person gives up. So, I think it is important to keep discussing.

Other participants express their wish to communicate more openly, but indicate that their partner or they themselves find it difficult to do so:

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: Well, he doesn't speak much. Even if I talk, he is like "Hmm". When I talk with the kids though, it's more active, the conversation flows well. There are times where I think 'ah, he is listening, he listened, maybe he wants to join the conversation'. It's difficult. Communication, yes.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 1: Well, I am more like, I don't really assert my opinion. Often, I just listen, I go 'that's true'.

Yet other participants use open communication because the better alternative, mindreading, is not *yet* available to them. However, they would like a reach a point where they can do without open and direct communication:

> Japanese focus group 1, female 2: You know, there are people, like very close married couples, who understand or can tell what the partner wants. They are very close to each other. If the relationship reaches that point, I guess the atmosphere would be totally readable. It is not possible for us yet, so we have to ask each other to spell it out.

In sum, Japanese participants appear to be ambivalent about what is best for the relationship when it comes to communication; they value communicating indirectly on the one hand, i.e., through evasive behaviors and mindreading, but they also engage in open communication on the other hand, either because they value doing so, or because they have no other means of dealing with the disagreement. The ambivalence around (open) communication possibly conveys that even Japanese partners cannot get past a minimum level of open communication in their relationship (i.e., 'it's a fact of life'), albeit unwillingly. However, it becomes clear from the transcripts that Japanese partners do not assign irrevocable importance to open communication like Belgians do.

Composed, Calm, and Emotional Moderation

Whereas Belgian partners often disclose thoughts and feelings during disagreement, Japanese partners do not. Quite to the contrary, Japanese partners suppress or hide their emotions, as is illustrated by the following examples:

> Japanese focus group 2, female 5: Maybe it's shyness too. Japanese men are shy. They show their emotion in an indirect way. They are a

> little bit shy. They don't show it openly. It might be a cultural difference. When they want to say something, they avert their eyes.
>
> Japanese focus group 3, male 2: That's why it is scary [the disagreement] even when she is smiling or when you're getting along well. We can't see where she keeps her frustrations. [Facilitator: She doesn't show it]. She doesn't.

Rather than voicing concerns or articulating emotions, partners convey indirectly how they feel. The counterpart is expected to pick up on these feelings from the atmosphere and from the partner's changed engagement, i.e., through mindreading, and adjust behavior accordingly. This resonates with the idea that a close relationship is one in which partners can infer each other's feelings without putting them into words (Rothbaum et al., 2000).

> Japanese focus group 1, female 5: I believe that it's when someone notices [that something is wrong] by themselves that they will really try to fix something [Facilitator: not when they are told so], so the husband notices there is something wrong not through an insinuation, but rather by the wife's sadness naturally showing itself. Maybe that would be what most likely motivates him to change something in his behavior. Only if you let him notice himself, by showing the feeling [not telling him], he will be like 'OK, OK… It's my fault, anyway'.

If Japanese participants do disclose their emotions during a disagreement, they prefer to do so in a controlled and calm way.

> Japanese focus group 1, female 5: We prepared presentation documents. If we discuss such a big topic without any structure and

> just let the discussion run its natural course, we will end with an emotional discussion. So, if it's an important issue, I think it's better to discuss it with business-like emotions.
>
> Japanese focus group 2, female 5: When we argue, we show our emotions, they get out. When I speak my mind, and he doesn't agree, I get frustrated and since I cannot control my feelings, they get out. Neither of us can control our emotions very well. So, we both get heated and become even more emotional. I am amazed that the Belgians [the ones in the video] can control their emotions. I don't have enough space in my heart to argue and still laugh and be calm. I cannot control my emotions that well. I felt the Belgians were very mature to be speaking their mind and still have enough space in their hearts to tell jokes. Children cannot control their emotions when they argue — their discussion get heated. So maybe the Belgians are more mature? They are probably angry, but they don't show it. I feel that they tried to avoid their anger from getting out of hand by trying to make light of it. That is the ideal scenario, well, I wish I could control my emotions that well.
>
> Japanese focus group 2, female 4: If I get too emotional and the argument gets really heated, I sometimes say things I regret later. I think it's better to discuss it [the disagreement] calmly.

As can be gathered from the quotes, the Japanese participants devalue emotional discussions; partners ought to control their emotions, i.e., by refraining from being angry and complaintive. The reference to "business-like emotions" and "presentation documents" in the first quote shows that disagreements are at times discussed in a professional and pragmatic way, with the level of emotionality that would fit a work

situation. Emotional moderation is considered ‘mature’, as it allows for a calm, smooth, and ‘light’ discussion. In other words, it safeguards a harmonious atmosphere. If Japanese participants do engage in anger and complaints, they regret doing so and wish they had controlled their emotions better. To remain composed and calm, or — if needed — take back (emotional) control over the interaction, Japanese participants, like the Belgian participants, take a time-out or leave the disagreement be.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 4: I think that most people want to minimize unpleasant feelings. If you discuss something, but there’s no answer, then it is better to leave it be, and shelve it for the moment, and you can come back to it in later point in time. I thought maybe that’s the secret to a good couple. In Japan.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 1: If you don’t let the argument rest, you won’t be able to control its course. So, in that way, you should give it some time and if it’s at home, and you think she’s in a bad mood, you can go to a different room or just leave her some space. [*Facilitator: To let her calm down*] Keep some distance.

The quotes above show that letting disagreement rest for a while helps couples move away from negative emotional states and towards a calm state. When partners decide to revisit the disagreement, they will have some more distance from their emotions. Thus, in a good relationship, Japanese participants steer away from escalation during a disagreement by hiding their emotions or by controlling them, and remaining calm.

Accepting and Adjusting to the Partner

Japanese participants, unlike the Belgians, focus primarily on accommodating to the needs of their partner. This is illustrated by the following two examples:

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: After I married, I was struck by how different men and women are. Despite these differences, we have to spend a big part of our live together, I think there are personalities like ( ). I think the way you arrange these personalities ( ) like [LEGO] blocks […] is important for a long-term relationship. For example, if I find a bump/hole in my husband, I will be thinking about how I can adjust myself to fit his bump/hole. I don't know what my partner thinks about it though.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 1: Well, I think it depends on one's character, but for me, rather than an argument, it depends on whether we have some common ground or not, depending on the topic I just compromise, probably. I let it go. Objectively speaking, it might sound like I'm irresponsible, ( ) won't make wind and waves. Well, I do say some things, but if I can I try to accept as much as I can. I somehow resign, to not make any wind or waves in the family, I believe that might be better. I'm a businessman, so it's normal that most of the time, Monday to Friday, I'm away from home. So, if someone like me would say something about it ( ) it's most likely that I don't really know the reality. So, if she wants advice about something, I will listen, I will also share my opinions about things related to the home, but often I prioritize my partner's opinion.

These examples show that accommodating your partner involves complementing your partner, and prioritizing your partner's opinion. The

Japanese woman uses the metaphor of LEGO block to emphasize that, like LEGO blocks, partners fit together in a good relationship; in other words, partners should try and adjust to each other's personalities in the best possible way. The metaphor illustrates that once the LEGO blocks are put together, or once partners adjust to each other's personalities, the result is one complementary 'whole'. The Japanese man leaves his wife her territory (i.e., "I'm away from home […] it's most likely that I don't know the reality); in some cases, resigning or letting go seems to be a way of accommodating to the partner and accepting the circumstances as they are, as to avoid friction in the relationship and even in the larger family. Both participants focus on acceptance of the partner, while setting aside personal desires. Notably, these and other examples also reveal that accommodation is one-way; partners adjust to the other without wondering if it is reciprocal. This is different from reaching a compromise; compromising involves adjustment, but it is by definition a two-way adjustment for the sake of reaching a solution. Also, compromising goes accompanied with a certain degree of negotiation and discussion, while accommodation does not.

Three crucial tools for adjusting to the partner are mindreading, engaging with the partner and endurance/patience. Mindreading, as discussed above, is about picking up on your partner's subtle emotional cues. Engaging with the partner involves empathizing with, sincerely listening to, and showing understanding towards your partner.

> Japanese focus groups 4, male 2: So, I believe that it's really very important to show that you're listening by your attitude in one way or

> another, in words by saying ‘I understand’, or by your attitude, or for example by parroting her, or by saying ‘I see’.

Finally, endurance/patience — translated from the Japanese word 我慢 (*gaman*) (Heine et al., 1999) — is a Japanese specific way of accepting and adjusting to the partner. It means to bear with hardships or to have the capacity to put off pleasure. In the context of a relationship, partners bear with an unpleasant aspect of the other’s personality, or with an uncomfortable situation they cannot change. Instead of complaining, they endure whatever they are dissatisfied with and accept the circumstances as they are for the sake of the relationship. Endurance/patience goes accompanied with self-restraint; partners suppress negative feelings and avoid confrontation not to inflict strain on the partner. Even though such self-restraint may come with suffering — it could mean partners do not get what they want or need — partners are to bear with and endure such suffering to enable mutual attunement and maintain relational harmony. Endurance/patience thus involves superseding one’s private needs for the good of the relationship. Importantly, endurance/patience does not equate to a lack of agency or assertiveness, but rather is a sign of maturity and strength in the realm of relational difficulties.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 2: The most important is that the woman endures and that’s the reason that the marriage keeps going.

The central role of accepting and accommodating to each other during conflict is further exemplified by examples of manipulative amae[4], which Behrens (2004) defines as one partner’s “expectation that things will get

done without their involvement and that their counterpart will understand what they want and comply with even unstated requests at times". During an episode of manipulative amae, one partner — the amae doer — may act helplessly or selfishly with the motivation to get their way and with the understanding that the other partner will indulge this behavior. The Japanese focus groups confirm Behrens (2004) findings that the amae doer is oftentimes the man; participants argue that this gendered pattern may be related to women's status in society, which is perceived as lower than that of men. This often results in women enduring and sometimes feeling forced to go along with what the man wants. However, participants also agree that this gender dynamic is gradually changing, in keeping with women's advancements in society.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: In my mother's generation, it was the men who provided, and the women were housewives. That pattern was the most common, and I don't think men and women were not on equal footing. We still have that way of thinking. It is changing, but many women still feel like they have to resign, or have to treat their husband with due respect.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 3: participants: Somebody just said that 'for Japanese, because the woman endures, the marriage keeps going'. I think I agree on that too, but... When I look at the younger generation, with the women participating in the labor force… It might be because of women's social progress too, but… I feel like more women live their lives without enduring.

The amae dynamic thus highlights the central role of partner acceptance and subsequent adjustment during a disagreement, albeit willingly or reluctantly, and emphasizes partners' interdependence and mutuality.

To conclude, Japanese participants indicate they do not address disagreement immediately, but instead gauge if the situation calls for discussing the disagreement at all. They convey an ambivalence about open communication; they say that open communication is necessary at times, yet they find it difficult to endorse open communication and do not consider it the ultimate way of solving a disagreement. Instead, Japanese participants appear to preferably engage in behaviors that preserve relational harmony, such as evasive behaviors, mindreading and emotional moderation (i.e., suppression, controlling emotions and remaining calm). Finally, they focus on adjusting to the needs of their partner, through one-way accommodation and adopting endurance/patience, for example.

2.4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore conceptions of couple disagreement in two different cultural contexts: Belgium and Japan. We conducted four focus groups in each culture and used thematic analyses to uncover themes in the data. We found that Belgian and Japanese participants — who were in a romantic relationship for at least two years and living together — had different conceptions of couple disagreement. Belgian participants viewed disagreements as both a given and a necessity in the relationship. They believed disagreements contribute to a couple's understanding of their differences and help them figure out how to deal with these differences. Belgian participants valued couples'

confrontation and open discussion, as these reveal the partners' needs and desires. Belgian participants were of the opinion that it would be unhealthy for the relationship if couples avoid disagreement or refrain from speaking out: problems need to be solved. Finally, the Belgian participants thought that couples should never lose sight of their own needs and desires, even if they occasionally yield towards their partner's desires, and even as it is important that they engage with each other (i.e., listen, show understanding, compromise).

In contrast, participants of the Japanese focus groups did not readily accept disagreement, and felt that couples should avoid open conflict. They reported much more reluctance to address a disagreement head on, and emphasized that disagreement may resolve over time. Japanese participants indicated that if disagreement persists, they tend to engage in indirect forms of communication, such as mindreading, giving up, and moderating their emotions (i.e., hiding feelings). Japanese participants described that these conflict strategies help partners adjust to the needs of their counterpart. Being able to overcome personal needs and desires, and considering as well as accommodating to those of the partner, is important for a good relationship, according to Japanese participants. Taken together, we found that the meaning of couple disagreement, as well as the preferences for dealing with disagreement, differed considerably across the Belgian and Japanese focus groups.

The differences in Belgian and Japanese participants' conceptions of couple disagreement can be understood from different relationship models in the respective cultures. In Western cultural contexts like Belgium, a close and healthy relationship is one in which partners are independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); that is, a

relationship that allows the partners each to fulfill their personal goals, desires and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Disagreements help partners articulate and negotiate personal goals, desires and needs, and are, therefore, considered instrumental. Verbal communication and self-disclosure are thought to not only help the partners articulate their perspective, but also foster psychological closeness, which naturally is a relationship goal for Belgian couples as well (Rothbaum et al., 2000). The Belgian participants in the focus groups also valued engaging behaviors (i.e., showing understanding) and compromise to achieve proximity in the couple.

Different from the Belgian relationship goals, in Japanese contexts the emphasis in couple relationships is on interdependence and relatedness (Markus & Kitayama, 1999; 2010). This means that partners continually aim to adjust the self in ways that fit the expectations and needs of the partner, allowing for harmonious, smooth, and stable interactions (Morling et al., 2002; Rothbaum, 2000). The approach to conflict, as verbalized by the Japanese focus group participants, fits with this general relational goal: couples gauge if a disagreement really needs to be addressed, are aware of non-negotiables, engage in mindreading, accept and endure hardship where possible, and indulge the partner's behavior. In doing so, disagreements can in fact be avoided. Moreover, and in contrast to Belgian participants, Japanese participants are ambivalent about the usefulness of verbal communication and self-disclosure. On the one hand, they consider these behaviors as signs that the relationship is not close. Only if the partners are not able to mindread successfully — that is, if they cannot sense the atmosphere and infer each other's feelings — do they need to be explicit about their feeling and thoughts, and do they mark open

communication as instrumental for dealing with a disagreement. On the other hand, some participants do value verbalizing their opinion because this allows for compromise. Nonetheless, what becomes clear from the focus groups is that Japanese participants do not univocally value verbal communication and self-disclosure like Belgian participants do (i.e., Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kito, 2005). In sum, the different conceptions of couple disagreement that Belgian and Japanese participants have can be understood from the prevailing relationship models in each culture — individuation and independence in Belgium, and relatedness and interdependence in Japan.

In addition to differences between Belgian and Japanese participants' conceptions of couple disagreement, there were also similarities. For example, both Belgian and Japanese participants found it important to engage with the partner, to stay calm and to occasionally move away from unproductive behaviors or emotional states (e.g., stop being stubborn, stop being angry). Also, open communication did have a place in dealing with disagreements for both the Belgian and the Japanese focus group participants. Yet, the similarities were limited if considered in the larger context of behaviors and conflict strategies: similar codes were often categorized under different meaningful themes. For example, Japanese participants invariably discussed open communication together with indirect forms of communication, such as mindreading. Even when open communication was mentioned in the Japanese transcripts, there was ambivalence about whether it truly represented the go-to strategy for dealing with disagreements; indirect communication was luring in the background as the more desirable alternative. In contrast, open communication was the hallmark of good relationships for the Belgian participants who favored it over any other

behaviors. Remaining silent or pretending the problem did not exist were considered particularly bad alternatives by the Belgian participants.

Furthermore, calmness was discussed (and valued) in both Japanese and Belgian focus groups. But whereas Japanese participants talked about being calm as a way of emotional moderation, Belgian participants referring to calmness meant to refrain from behaviors that were too coercive to the partner. As a final example, when Belgian focus group participants mentioned “engaging with the partner”, they referred to being polite and respectful, but they also emphasized that engaging with the partner did not mean that you gave in on your own opinions. Engaging was respectful, but firm. In contrast, for Japanese focus group participants, engaging with the partner meant to accept differences and adjust to the partner. Thus, although some of the ways of handling disagreement discussed in the Belgian and Japanese focus groups could be coded similarly, these strategies tended to have different meanings, and served different relational purposes.

New Insights into Culture, Couple Conflict and Romantic Relationships

The present study contributes to the research field of culture and romantic relationships in several ways. Our findings show that much relationship research has started from beliefs and assumptions on couple disagreement that are largely shared by people in Western contexts (i.e., Belgium), but not necessarily beyond these contexts. The two central scientific assumptions on couple disagreement — that disagreement is inevitable and that it requires verbal problem solving

(Beach, 2016; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006) — were shared by participants in our Belgian, but not by participants in our Japanese focus groups. Japanese participants indicated that disagreement is avoidable and does not necessarily require open communication. In fact, in many circumstances, participants in Japanese focus groups felt that open and direct communication was refrained from. Our findings thus suggest that scientific insights on couple conflict so far have been attuned to a local (Western) reality only.

Our findings also have implications for couple therapy; interventions that are commonly adopted in Western cultural contexts, may not be effective for couples with a different cultural background. For example, interventions often target emotion expression (Johnson & Greenberg, 1987; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016) and communication skills (Baucom et al., 1998; Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006; Witthon et al., 2018), by encouraging partners to express directly what they feel and desire. However, given that Japanese partners consider articulating feelings and desires as immature and selfish, this need not be the most helpful approach for Japanese couples (Shibusawa, 2005). Also, therapists in Western cultural contexts tend to focus on improving problem solving skills, i.e., by getting each partner to talk about what bothers them (Witthon et al., 2010; Baucom et al., 1998; Snyder et al., 2006). This may clash with Japanese partners' point of view that accepting a problem as is, without addressing or attempting to solve it, can be adaptive to the relationship (Shibusawa, 2005). Our findings suggest that couple intervention would benefit from taking the larger (cultural) relationship goals of the couple into account: couples seeking fulfilment of the individual goals and

needs of the partners may just take a different type of intervention than couples seeking relational harmony.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study comes with several limitations. First, we coded the Japanese focus groups using translated English versions of the transcripts. We took several precautions to make sure that we preserved the original Japanese meanings. First, the transcripts of the Japanese focus groups were carefully translated, and the translations checked by a Japanese speaking researcher — a method also used in other cross-cultural focus group research (Hennink, 2007). Second, we had Japanese research assistants check whether the initial coding (which was based on the English transcripts) described the original Japanese transcripts well, which was found to be the case. Although we were careful to avoid mistakes introduced by the English translations, we cannot fully rule out that different codes and themes had emerged, had we based our coding directly on the Japanese transcripts.

Second, we focused on only a small slice of couples' everyday life — couple disagreement. While the findings in each culture could be understood from the cultural relationship ideals, and hence give insight in what these relationship ideals may be, romantic relationships revolve around much more than couple disagreement only. The topic of the focus groups, and the questions we designed, did not allow to fully tap into other areas of romantic relationships, such as trust, assurance, loyalty, love, and romance, for example (Goodwin, 1999; Heine, 2020 (Chapter 11); Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Hence, the findings are not representative of cultural relationship ideals in the broadest sense;

instead, they are specific to ideals that are salient during couple disagreement. To gain a more thorough understanding of *romantic* relationship ideals in each culture, future research should focus on what it means for participants to have a good and healthy relationship more generally, and cover other relationship areas and/or interactions, rather than ask about couple disagreement only.

Conclusion

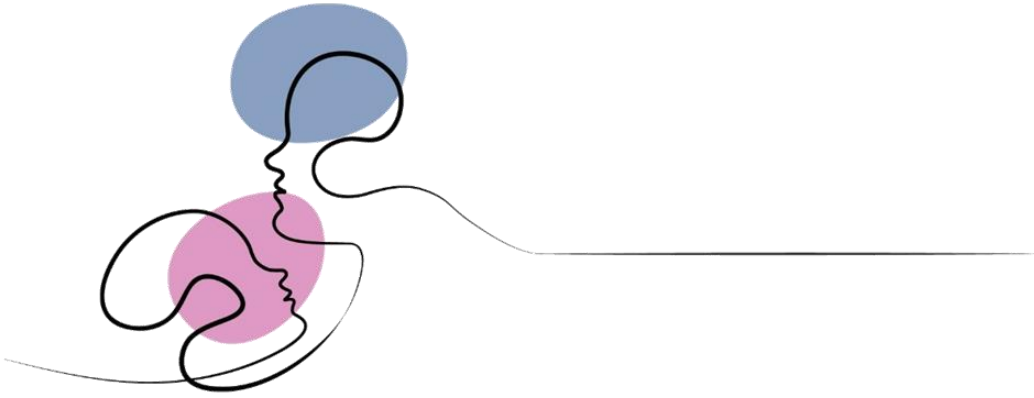
This qualitative study provides evidence that romantic partners from different cultures conceive of couple disagreement differently; in ascribing meaning to couple disagreement, partners appear to draw from the prevalent cultural ideas, meanings, and practices of how to relate to their partner in a romantic relationship. We found that as Belgian participants talked about and negotiated the meaning of couple disagreement during a focus group interview, they constructed a different reality of couple disagreement than Japanese participants who had a conversation about the same topic: Belgian participants believed that disagreement was inevitable, necessary and required verbal problem-solving, while Japanese participants thought of disagreement as avoidable, unnecessary (at times) and requiring non-verbal, indirect communication strategies. Conceptions of couple disagreement are thus not universally shared, which warrants cultural sensitivity when studying cultural differences in how couples deal with disagreement in their relationships.

Notes

1. For diverging views on couple conflict, also see Beach (2016) and Bradbury (2016).
2. The video-clips of the couples in each culture were selected to have high, medium, and low relationship satisfaction as measured by the Couple Satisfaction Index (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). The clips were shown alternately between cultures, and in descending order of relationship satisfaction (i.e., highly satisfied Belgian couple 1, highly satisfied Japanese couple 1, medium satisfied Belgian couple 2 etc.).
3. 'Adding water to wine (i.e., red wine) is a Dutch saying which means to compromise. Figuratively speaking, when one adds water to the wine, the wine becomes less red (i.e., diluted) which means one has compromised.
4. When talking about how to deal with disagreements, it perhaps makes sense that the amae episodes described by participants are of the manipulative rather than the affective kind – after all, a disagreement generally means that partners' goals are misaligned, and a certain degree of selfishness and manipulation may hence be fitting in this context. However, key to manipulative amae – as is true for other types of amae – remains to be the assumption or expectation that the partner will indulge selfish behavior. In other words, the amae doer conveys a desire to be accepted and understood, and he/she relies on the counterpart to pick up on this desire and provide gratification.

3

Cultural Differences in Emotion Suppression in Belgian and Japanese Couples: A Social Functional Model



This chapter is based on:
Schouten, A., Boiger, M., Kirchner-Häusler, A., Uchida, Y., Mesquita, B. (2020) Cultural Differences in Emotion Suppression in Belgian and Japanese Couples: A Social Functional Model. Front. Psychol. 11:1048.

3.1. Introduction

“Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.” (Freud, 1856 – 1939)

秘すれば花 (世阿弥・風姿花伝) “If hidden, it's elegant”. By Zeami, Fūshikaden

顔で笑って心で泣く(背中で泣く) “Smiling face, crying heart”. (Common Japanese Proverb)

Insights from Western folk theory and psychology alike are that emotion suppression is unhealthy. This idea, introduced by Sigmund Freud (illustrated by quote above), has penetrated popular thinking, and does so even today: A simple Google search with the key term “suppression of emotions” for Belgium alone, generates 9.180.000 results. The majority of these entries express the idea that emotion suppression is unhealthy: “Suppressing negative emotions is unhealthy” and “10 dangerous things suppressing emotions can lead to” are examples. The extant psychological research on emotion regulation is consistent with this idea that emotion suppression is “unhealthy”, at least in research conducted within Western cultural contexts. Emotion suppression in these cultural contexts is found to be associated with both poor psychological outcomes and low relational well-being (Butler et al., 2003; Gross & John, 2003; Haga, Kraft, & Corby, 2009).

Emotion suppression has a better press in some other cultures, as is illustrated by the two Japanese quotes. Consistently, in many East-Asian, interdependent cultural contexts emotion suppression is more common and less detrimental to psychological well-being and

relationships than in Western cultural contexts (Matsumoto, Yoo, Fontaine, et al., 2008a; Matsumoto, Yoo, Nakagawa, et al., 2008b; Mauss & Butler, 2010; Cheung & Park, 2010; Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, & Minnick, 2011; Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007). These cultural differences in emotion suppression are meaningful (Mesquita, De Leersnyder, & Dustin, 2014; Mesquita & Delvaux, 2012): individuals suppress their emotions when expressing them would be negative, or at times, when suppressing is beneficial (cf. Le & Impett, 2013).

Expanding previous findings (e.g., Matsumoto et al., 2008a; Soto et al., 2011), we suggest that cultural differences do not merely exist with regard to the general levels of emotion suppression, but also with respect to the specific types of emotions being suppressed. We postulate that emotions that advance the cultural relationship ideals may be expressed, even in cultures that promote emotion suppression generally (Mesquita, De Leersnyder, & Dustin, 2014). For instance, emotions that help to strengthen the bond (e.g., guilt; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994) may be expressed; this would be the case even in interdependent cultural contexts where high levels of emotional suppression generally benefit the cultural ideal of harmony in relationships. Cultural differences in suppression are, therefore, expected to vary by emotion.

In the current study, we expect cultural differences in (a) the overall level of emotion suppression, and (b) the level of suppression for particular types of emotion; we also examine (c) the association between emotion suppression and interaction outcomes. Our predictions have been tested in the context of a cross-cultural dyadic study in the lab; we compare emotion suppression in Belgian (i.e.,

Western) and Japanese (i.e., East Asian) couples who engaged in a disagreement interaction.

Suppression and The Cultural Meaning of Emotion

The central assumption guiding this research is that the extent to which romantic partners suppress their emotions in the context of disagreement depends on the cultural model of self and relationship. We compared the level of emotion suppression during couple disagreement between a Western European (i.e., Belgian) and an East Asian (i.e., Japanese) cultural context. In Western (European) cultural contexts, where independence is foregrounded, a central relational task is to discover and affirm internal attributes such as preferences, desires, or needs (Kitayama et al., 2009). In good relationships, each partner asserts and acts according to these internal attributes. Emotional expression (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002) and self-disclosure (Chen, 1995; Kito, 2005) may be common aspects of the relationship that allow partners to achieve a relationship that meets their personal preferences, desires, and needs. For instance, expressing annoyance towards your partner communicates that your personal needs have not been met. In Western cultural contexts, emotion suppression may thus be detrimental for the relationship because it hinders the assertion of independent goals.

In contrast, in East-Asian cultural contexts, in which interdependence is foregrounded, a central task for the individual is to anticipate and accommodate to the needs of others in relationships (Morling et al., 2002). In good relationships, partners act to meet others'

expectations, and to fulfill their normative role in the relationship; personal preferences, desires or needs ought to be set aside. Consequently, emotions that focus on individual preferences, desires, and needs should be concealed or hidden in order to protect the relationship. For instance, individuals are expected to suppress their annoyance over their partner's behavior, because expressing it may draw attention to your personal needs and away from your partner's needs, or the normative roles in the relationship. Self-expression (Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006) and open communication of feelings (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002) are not as valued in East Asian as they are in Western cultural contexts. Emotion suppression for the sake of relational harmony appears functional in interdependent relational contexts.

In support of cultural differences in the levels of emotion suppression during couple disagreement is research showing that emotion suppression is generally used more frequently by members from independent (e.g., Western) than interdependent (e.g., East-Asian) cultures (Gross & John, 2003; Gross, Richards, & John, 2006; Kim & Sasaki, 2012; Moran, Diefendorff, & Greguras, 2013; Safdar et al., 2009). For instance, in a study with participants from 32 countries, country-level individualism (by some authors used interchangeably with independence) predicted suppression on a bidimensional scale ranging from expression to suppression. High levels of individualism (as established for Western cultures) predicted more expression (and less suppression) than low levels of individualism (Matsumoto, Yoo, Fontaine, et al., 2008a). In another study, Matsumoto, Yoo, Nakagawa, et al., (2008b) measured suppression in 23 countries with the

suppression sub-scale of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), which is unidimensional. Despite the use of a different measure of suppression than the previous study, this study yielded an association between country-level individualism and suppression as well. Again, low levels of individualism predicted higher levels of suppression. In sum, the extant research suggests that emotion suppression is more common in East-Asian than Western cultural contexts. In this study, we sought to replicate this finding for Japanese and Belgian couples during conflict interactions.

Suppression and the Cultural Meaning of Disengaging and Engaging Emotions

The current study goes beyond prior research, to propose that cultural differences in emotion suppression also depend on the type of emotion. We distinguish between two types of emotions that form the extremes of the dimension of social engagement: Socially disengaging and socially engaging emotions (Kitayama et al., 2000). Social engagement defines the emotion domain across different cultures. On the disengaging end, emotions such as anger (negative) and pride (positive) underline the self as separated from others, whereas on the engaging end, emotions such as guilt (negative) and friendly feelings (positive) help to connect the self with others in the relationship.

Unwittingly, cross-cultural studies on emotion suppression have largely focused on the suppression of disengaging emotions, at the expense of engaging emotions. For example, the study by Matsumoto and colleagues (2008) included negative disengaging emotions like anger, contempt and disgust, in addition to some positive emotions and

sadness; no negative engaging emotions (e.g., shame, worry, guilt) were included. The study revealed that participants high on individualism expressed their emotions more (and suppressed them less) than participants low on individualism. One exception was sadness: participants high on individualism suppressed sadness more than participants low on individualism, which is neither engaging nor disengaging. One question is, therefore, whether negative engaging emotions would be equally suppressed in cultures low on individualism? It is conceivable that emotion suppression is marshalled to mitigate negative disengaging but not negative engaging emotions, as only the former are considered harmful to interdependent relationships. Especially in the context of a disagreement interaction, we expect negative disengaging emotions to be acceptable in Belgium where they help partners to assert and protect their individual goals. In contrast, in Japan, where preferences, desires and needs should be put aside during disagreement, negative disengaging emotions work crossways.

In the current study, we broaden the research on cultural differences in emotion suppression to include negative engaging, in addition to negative disengaging emotions. We predict that, especially during a disagreement interaction, cultural differences in emotion suppression are larger for negative disengaging than engaging emotions. We predict that partners in Japan use more emotion suppression generally, but do not suppress their negative engaging emotions more than their Belgian counterparts. Conversely, cultural differences in emotion suppression should be larger for disengaging emotions, as these emotions have a contrasting function for the relationship across cultures.

Cultural Differences in the Consequences of Emotion Suppression

Consistent with the idea that emotion suppression is detrimental in Western cultural contexts, research within these cultures has found an association between emotion suppression and poor wellbeing — depression, low self-esteem, low life satisfaction (Gross & John, 2003; Haga et al., 2009), and the experience of fewer positive and more negative emotions — as well as negative relationship outcomes (Butler et al., 2003; Gross & John, 2003). In one study, dyads of European American female undergraduates who discussed their thoughts and feelings after having watched an emotion-eliciting movie, reported less "rapport" and lower relationship satisfaction when one partner was instructed to suppress her thoughts and feelings. Rapport and relationship satisfaction were reported by the partner who had not received the suppression instruction (Butler et al., 2007). This suggests that emotion suppression has both negative relational and psychological consequences in Western cultural contexts.

Emotion suppression may be less costly in East-Asian cultural contexts. One cross-cultural study with Asian and European American participants found that the relationship between anger suppression and depression varied by cultural self-construal. Whereas anger suppression was associated with depression in participants with independent self-construals, the association was much lower in participants with interdependent self-construals (Cheung & Park, 2010). Generalizing this finding to the cultural context might suggest that the consequences of anger suppression are less detrimental in cultures with an interdependent (as opposed to independent) model of self.

Consistently, in a cross-cultural questionnaire study, European American participants who reported suppressing their emotions tended to be more depressed and less satisfied with life than those who did not; in contrast, no differences in depression and life satisfaction were found between East-Asian participants who did and did not report suppressing their emotions (Soto, Perez, Kim, Lee, & Minnick, 2011). One reason for cultural differences in the consequences of suppression may be its differential effect on the experience of the emotion. Suppression reduces the experience of unwanted emotions (i.e. anger) in East-Asian, but not in Western cultural contexts (Allen, Diefendorff, & Ma, 2014; Mauss & Butler, 2010). More specific to close relationships, the negative relational consequences of emotion suppression also appear to vary across cultural contexts. In a dyadic suppression study similar to the one described above, suppression was less detrimental to the relationship in Asian American than in European American dyads (Butler et al., 2007). The partners of European American suppressors perceived the suppressor as more hostile and withdrawn, and responded to the suppressor with more hostile behavior than the partners of Asian American suppressors.

Results are mixed, though. In the dyadic study, suppression had some unfavorable effects, even in Asian American dyads: Asian and European American partners alike indicated that they were unwilling to pursue a friendship with the suppressor, and displayed fewer affiliative behaviors towards them. Furthermore, in a cross-cultural survey study using the ERQ, emotion suppression was associated with lower relationship satisfaction in American as well as Chinese individuals (English & John, 2013); the suppression items of the ERQ do not specify emotions. Against the background of the mixed findings on cultural

differences in the relational consequences of emotion suppression, we will study these consequences in the context of couple disagreement.

Present Research

The present study focuses on emotion suppression during couple disagreements. It compares couples from two different cultural contexts — Belgium and Japan — that are on opposite ends of different scales of independence vs. interdependence. For example, Schwartz (2006) found that Belgian samples were high on autonomy (e.g., being independent), whereas Japanese samples were high on embeddedness (e.g., interdependence in relationships). Furthermore, Belgian samples were high on egalitarianism, another facet of independence, whereas Japanese samples were high on hierarchy (e.g., pertaining to ascribed roles), considered a facet of interdependence. The research focuses on cultural differences in suppression, contrasting Belgian and Japanese partners. Building on as well as expanding previous research on cultural differences in emotion suppression, we tested the following three hypotheses:

1. Japanese partners endorse more emotion suppression than Belgian partners during disagreement.
2. Compared to Belgian partners, Japanese partners of couples report more emotion suppression when negative disengaging emotions take precedence over negative disengaging emotions; no such differences in emotion suppression are expected when negative engaging emotions take precedence over negative disengaging emotions.

3. Emotion suppression is negatively associated with interaction outcomes in Belgian partners, but not in Japanese partners.

We tested these hypotheses using data from a lab study on couple conflict.[1] We focused on couple conflict as the context to study emotion suppression, because within conflicts, emotions and emotion suppression are on display. Moreover, this context allowed us to build on a large literature describing emotions during relationship-conflict (e.g. Levenson, Haase, Bloch, Holley, & Seider, 2014), and to measure emotion suppression in response to actual emotions triggered in a standardized interaction. We focused on negative disengaging and engaging emotions; the types of emotions central to our hypotheses.

3.2. Methods

Participants

58 Belgian participants from in and around the city of Leuven and 80 Japanese participants from Kyoto/Osaka area were recruited for the study in turn for a monetary price. The present study is part of a larger study on emotions during couple conflict. For the larger study, sample sizes were collected that far exceeded those of previous studies also using an interaction paradigm (Hiew, Kim Halford, Van De Vijver, & Liu, 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Tsai et al., 2006). All participants that enrolled in the larger study, were included in the analyses for this study. Participants were (a) between 30 to 50 years old and (b) native Dutch/Japanese speakers. Partners were selected to have been in a

heterosexual relationship for at least 2 years, and cohabiting. Due to technical difficulties, one Belgian couple and four Japanese participants had to be excluded, thereby leaving the data of 57 Belgian and 76 Japanese participants for analyses.

In the final sample, Belgian participants were significantly younger than Japanese participants (M_{BE} = 41.12, SD_{BE} = 5.15; M_{JP} = 42.86, SD_{JP} = 4.30, t(217.63) = 2.92, p < .01). No cultural differences were found in terms of relationship duration: On average, both Japanese and Belgian participants had been in a romantic relationship for approximately 15 years (M_{BE} = 15.54, SD_{BE} = 8.25; M_{JP} = 15.03, SD_{JP} = 7.13; t(222.76) = -0.54, p = .59). The majority of participants in both countries were married but, reflective of the difference in cultural practice, a higher proportion of Japanese (97.4%) than Belgian participants (73.7%) were married, $\chi^2(1) = 32.78$, $p < .001$.

Procedure

We focus the discussion of the Methods on the relevant parts for this research (the full package of material for the larger study can be consulted in Appendix A.2). In the main part of the study, couples participated in a dyadic interaction task that was originally developed by Levenson & Gottman (1983) for research on marital processes. For the current study, the procedure of the dyadic interaction task was slightly adjusted to ensure applicability in Japanese and Belgian contexts. In the original procedure developed by Levenson & Gottman (1983), a research assistant (RA) picked the conflict topic that elicited the largest emotional response during an exploratory conversation, in which the couple was asked to briefly touch on the various conflict areas that they

had independently indicated as important in a prelab questionnaire. We tried this procedure in a pilot, but it soon became clear that Japanese participants experienced it a breach of confidence that the RA brought up areas of conflict that they had confidentially, and unbeknownst to the other, listed in a questionnaire. We changed the procedure to accommodate these concerns, and instead compiled a list with all conflict areas that at least one of the partners had rated as higher than zero on the scale. No mention was made of the origin of these topics, and the couple was simply asked to choose which area of disagreement they were going to discuss during the lab session. This procedure ensured that confidential information was not revealed to the partner and that the couple's choice to discuss a topic (or not) was respected. The entire conflict interaction study consisted of three steps: the pre-laboratory phase, the dyadic interaction task at the lab, and the video-mediated recall, also at the lab.

Pre-laboratory Phase

Each partner completed an online questionnaire package at home at least three days prior to the lab visit. The package included measures of relationship satisfaction and areas of couple conflict. Partners were asked to fill out the questionnaire independently.

Dyadic Interaction Task

Participants engaged in three interactions in the lab that were each video-recorded: (a) a neutral interaction (5 minutes) during which they talked about a random and current event in their lives; (b) a conflict interaction (10 minutes); and a positive interaction (10-minutes) with the

purpose of resolving any remaining tension between the partners. The conflict interaction is the focus of the current study. First, couples selected an area of disagreement from the compiled list of disagreement areas. Before the start of the interaction, the RA gave the couple several instructions: Couples were asked 1) to behave naturally, as if they were at home 2) to recall the last time they had had a disagreement about the selected topic and 3) to start their conversation by each stating their point of view. In addition, couples were encouraged to try and solve the problem. A chime signaled both the beginning and end of the conversation.

Video Mediated Recall

After the dyadic interaction tasks, partners were led into separate rooms to participate in a video mediated recall (VMR). The VMR allowed for a measure of emotion suppression in response to momentary and real emotions during ongoing social interactions. Each partner viewed the recording of their conflict interaction two times, the first of which will be reported here. During the first viewing, the video recording was stopped every 30 seconds, and participants indicated to what extent they had (a) experienced each of 12 discrete emotions and (b) suppressed their emotions. Before the start of the actual VMR, participants completed a short training session to familiarize them with the procedure. The VMR software malfunctioned for one Belgian couple (3020) and four Japanese couples (2011, 2012, 2051, 2053), leaving us with 57 Belgian and 76 Japanese couples for analyses. Immediately after the VMR, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the conflict interaction, which included an item on conflict resolution.

Measures

Negative Disengaging and Engaging Emotions

Immediately after the dyadic interaction task, participants were asked to rate 12 emotions while reviewing their conflict interaction in the VMR. These emotions were selected based on a preliminary study that ensured their cross-cultural relevance. In this study, Japanese and Belgian participants in a relationship rated a recent conflict interaction on 48 emotions (a) taken from previous research on emotional experience during conflict (Bell & Song, 2005; Sanford, 2007; Coan & Gottman, 2007) and between romantic partners (Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007) (b) representing major dimensions of emotional experience (Fontaine, Scherer, & Soriano, 2013; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and (c) representing emotional dimensions that differ significantly in prevalence across cultures (Boiger, De Deyne, et al., 2013b; De Leersnyder, Mesquita, & Kim, 2011; Kitayama et al., 2000; Mesquita, 1993; Scherer, 1997). Using Clusterwise Simultaneous Component Analysis (De Roover, Ceulemans, & Timmerman, 2012), an analytical method that establishes if a component solution (similar to a factor structure) holds across all blocks (i.e. all cultures), we found a common solution across cultures. From this common solution, we selected 12 emotions that scored the highest and/or were the most theoretically relevant: eight negative emotions (resigned, hurt, annoyed, aloof, afraid of hurting my partner, guilty, worried and embarrassed) and four positive emotions (amae/like my partner would indulge any of my requests, empathy for my partner, strong, calm).

To establish whether positive and negative engaging and disengaging emotions loaded on different factors in the current study,

we conducted Principle Component Analysis (PCA) with the raw data derived from the video mediated recall; we used the emotion ratings of each partner per time point[2]. We excluded amae because it formed its own factor. PCA on the pooled data (i.e., taking into account both cultures) yielded three components: negative disengaging emotions, negative engaging emotions and positive emotions. Our hypotheses pertained to the negative emotions only. For the purposes of this study, we assigned all eight negative emotions to one of the two categories of negative emotions: Negative disengaging and negative engaging emotions. Assignment to a category was based on factor loadings; cross-loadings were found for hurt and embarrassed, which were assigned to either category based on conceptual considerations (Table 3.1 shows the two categories: $\alpha_{\text{JP disengaging emotions}} = 0.82$, $\alpha_{\text{JP engaging emotions}} = 0.79$, $\alpha_{\text{BE disengaging emotions}} = 0.61$, $\alpha_{\text{BE engaging emotions}} = 0.73$). We calculated the average emotion rating of negative disengaging and engaging emotions for each partner per time point, and next, we averaged the ratings across time points, yielding one rating for disengaging and one rating for engaging emotions per partner.

Finally, we calculated each individual's tendency to feel negative disengaging vs. engaging emotions. This was done by subtracting the score for negative engaging emotions from the score for negative disengaging emotions for each participant. We refer to the resulting score as *disengaging vs engaging emotions*. High scores on disengaging vs. engaging emotions indicate higher levels of negative disengaging than negative engaging emotions, and low scores indicate higher levels of negative engaging than negative disengaging emotions. The disengaging vs. engaging emotions score was calculated for several reasons. First, people tend to experience engaging and

disengaging emotions simultaneously; the two types of emotions may be positively correlated. Indeed, we found a positive correlation between disengaging and engaging emotions in both Japan (r =0.76) and Belgium (r =0.54). Because multicollinearity hinders unique estimation of regression coefficients — it is impossible to estimate the effect of disengaging emotions on suppression controlling for engaging emotions and vice versa — we used the disengaging vs. engaging emotions score for further analyses. Second, the disengaging vs. engaging emotions score allows for insight into emotion suppression when one or the other emotion prevails, and as such, allows us to examine if cultural differences in emotion suppression are larger when disengaging emotions take precedence over engaging emotions.

Emotion Suppression

Emotion suppression was measured by a single item that asked about the extent to which participants wanted to hide their emotions; the scale ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). Participants rated emotion suppression 20 times, namely every time the video recording stopped (every 30 seconds). The average emotion suppression across different time points constituted a participant's suppression score.

Interaction Outcomes: Conflict Resolution

We considered conflict resolution as a relevant interaction outcome in the context of disagreement. Conflict resolution was measured immediately after the VMR by a single item that probed the extent to which partners had come to "a solution or compromise during the conversation"; the scale ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*).

Table 3.1. Negative disengaging and engaging emotions

	Factor loadings
Negative disengaging emotions	
Resigned	.566
Hurt	.698
Annoyed	.839
Aloof	.662
Negative engaging emotions	
Afraid of hurting my partner	.757
Guilt	.795
Worried	.629
Embarrassed	.404

Control Measures

Conflict Areas

To select a meaningful topic for the conflict interaction, participants completed an adapted version of the Couple's Problem Inventory (CPI; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977) during the pre-laboratory assessment. The total number of conflict areas in the adjusted CPI was 22 (e.g. children, sex, household-related issues); the original items were supplemented with items from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and with items tailored to the Japanese context. Participants indicated the degree of disagreement for each conflict area on a scale from 0 (*no disagreement at all*) to 100 (*high disagreement*). They also had an option of adding any additional area of conflict that was not on

the list. Areas of conflict rated higher than zero by either partner were incorporated in a list from which the couple were to choose a topic for the lab interaction.

Relationship Satisfaction

To assess relationship satisfaction in both cultures, we administered the 16-item Couple Satisfactory Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007) and an additional item on perceived emotional support (Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008) that was suggested by the Japanese team. As in the original CSI, the first item ("*Please indicate how you would judge the degree of happiness in your relationship"*) was rated on a seven-point scale. Also consistent with the original CSI, all other items were rated on six-point scales ranging from 0 to 5 (0 was the lowest and 5 the highest score; scale points were defined in slightly different ways for different items). Sample items were "*I really feel like part of a team with my partner"* and *"I feel miserable about my relationship"* (reverse-coded). The item suggested by the Japanese team was "My relationship is *respectful*". Cronbach's alpha's for our 17-item relationship satisfaction scale were .96 in Belgium and .95 in Japan.

3.3. Results

Statistical Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we used multilevel models (MLM) for dyadic data analyses (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) with SPSS. Couples were situated at level 2 and participants were situated a level 1; partners were

nested in the couple and individual scores were treated as repeated measures. Culture was treated as a level 2 variable for each model and transformed to a dummy variable. To test whether the level of emotion suppression differed across cultures (hypothesis 1), we solely entered culture as a predictor variable of emotion suppression. To test the relationship between disengaging vs. engaging emotions and emotion suppression across cultures (hypothesis 2), disengaging vs. engaging emotions, culture and the interaction between disengaging vs. engaging emotions and culture were entered into the model as predictors of emotion suppression. The variable 'disengaging vs. engaging emotions' was treated as a level 1 independent variable and centered around the culture mean. To test the relationship between emotion suppression and conflict resolution across cultures (hypothesis 3), emotion suppression, culture and the interaction between emotion suppression and culture were entered into the model as predictors of conflict resolution. Emotion suppression was treated as a level 1 independent variable and centered around the culture mean. For each model, we assumed a random intercept; in the model for hypothesis 2 emotion suppression, and in the model for hypothesis 3 conflict resolution could vary between couples. Non-independence between partners was modeled through this random intercept and estimated as a correlation. We did not assume a random slope because there were not enough data points per dyad. The variance between couples was 17% and the variance within couples was 83%.

Hypothesis 1:

Level 1: Emotion Suppression$_{ij}$ = β_{0j}

Hypothesis 2:

Level 1: Emotion Suppression$_{ij}$ = β_{0j} + β_{1j}Disengaging vs. Engaging Emotion$_{ij}$ + ε_{ij}

Hypothesis 3:

Level 1: Conflict Resolution$_{ij}$ = β_{0j} + β_{1j}Emotion Suppression$_{ij}$ + ε_{ij}

Level 2: β_{0j} = γ_{00} + γ_{01}Culture$_j$ + ε_{0j}

Level 2: β_{1j} = γ_{10} + γ_{11}Culture$_j$

Manipulation Checks

To ensure that the conflict interactions resulted in comparable conflict, we conducted several manipulation checks. First, we checked whether the level of disagreement for the selected conflict topic was similar for Japanese and Belgian couples. Although different areas of disagreement were discussed (see Appendix A.3. for an overview) ($\chi 2(17) = 29.50$, $p = 0.010$, Fisher's exact test), the level of disagreement did not differ between the two cultures ($M_{BE} = 31.98$, $SD_{BE} = 20.43$; $M_{JP} = 34.40$, $SD_{JP} = 20.21$, $t(131) = 0.497$, $p = 0.50$); both Japanese and Belgian couples chose to discuss topics on which they moderately disagreed. Next, we checked if the disagreement paradigm tapped into processes that were relevant to the relationship. In both cultures, we found that couples who discussed more intense disagreements, also reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction ($\beta_{BE} = -0.54$, t = -4.80, p < 0.001; $\beta_{JP} = -0.51$, $t = -5.13$, $p < 0.001$).

Do Japanese Suppress Their Emotions More than Belgians? (Hypothesis 1)

Japanese partners suppressed their emotions marginally more than Belgian partners (M_{JP} = 0.79, SD_{JP} = 1.10, *range* = 4.15; M_{BE} = 0.52, SD_{BE} = 0.68, *range* = 5.50; *B* = 0.27, *t*(133) = 1.98, *p* = 0.050). Our first hypothesis — that Japanese partners would suppress more than Belgian partners — was not fully borne out, therefore.

Do Cultural Differences in Suppression Vary by Type of Emotion? (Hypothesis 2)

We hypothesized that Japanese partners would suppress their disengaging emotions, but not their engaging emotions, more than Belgian partners. The results offer support for this hypothesis: culture moderated the relationship between disengaging vs. engaging emotions and emotion suppression (*B* = 0.33, *t*(265.72) = 1.99, *p* = 0.047, 95% CI[-0.005, 0.66])[3], and this relationship was marginally significant for Japanese partners (*B* = 0.20, *t*(257.22) = 1.685, *p* = 0.093, 95% CI[-0.033, 0.42]), but not significant for Belgian partners (*B* = -0.13, *t*(262.56) = -1.15, *p* = 0.25, 95% CI[-0.37, 0.10])[4,5]. Notably, in the model used for hypothesis 2, culture significantly predicted emotion suppression (this was not the case in the model used for hypothesis 1); Japanese partners suppressed more than Belgian partners when controlling for disengaging vs. engaging emotions (*B* = -0.27, *t*(128.10) = -2.80, *p* = 0.047, 95% CI[-0.53, -0.003]).

To determine whether Japanese partners suppressed more than Belgian partners at high levels of disengaging vs. engaging emotions

(i.e., when disengaging emotions take precedence over engaging emotions), but not at low levels of the disengaging vs. engaging emotions (i.e., when engaging emotions take precedence over disengaging emotions), we probed the interaction. More specifically, we conducted a 'pick a point' analysis to establish the effect of culture on emotion suppression for particular values of disengaging vs. engaging emotions. For this analysis, we centered disengaging vs. engaging emotions at two standard deviations below and two standard deviations above the mean (Hayes, 2013). As Figure 3.1 illustrates, Japanese partners suppressed their emotions significantly more than Belgian partners (B = 0.77, t(249.49) = 2.710, p = 0.007, 95% CI[0.20, 1.32]) at high levels of disengaging emotions vs. engaging emotions (+2SD), but not at low levels of disengaging vs. engaging emotions (-2SD) (B = -0.23, t(249.53) = -0.81, p = 0.42, 95% CI[-0.79, 0.33])[6].

To check if gender was interchangeable, we added *gender* as well as the interaction between *gender* and *disengaging vs. engaging emotions* to the model as predictors. We found that gender did not moderate cultural differences; the three-way interaction (culture x disengaging vs. engaging emotion x gender) was not significant. However, for men, but not women, culture significantly moderated the relationship between disengaging vs. engaging emotions and emotion suppression: Japanese men suppressed more than Belgian men when disengaging emotions took precedence over engaging emotions (B = 0.62, t(133.30) = 2.21, p = 0.029, 95% CI[0.064, 1.17]), but no differences in emotion suppression were found between Japanese and Belgian women who experienced more disengaging than engaging emotions. Notably, the results for women were in the same direction as those of men, such that the relationship between disengaging vs.

engaging emotions and emotion suppression was positive and marginally significant in Japanese women (B = 0.20, t(133.75) = 1.73, p = 0.086, 95% CI[-0.029, 0.44]), but positive and *non-significant* in Belgian women. We may thus conclude that the effect of culture on the relationship between disengaging vs. engaging emotions and emotion suppression is primarily carried by men.

Emotional Suppression and Interaction Outcomes (Conflict Resolution) (Hypothesis 3)

We expected that suppression would be associated with low conflict resolution in Belgian partners but not in Japanese partners. Consistent with our hypothesis, the results yielded a significant interaction between culture and suppression (B = -.54, t(260) = 2.458, p = 0.015, 95% CI[0.11, 0.97]), suggesting that high levels of suppression are associated with low conflict resolution in Belgian partners (B = -.53, t(261.59) = -2.968, p = 0.003, 95% CI[-0.88, -0.18]), but not in Japanese partners (B = 0.01, t(218.99) = 0.085, p = 0.933, 95% CI[-0.24, 0.26]) (Figure 3.2)[7,8]

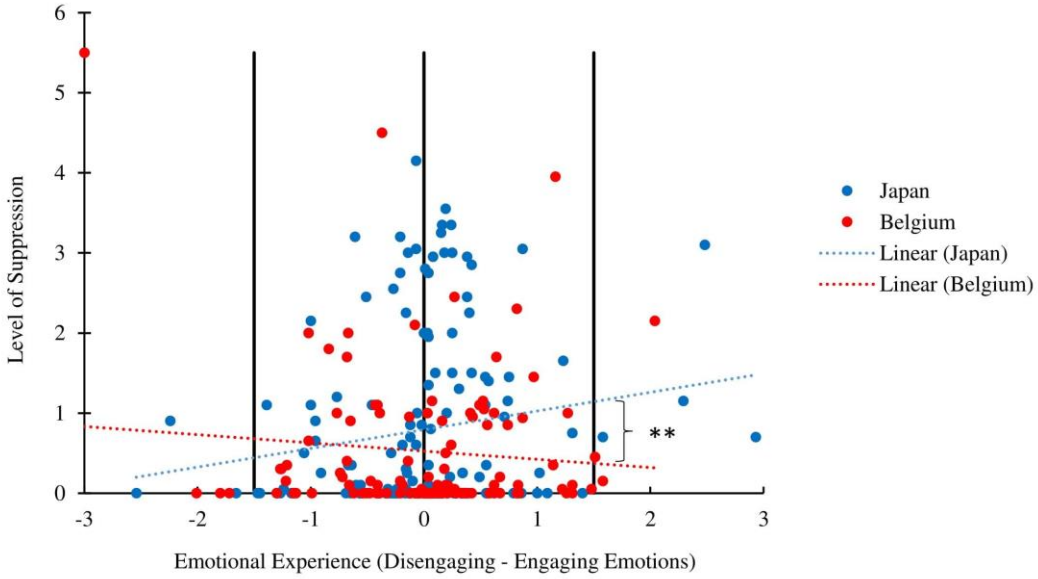


Figure 3.1. Graph depicting the relationship between the reported intensity of the emotional experience (equal to disengaging emotions minus engaging emotions) and the level of emotion suppression for Japanese (blue) and Belgian (red) partners. Reference lines are located at the mean, and at 2 standard deviations above and below the mean. **p < 0.01.

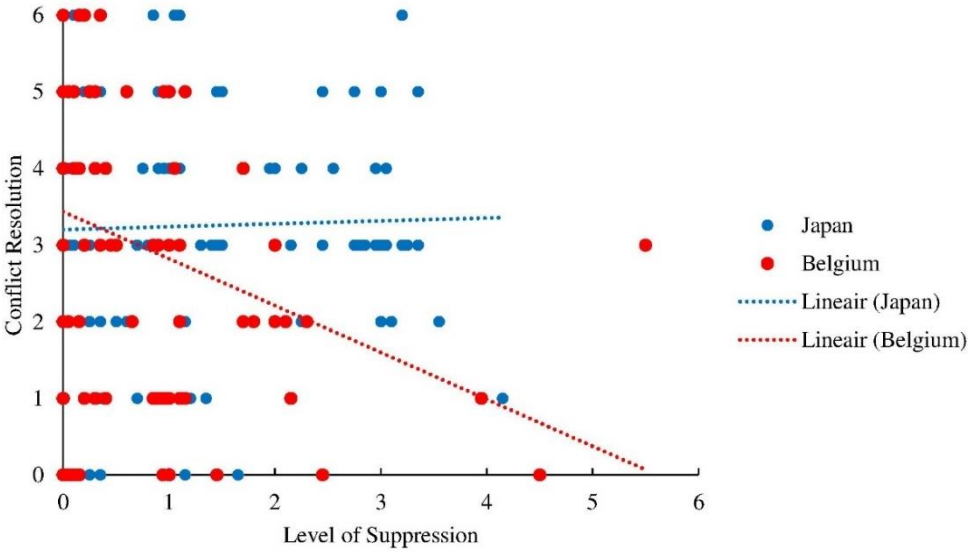


Figure 3.2. Graph depicting the relationship between the reported level of emotion suppression and conflict resolution in Japanese (blue) and Belgian (red) partners.

3.4. Discussion

Central to this study was the idea that cultural differences in emotion suppression depend on the type of emotion that is experienced. More specifically, we expected larger cultural differences in emotion suppression for disengaging than for engaging emotions. In this study, we examined emotion suppression as reported during couple interactions of disagreement. In support of our hypothesis, we found that Japanese and Belgian partners who experienced more disengaging emotions (resigned, annoyed, aloof and hurt) than engaging emotions (guilt, embarrassment, shame and feeling worried) differed with regard

to the level of emotion suppression reported during a conflict interaction — Japanese partners reported more suppression than Belgian partners when disengaging emotions prevailed. However, Japanese and Belgian partners who experienced more engaging than disengaging emotions did not differ in the level of reported emotion suppression. Cultural differences in emotion suppression were in the same direction for men and for women, but the effect was stronger for men. In addition, we found that positive emotions were suppressed to different extents across cultures: Japanese partners suppressed their positive emotions more than Belgian partners did. Cultural differences were thus particularly large for disengaging (rather than engaging) emotions, as well as for positive emotions.

Our findings go beyond the existing research on cultural differences in emotion suppression by considering the type of emotions. Whereas existing studies sought to examine cultural differences in emotion suppression in general (Matsumoto, Yoo, Fontaine, et al., 2008; Moran et al., 2013), we predicted that emotion suppression would differ depending on the functionality of the emotion type. Based on previous cross-cultural work on emotions, we suggested that disengaging emotions may be conducive to the goal of autonomy in Western cultural contexts (i.e. US, Belgium), but may interfere with relational harmony in non-Western cultural contexts (i.e. Japan) (Boiger, De Deyne, & Mesquita, 2013b; Boiger, Mesquita, Uchida, & Barrett, 2013a; Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Mesquita, Boiger, & De Leersnyder, 2017; Mesquita, 2001; De Leersnyder et al., 2017). Cultural differences in emotion suppression may thus be significant for disengaging emotions. In contrast, we predicted that the levels of suppression would vary less across cultures for engaging emotions,

because these emotions are conducive to relational harmony in Japan. Our findings are consistent with the idea that cultural differences in emotion suppression occur when disengaging emotions dominate, but not when engaging emotions do.

In addition, this study aimed to conceptually replicate cultural differences in the prevalence of emotion suppression, as they had been found in previous comparisons between participants from interdependent and independent contexts (Gross & John, 2003; Gross et al., 2006; H. S. Kim & Sasaki, 2012; Matsumoto, Yoo, Fontaine, et al., 2008a; Matsumoto, Yoo, Nakagawa, et al., 2008b). Although cultural differences in the levels of self-reported suppression were in the predicted direction — Japanese participants did report higher levels of suppression than their Belgian counterparts — they did not reach significance. An explanation for the failure to fully replicate previous findings may be precisely that the current study included engaging, in addition to disengaging emotions. In fact, we found cultural differences in emotion suppression when disengaging emotions took precedence over engaging emotions, but *not* when engaging emotions took precedence over disengaging emotions. Previous studies focused on disengaging emotions only. That the failure to replicate significant differences in emotion suppression is due to inclusion of engaging emotions is supported by our results. When we controlled for the effect of emotions, the cultural differences in emotion suppression did turn significant: Japanese partners reported significantly higher levels of emotion suppression than Belgian partners. The inclusion of a wider range of emotions in the current study may thus account for lower differences in the overall levels of emotion suppression between Japanese and Belgian partners.

A final aim of the current study was to conceptually replicate cultural differences in the interactional correlates of emotion suppression. In line with earlier research showing that emotion suppression leads to fewer negative relationship outcomes in East-Asian than in Western cultural contexts (Butler et al. 2007), we found that emotion suppression did not stand in the way of solving conflict in Japanese partners, while in Belgian partners it did. Our finding challenges the prominent and largely 'Western' point of view that emotion suppression is unhealthy. As the quotes in the beginning of this article suggest, emotion suppression may actually be relatively more adaptive in East-Asian cultural contexts.

Limitations

The current study has at least three limitations. First, and due to the low co-occurrence of suppression and disengaging/engaging emotions (co-occurrence only in 35% of the measurement points in the Japanese sample, and 27% in the Belgian sample), our multilevel analyses were based on time-aggregated data per person. Modeling the non-aggregated data yielded no interpretable results. One reason for this may have been that measurements were not continuous, and that partners only reported their emotions every 30 seconds. It is possible that the peaks of either the emotions or suppression itself did not neatly coincide with each other. Future research using continuous measurement may yield a more precise picture. A second limitation of the current study is that emotion suppression was measured with a single item. A multiple-item scale would have increased reliability. A third limitation was that participants reported the extent to which they

had hidden their emotions in general, instead of how much they had suppressed either a specific emotion or the highest intensity emotions of the past 30 seconds. Future research should include more precise measurements of the suppressed emotions, which may also compensate for some of the co-occurrence problems mentioned above. However, the video-mediated recall constrains the number of items (pilot testing revealed that 12 emotions for 20 times was the upper limit) which complicates adding extra items to the specific design. To gain further insight in the process of emotion suppression during interactions, future research should consider including behavioral measures of suppression.

Conclusion

This study suggests that cultural differences in emotion suppression vary by emotion type. We compared emotion suppression of Japanese and Belgian couples during conflict interactions. Cultural differences in emotion suppression were larger when disengaging emotions rather than engaging emotions were foregrounded. It is suggested that the suppression of emotions is generally valued more in Japanese than in Belgian relationships, but that expression of engaging emotions may be conducive to interdependence in Japanese relationships; engaging emotions may therefore not be suppressed as much. The finding from previous research that emotion suppression is more common in East-Asian (Japanese partners) than Western cultural contexts (Belgian partners) did not reach conventional significant levels, possibly because this study — in contrast to previous ones — included engaging emotions, in addition to disengaging emotions. Finally, emotion

suppression was associated with poor interaction outcomes (i.e., conflict resolution) in Belgian, but not in Japanese couples.

Notes

1. Data from the same study were used in other research reports (Boiger, Kirchner, Schouten, Uchida, & Mesquita, 2020; Kirchner, 2021). The current study is the only one to make use of the emotional suppression data.
2. We also conducted PCAs with processed rather than raw data (couple centered and within-culture standardized data, as well as person-centered data) to account for dependency across repeated measures, but these solutions were hard to interpret. Note that PCA at the couple level (using the couple's average emotion ratings) yielded the same solution as the PCA with the raw individual-level data.
3. Degrees of freedom are decimals because of the Satterthwaite Approximation by SPSS.
4. Because positive emotions could not be assigned to either category of disengaging or engaging emotions, we did not focus on positive emotions in the paper. However, positive emotions were suppressed differently across cultures: Japanese participants suppressed their positive emotions significantly more than Belgian participants (significant interaction effect of culture x positive emotions; $B = 0.28$, $t(265.11) = 2.273$, $p = 0.024$, 95% CI[0.038, 0.53]).
5. We examined cultural differences for each type of engaging emotion, and found only embarrassment was suppressed less by Japanese than Belgian partners.
6. We found the same result when probing the interaction at 1SD above and below the mean of disengaging vs. engaging emotions.

7. We also checked if culture moderated the association between emotion suppression and relationship satisfaction, however the interaction was not significant (B = -2.44, t(233.45) = -1.46, p = 0.15 , 95% CI[-5.75, 0.86]).
8. Conflict resolution correlates positively with relationship satisfaction in Belgian partners (r = 0.27) but it does not correlate significantly with relationship satisfaction in Japanese partners.

4

Couple Conflict Observed: Emotional Behaviors in Belgium and Japan



This chapter is based on:
Schouten, A., Boiger, M., Uchida, A., Uchida, Y., Verstaen, A., Paille, C., Mesquita, B. (2022). Couple Conflict Observed: Emotional Behaviors in Belgium and Japan. *Manuscript in preparation*.

4.1. Introduction

As soon as the conversation begins, Kato accuses her husband Tom of being inconsistent with their son Sam. Frowning and raising her voice, Kato calls out: "I tell Sam he cannot watch TV for a week, and the slightest thing happens, you overrule me, and let him watch TV the entire week." As Kato keeps ranting, Tom injects in soft voice: "Only one time, [I] only let him watch TV once." As Tom is still speaking, Kato wags her finger, shouting: "Not true! Not true! He also watched the weekend. You completely undermined me", and adding emphatically: "And he didn't even finish reading his book from school." Tom softly objects: "He did read his book, he really tried his best." Kato, almost without missing a beat, keeps talking in an accusative manner.
[excerpt from Belgian couple]

When asked to choose a conflict topic, Yumi suggests that her husband Kenzo and she talk about their daughter Yoko. Kenzo asks: "What about it, our differences?" They both fall silent for 4 seconds, after which it is Kenzo who resumes: "There is no choice but to leave it up to her what she wants." Yumi gives her view, also calmly: "As a parent I want to help her in any way I can." The exchange continues until, three minutes into the conversation, Yumi says, still in a quiet voice: "And we don't even open up to her anymore…So, I wonder about that — I simply don't understand that." After a short, soft interjection by Kenzo —"What do you mean, being open?—Yumi continues, still calmly: "I mean, you don't like being open with people. With kids, with me…." Kenzo denies this: "No, no, that's not true, I talk with Yoko." If this is the case, Yumi asks Kenzo, why does he not share these conversations with her — Yumi? Kenzo, still sounding calm, tells Yumi the reason is that she would nag him to tell Yoko what to do. Throughout the exchange, the partner not speaking at that moment looks at the speaker attentively and provides 'aizuchis' (the Japanese word for verbal backchanneling such as "hmm").
[excerpt from Japanese couple]

Both the Belgian and the Japanese couple above were invited to the lab and asked to discuss an area of disagreement in their relationship. Both couples chose to talk about their mutual differences in child rearing. While the topic of their disagreements was similar, the course of their interactions was not. The Belgian wife, Kato, arguably launches an angry attack right away, by accusing her husband of unwanted behavior (*being inconsistent with their son*) while raising her voice and frowning. The Belgian husband, Tom, responds by minimizing the problem ("*only once")*; a response that can be interpreted as 'defensive'. The wife, Kato, forcefully invalidates her husband's view while wagging a finger at him; behaviors that may be read as 'domineering'. All of the Belgian couple's behaviors described in this excerpt — 'anger', 'domineering', 'defensiveness' — can be seen as protecting individual partners' rights and positions: Kato defends herself against infractions on her rights as a parent, and Tom defends his actions against his wife's attacks.

The Japanese wife, Yumi, similarly brings up a disagreement on the partners' respective parenting styles ("about our daughter"), but she leaves it up to her husband Kenzo to define the issue further ("about our differences?"). Both are hesitant to start this discussion, as apparent from the 4-second lull in their conversation. Kenzo and Yumi then state their different opinions on child rearing, yet without being confrontational. Throughout the interaction, the focus is on listening and validation; in doing so, they clearly express their appreciation of the partner and the partner's point of view. Each partner steers away from angry demeanor and, for the most part, from accusations and defensiveness. The slightest confrontation only appears after three minutes ("*And we don't even open up to her anymore…So, I wonder about that – I simply don't understand that.")* — the 'we' Yumi uses can

be interpreted as an effort towards preserving the relationship. Yumi also does not criticize her husband directly, but instead she tells him she does “not understand anymore”, thus avoiding confrontation. The closest Kenzo comes to an accusation is when, in defense of his own behavior, he tells Yumi that she tends to be controlling, and would nag him to tell Yoko what to do if he shared with her the conversations with his daughter. The Japanese couple’s behaviors described in this excerpt — primarily avoiding confrontation, listening and validation — are arguably geared towards protecting the stability and harmony of their relationship.

In the current research, we examine partners’ behaviors in conflict interactions among Belgian and Japanese couples. We postulate that the interactions between Kato and Tom, and between Yumi and Kenzo, do not stand alone, but rather are part of broader cultural patterns (Goodwin, 1999). While the precise partner behaviors may differ within cultures — across couples and specific interactions — we hypothesize, and test in this study, that there are systematic cultural differences in the tendencies for certain behaviors. Many of the partner behaviors observed during couple conflict can be interpreted as emotional; that is why, similar to researchers before us (Gottman & Levenson, 1992), we speak of *observed emotions*. We assume that observed behaviors are cross-culturally different in ways that can be understood from the relationship ideals in each culture (Mesquita, 2003; Mesquita, De Leersnyder, & Boiger, 2016; Mesquita & Leu, 2007).

Cultural Relationship Ideals and Roles of Conflict

Cultural ideals for close relationships — couple relationships in particular — vary markedly (Goodwin, 1999; Rodriguez Mosquera, 2015), as is clear from the contrasting cultural ideals for close relationships in North American (white) and Japanese cultural contexts (Rothbaum et al., 2000). In North American contexts, the individual partners of a relationship are seen as unique and distinct entities, separate from each other (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; 2010). Personal growth of individual partners is so essential that the viability of close relationships depends on whether these relationships give room to, or conversely, stunt personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2014; Hadden, Baker, & Knee, 2008). A good relationship is one that affords partners a high degree of autonomy and independence (Heine et al., 1999). Therefore, partners are encouraged to discover and fulfil their own as well as their partner's personal goals and needs; for example, by self-disclosure and self-assertion (Chen, 1995; Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kito, 2005).

In contrast, in Japanese cultural contexts, interdependence is foregrounded in relationships. It is important to achieve and maintain a smooth, stable and harmonious relationship (Rothbaum et al., 2000; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Individuals are viewed as fundamentally connected to, and defined by, the relationships of which they are a part; a couple's relationship thus defines who they are as individuals and dictates their priorities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; 2010). A good relationship is one in which partners try to accommodate to the role expectations others — their partner included — have for them in the couple relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). To meet others' expectations, it is important that

partners remain self-critical as this is a condition to self-improvement (Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama, Matsumoto, Markus, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Self-assertion and disclosure should be avoided (Chen, 1995; Kim et al., 2008; Kito, 2005), as it is through mutual adjustment that partners achieve their ideal relationship.

The culturally different relationship ideals have implications for the ideas that are in force on the role of conflict. In the context of autonomous or independent relationships, such as described for the North American context, disagreements are considered potentially useful, and moreover, inevitable. Conflicts are useful, as they offer partners opportunities to negotiate their personal goals and needs, which will ultimately lead to a stronger bond between the partners (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014; Rothbaum et al., 2000). They are inevitable because partners' personal goals and needs cannot but clash at times. In a healthy relationship, then, partners engage in disagreement, rather than avoid it (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). During a disagreement, partners each try to influence and control each other with the objective of getting their goals and needs met (Morling et al., 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). In the current research, we assume that independent relationship goals are central in Belgian couples as well (Boiger, De Deyne, et al., 2013b; Kitayama et al., 2009).

In the context of interdependent relationships, such as prevalent in Japanese contexts, disagreements threaten relational harmony, and may signal that the partners have failed to sufficiently accommodate one another (Rothbaum et al., 2000). Disagreement should therefore be quickly transcended. Japanese partners avoid disagreement, rather than talk openly about feelings and thoughts having to do with

disagreement. They also focus on integrating and reconciling both partner's needs, which may be best achieved through mutual collaboration (Lee et al., 2013) and being accepting and understanding of what each partner wants (Ohbuchi, 1999; Matsunaga & Imahori, 2009). Japanese place great value on mindreading (Matsunaga & Imahori, 2009), which allows them to anticipate the needs of their partner, and adjust to these as well as relational expectations accordingly (Morling et al., 2002). Like this, harmony in the relationship is reinstalled.

Observed Emotions During Conflict

Given the respective cultural goals for couple conflict, we expect cultural differences in the typical emotions during conflict. This is so, because emotions 'do' something in the relationship: in many instances of anger, for instance, individuals set boundaries, protect their own goals and needs, and generally, refuse to accept the situation or another person's behavior (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Kuppens et al., 2003). Furthermore, research has shown that individuals 'favor' emotions that serve the goals at hand in a situation (Tamir et al., 2016); including goals within a given relationship context (Boiger, Kirchner, Schouten, Uchida, & Mesquita, 2020; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Thus, when the goal is confrontation, anger is more likely to occur than when the goal is to avoid confrontation. In the current research, we predict, and test, the idea that the most prevalent emotions in couple conflict are those that promote the respective cultural relationship goals: getting each partner's needs met in Belgian couples, and achieving relational harmony in Japanese couples.

Although cultural differences in the prevalent emotions are widely documented (Boiger, Mesquita, Uchida, & Barrett, 2013; Boiger, Mesquita, Tsai, & Markus, 2012; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006), and have been linked to differences in the prioritized goals (De Leersnyder, Koval, Kuppens, & Mesquita, 2018), fewer studies have documented cultural differences in emotions during couple conflict. However, there is some first evidence that the most prevalent emotions during couple conflict are those that maximally promote the cultural relationship goals. In previous research (Boiger et al., 2020), we invited Belgian and Japanese couples to the lab. The couples engaged in a disagreement discussion that was recorded. Subsequently, we used video-mediated recall to study the emotions experienced by each partner. The most frequently reported emotional states in conflict interactions were mutual anger (measured with the item "annoyance") in Belgian couples, and mutual "empathy" in Japanese couples. Whereas anger can be seen to promote independent relational goals – – it defends personal needs and autonomy (Kitayama et al., 2000, 2006) — empathy fits the interdependent relationship goal of taking each other's perspective and maintaining a harmonious relationship (De Leersnyder, Koval, Kuppens, & Mesquita, 2018; Kitayama et al., 2006). In the current study, we use the same recorded interactions, yet focus on observed emotions. Partners' observable behavior is arguably constitutive of the course of the interaction, and therefore closer to relationship dynamics than self-reported experience. We predict that observed emotions that are consistent with the cultural relationship goals are more prevalent in each culture.

There are only few cross-cultural studies with couples, and even fewer using observational measures. Those cross-cultural studies that

do observe emotions in couples come with limitations that restrict us from formulating clear predictions about cultural differences in couples' typical emotional behaviors. For example, Tsai, Levenson, & Mccoy, (2006) observed discrete emotional behaviors in couples who discussed a disagreement in the lab, but ultimately focused on aggregated behaviors at the level of valence. They found that Chinese American couples behaved *less* positively, but *more* negatively than European American couples. The cultural difference in positive expressivity (but not in negative expressivity) could be explained by couples' endorsement of collectivism (used interchangeably with interdependence): the more couples endorsed collectivism, the less they expressed positive emotions — Chinese American couples reportedly endorsed collectivistic values more than European American couples. Although Tsai and colleagues' data supports the idea that couples' interactions may be marked by those emotional behaviors (i.e., positive behaviors) that promote central relational values (i.e., collectivism), these data do not give insight in cultural differences at the specific functional level of emotional behaviors.

In another observational study, Lee and colleagues (2013) investigated the extent to which couples from various East-Asian cultural contexts (Hong-Kong, China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan, 10 couples from each culture) engaged in a variety of behaviors (i.e., negativity, demand/withdraw, mutual hostility, withdrawal and collaboration). Of particular interest to the present study are the findings on Japanese couples' emotional behaviors; Lee and colleagues found that Japanese couples stood out in that they showed low (or the lowest) levels of negativity, hostility and demand/withdraw behaviors. On the rare occasions that criticism or demands were made, these were

followed by expressions of positivity (i.e., giggling and laughing) or hiding tension — presumably to avoid an open conflict. These observed behaviors (or the lack thereof) in Japanese couples can be seen as reflective of interdependent relationship goals; negative, demanding and hostile behaviors may be low in prevalence as they unwillingly draw attention to personal needs and impede relational harmony. If these behaviors do occur, it might be useful for Japanese partners to move away from them by lightening the atmosphere (i.e., expressing positivity), or avoiding disagreement (i.e., hiding tension). Although the study by Lee and colleagues gives a little more insight in specific types of emotional behaviors than the study by Tsai and colleagues, the negativity score in the former was similarly obtained by aggregating discrete negative behaviors. Moreover, Japanese couples were not compared with couples from a Western cultural context.

Several other observational studies, although not cross-cultural, suggest that specific behaviors such as anger and domineering may be instrumental in Western (i.e., Belgian) couples (Gottman, 1994; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall & McNulty, 2017). For example, Overall and colleagues (2009) observed couples' emotional behaviors (i.e., indirect positive, direct positive, indirect negative and direct negative) as each partner talked about something they wanted to change in their counterpart. They found that direct positive and negative behaviors, such as rational reasoning (presenting arguments, explaining point of view in a convincing way) and *domineering*, were associated with desired change in the partner over time, even though these behaviors were perceived as unsuccessful in the moment. According to the authors, direct emotional behaviors may underline unmet needs and motivate the other partner to change in a way that again fulfils these

needs. Yet, indirect positive and negative behaviors, such as *validating* the partner's point of view, minimizing the problem and expressing sadness, did not predict desired change over time. By categorizing discrete behaviors as direct and indirect — in addition to valence — the findings by Overall and colleagues give slightly more insight in emotional functionality than other monocultural observational studies that solely examined aggregated positive and negative scores (Johnson et al., 2005; Leuchtmann et al., 2019). However, insights in the functionality of more discrete behaviors beyond direct and indirect behaviors, such as domineering and validation, are lost.

Despite their limitations, we may infer from the observational studies above that Belgian couples are possibly inclined to engage in angry and dominant behaviors that are central to independent relationship goals, while Japanese couples may refrain from engaging in such behaviors, as they stand in the way of interdependent concerns. Instead, Japanese couples may engage in empathic and collaborative behaviors that promote mutual adjustment and relational harmony. One such empathic or collaborative behavior may be validation, which was prevalent in Kenzo's and Yumi's interaction. The *aizuchi's* or backchannels that constitute validation, may coordinate partners' interaction and underline their connection, even if partners have divergent point of views (Kita & Ide, 2007). These assertions would be in line with self-report findings showing that members from individualistic (i.e., independent) cultures, such as Belgium, tend to use dominant and forcing conflict styles more, but avoidant and conciliative conflict styles less than members from collectivistic (i.e., interdependent) cultures, such as Japan (Holt & DeVore, 2005; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ohbuchi, 1999; Yang, 1991).

Culturally Typical Emotional Behaviors and Relationship Outcomes

Because emotional behaviors depend on cultural relationship ideals, they may contribute to relationship outcomes in ways that are culturally dependent. For example, in Belgian cultural contexts, engaging in a blend of domineering and angry behaviors may help partners maintain individual autonomy, and because of this, these behaviors may also be beneficial for the relationship. Yet, in Japanese cultural contexts, a blend of validation and low levels of domineering and angry behavior may benefit the relationship, as these behaviors together foster relational harmony. Thus, engaging in a culturally typical blend of emotional behaviors (i.e., fitting in with the cultural average), should come with positive relational consequences, such as an increase in relationship satisfaction, for example. There is some indication that couples are indeed more satisfied with their relationship when they *experience* a pattern of emotions that fits the cultural average, because such culturally typical emotional patterns may be geared towards couples' cultural relationship goals (Boiger et al., 2020). We argue that the same might be the case for specific emotional *behaviors.*

Williamson et al., (2012) found support for the idea that emotional behaviors may contribute to relationship satisfaction in culturally dependent ways. They observed couple interactions in which one partner talked about something they wanted to change about themselves. The authors found that positive emotional behaviors, as displayed by both the husband and the wife, predicted an increase in American husbands' satisfaction with the relationship, but were not associated with Chinese husbands' relationship satisfaction. The

opposite was true for negative emotional behaviors, which were found to predict a decrease in Chinese husbands' satisfaction, but were not associated with relationship satisfaction in American husbands. Positive emotional behaviors may have impacted relationship satisfaction in American husbands because they foster self-confidence and high self-esteem, aspects valued in independent cultural contexts (Heine et al., 1999; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009; Kirchner-Haüsler et al., 2021). In contrast, positive emotions may not play a role for satisfaction in Chinese couples as they distract partners from focusing on their own shortcomings and the partner's needs. Instead, negative emotions point out to partners that they failed to live up to relational expectations, and so may impact relationship satisfaction in Chinese contexts (Heine et al., 1999; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009; Kirchner-Haüsler et al., 2021). Although these findings were not found for American and Chinese wives, the findings for husbands suggest that in each culture, emotional behaviors that align with cultural relationship goals, also contribute to relationship outcomes. However, the findings again convey little about the functionality of emotion types for the relationship.

Present Research

In the present study, we examined whether 1) Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different emotional behaviors during a disagreement, and 2) engaging in culturally typical emotional behaviors is beneficial for the relationship. To this end, we used to the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) by Coan & Gottman (2007), which was originally developed for the observation of emotional behaviors in marital interactions. The SPAFF has been widely used in monocultural

(Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002; Johnson et al., 2005; Leuchtmann et al., 2019) as well as in a few cross-cultural couple studies (Tsai et al., 2006). The SPAFF's development stems from a dissatisfaction with previous coding schemes that solely allowed to code for positive, negative and neutral behavior; Gottman believed that this way of coding was too crude to understand the kinds of relationships couples have (see Gottman, Mccoy, Coan, & Collier, 1995). The SPAFF thus intents to code for specific emotional behavioral categories that are functionally defined, which makes it especially suitable for the purpose of this study (see method section for a more detailed description of the SPAFF).

Our first hypothesis concerns cultural differences in couples' emotional behaviors. We suggest that couples may be particularly prone to engaging in those specific emotional behaviors that are in line with their relationship ideals. Because different relationship ideals are emphasized in Belgium and Japan, we expected that Belgian and Japanese couple interactions may be characterized by different specific emotional behaviors (i.e., SPAFF codes).

> **H1:** Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement interactions are characterized by different emotional behaviors; in each cultural context, couples engage in those emotional behaviors that are in line with the cultural relationship ideals.

We did not formulate concrete hypotheses for each emotional behavior included in the SPAFF, as cross-cultural research on specific emotional behavior in couple interactions is limited. However, we did formulate concrete hypotheses for three SPAFF behaviors based on a few mono-

and cross-cultural studies described earlier (Overall et al., 2009; Boiger et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2013): anger, domineering and validation.

> **H1a:** Belgian couple disagreement interactions will be characterized by more anger behavior than Japanese couple disagreement interactions.
>
> **H1b:** Belgian couple disagreement interactions will be characterized by more domineering behavior than Japanese couple disagreement interactions.
>
> **H1c:** Japanese couple disagreement interactions will be characterized by more validation than Belgian couple disagreement interactions.

Our second hypothesis concerns cultural differences in the link between emotional behaviors and relationship outcomes. We propose that emotionally responding to disagreement in a culturally typical way comes with relational benefits. We operationalized relational benefits as high conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction. We expected that engaging in a culturally typical blend of emotional behaviors (i.e., involving anger and domineering in Belgium, and validation in Japan) would be associated with high conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction in both Belgium and Japan.

> **H2:** In both Belgian and Japanese couples, a culturally typical blend of emotional behaviors is positively associated with conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction.

4.2. Methods

Participants

80 Japanese couples and 58 Belgian couples participated in the study[1]. Belgian couples were recruited through advertisements on social media and flyers spread in and around the city of Leuven, and Japanese couples were recruited in the greater Tokyo/Kansai Area by a recruitment company. Participants met the following criteria: they were native Japanese/Dutch speakers, between 35 and 50 years old, in a heterosexual relationship for at least two years and cohabiting. Each couple received a monetary compensation of 100 euros for completing the study (the Japanese couples received this amount from the recruitment company through an internal point system).

Belgian partners were significantly younger than Japanese partners (M_{BE} = 41.22, SD_{BE} = 5.15; M_{JP} = 42.98, SD_{JP} = 4.34, t(221.20) = 3.00, p < 0.01). The cultural difference in age was primarily driven by an age difference between females: Belgian females were slightly younger than Japanese females (M_{BE} = 39.90, SD_{BE} = 4.97; M_{JP} = 42.29, SD_{JP} = 4.21, t(136) = 3.05, p< .01), while the age of male partners was similar across cultural groups (M_{BE} = 42.53, SD_{B}= 5.03; M_{JP} = 43.68, SD_{JP} = 4.37; t(136) = 1.42, p = .16). The self-assessed socioeconomic status also differed between samples: while Belgian couples were more frequently higher middle class (29.3% in Belgium; 10% in Japan), Japanese couples were more likely middle class (58.6% in Belgium, 64.4% in Japan). The average relationship duration for both samples was approximately 15 years (M_{BE} = 15.55, SD_{BE} = 8.18; M_{JP} = 14.98, SD_{JP} = 7.18; t(274) = -.62, p = .54), and in line with the customs of the

respective cultures, Belgian couples were less likely to be married than Japanese couples (BE: 72.4%; JP: 97.5%, $\chi 2$ (1) = 37.31, p <0.001).

Procedure

This study was part of a larger study on couple conflict (Boiger et al., 2020; Kirchner et al., 2021) in which couples participated in a dyadic interaction task that was originally developed by Levenson & Gottman, (1983) to study marital processes. The task involved three interactions in the lab of which the disagreement interaction was of particular interest to this study. The laboratory phase was preceded by a pre-laboratory phase and followed by video mediated recall (not reported here).

Pre-laboratory Phase

At least three days prior to the laboratory visit, each partner of a couple separately filled out an online questionnaire package at home (see full package in Appendix A.2). The questionnaire package included, among other questionnaires, the Couples Problem Inventory (CPI) and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). The former provided a list of relevant disagreement topics for each couple, and the latter measured each partner's relationship satisfaction.

Laboratory Phase: Disagreement Interaction

After the pre-laboratory phase, couples visited the laboratory to engage in the disagreement interaction. The dyad room in which the interaction took place was equipped with three cameras: one camera recorded an overview of the interaction (both partners were visible from the side), and two other cameras recorded the frontal view of each partner.

Partners were seated face to face; the woman was seated on the right, and the man on the left side of the table that was positioned in the middle of two chairs. Prior to the disagreement interaction, couples discussed a neutral topic for five minutes to acclimatize to the new environment. Next, couples engaged in the disagreement interaction for ten minutes. Couples first chose a disagreement topic from a list of disagreement topics that they had rated as relevant on the CPI in the pre-laboratory phase. Once the disagreement topic was chosen, the research assistant instructed couples to (a) talk about the disagreement as if they were at home, (b) start the conversation by having each partner state their point of view, and (c) try and solve the disagreement. After the disagreement interaction, partners played a cooperative card-matching game to end on a positive note.[2]

Measures

Emotional Behaviors

We used the SPAFF developed by Gottman and Coan (2007) to code for partners' emotional behaviors during the disagreement interaction. The SPAFF is based on the premise that verbal and nonverbal behaviors have a social function and that this social function can be inferred from behavior by means of the cultural informant approach. This approach assumes that individuals who have knowledge about a specific cultural group, are uniquely able to infer whether a given behavior, in combination with other behaviors and in a specific (cultural) context, is affective and conveys a social function. For example, only a (Belgian) cultural informant would be able to infer if Kato's behavior — a combination of accusing, complaining, raising her voice and frowning

— may be categorized as angry behavior and is reflective of the intention or function to “respond to perceived violations of the speaker’s rights to autonomy and respect” (the social function of anger according to the SPAFF). The non(verbal) behaviors that are part of an emotional behavioral category are considered illustrative, not exhaustive. After all, anger can for example be displayed in many different non(verbal) ways depending on the context. Because the SPAFF a) offers a systematic way of perceiving the social function of behavior while taking cultural context into account, and b) does not focus on a fixed list of non(verbal) cues that ought to present to be able to code for a category, we deem it especially suitable for usage across cultural contexts.

The SPAFF includes 16 emotional behaviors, of which five positive (affection, enthusiasm, humor, interest and validation) and 11 negative emotional behaviors (anger, domineering defensiveness, belligerence, threat, criticism, contempt, fear/tension, sadness, disgust and whining) (see Appendix A.4 for an overview of each SPAFF code). Each emotional behavior or code is based on a combination of facial expressions, gestures, postures, verbal content, voice, and speech rate. Belgian couple interactions were coded by three Dutch-speaking coders and Japanese couple interactions were coded by three Japanese coders, using the coding software the Observer XT. Coders were trained for 20-30 hours, during which they watched example videos, did coding exercises and coded collectively. To ensure that coders continued to interpret the SPAFF codes in a similar way, regular coding meetings were organized to discuss fragments that were difficult to code or that coders disagreed about. Emotional behaviors were coded each speech turn (usually a phrase) and second by second. Coders coded behavior as neutral when exchanges were non-affective (i.e., mere informational

exchanges such as ‘what are we eating for dinner tonight’), or when it was unclear if a behavior was affective. For each second a partner was not speaking, a positive, negative or neutral listener behavior — or stonewalling — was coded. For the current analyses, we computed the total duration in seconds of each emotional behavior per partner.

To assess inter-rater reliability (IRR), at least 30% of the couples in each cultural group were coded by several coders: 29 (50%) Belgian couples were coded by all three coders and 32 (40%) Japanese couples were coded by at least two out of three coders (not a fully crossed design; each coder was paired with every other coder). Before computing the IRR in each culture, we excluded those emotional behaviors for which comparisons between cultures were difficult to make because of non-existent or extremely low frequencies (i.e., observed less than 5% of the time in at least 266 or more participants across cultures); behaviors that did not occur at all were threats, whining, disgust and enthusiasm, and behaviors with low frequencies were affection, interest, belligerence, contempt, sadness and stonewalling. Next, we calculated Cohen’s Kappa for duration across the selected emotional behaviors per couple using the Observer XT; the selected behaviors were neutral, anger, domineering, defensiveness, criticism, fear/tension, validation and humor. Because Cohen’s Kappa may be influenced by low frequencies and thus low durations (Bakeman & Quera, 2011; Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990), we also investigated the ratio of the obtained and the maximum attainable Cohen’s Kappa per couple (k/k_{max}). This ratio represents the extent to which the obtained Cohen’s Kappa approaches the maximum attainable Cohen’s Kappa; the latter is based on the maximum number of possible agreements and thus accounts for duration differences. We found that the average

Cohen's Kappa value in each cultural group was moderate (mean k_{BE} = 0.55, SD_{BE} = 0.12; mean k_{JP} = 0.56, SD_{JP} = 0.17). However, the average ratio k/k_{max} was considerably higher in both cultural groups (mean k/k_{maxBE} = 0.73, SD_{BE} = 0.11; mean k/k_{maxJP} = 0.77, SD_{JP} = 0.17), implying reasonable interrater reliability.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution was measured immediately after the VMR by a single item that probed the extent to which partners had come to "a solution or compromise during the conversation"; the scale ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*).

Relationship Satisfaction

To measure each partner's relationship satisfaction, we used the 16-item Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI) developed by (Funk & Rogge, 2007). We added one item on respectfulness that was suggested by the Japanese team, which asked participants to indicate how disrespectful or respectful they felt about their relationship on a scale from 0 (*disrespectful*) to 5 (*respectful*). The first item of the CSI asked partners to indicate how they would judge the degree of happiness in their relationship on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*extremely unhappy*) to 6 (*perfect*). All other items were measured using a six-point response scale ranging from 0 (e.g., *never, not at all true, not at all, boring, bad* etc.) to 5 (e.g., *all the time, completely true, completely, interesting, good*, etc.). Sample items were "I really feel like part of a team with my partner" and I feel miserable about my relationship" (reverse coded). The responses of each partner were summed to obtain a total score

between 0 (low relationship satisfaction) and 81 (high relationship satisfaction). The Cronbach's alpha's for the CSI were .93 in Japan and .92 in Belgium.

Conflict Topic and Intensity

To select a disagreement topic for the conflict interaction, partners completed an adapted version of the Couple Problem Inventory (CPI, Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977) during the pre-laboratory phase. This adapted version of the CPI consisted of 22 areas of disagreement (i.e., children, in-laws, and finances). We supplemented these original areas of disagreement with items from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and items suggested by our Japanese collaborators, such as face (e.g., losing face) and role division and gender expectation. For each area of disagreement, partners rated the degree of disagreement on a scale ranging from 0 (*no disagreement at all*) to 100 (*high disagreement*). Each area of disagreement rated by either one of the partners as higher than 0 was incorporated in a list from which couples chose a disagreement topic for the disagreement interaction.

Statistical analyses

To test our hypotheses, we used multilevel models (MLM) for dyadic data analyses (Kenny et al., 2006) in SPSS. Couples were situated at level 2 and partners were situated at level 1; partners were nested in the couple and individual scores were treated as repeated measures. Culture was treated as a level 2 variable and transformed to a dummy variable.

To test cultural differences in the duration of emotional behaviors between Japanese and Belgian partners, we solely entered culture into the model as a predictor variable of each emotional behavior. Furthermore, to investigate within-culture variations of emotional behaviors, we restructured the dataset to obtain one nominal variable indicating the type of emotional behavior, and one continuous variable indicating the total duration of each emotional behavior per partner. Next, we created dummy variables for each emotional behavior and entered all dummy variables into the model as predictors of duration, each time using a different emotional behavior as the reference category.

To determine if couples engaged in emotional behaviors that fit the cultural average, we computed emotional fit scores. Previous studies have shown that emotional fit, rather than specific emotions perse, are particularly predictive of relationship outcomes (Boiger at al., 2020)[3]. Emotional fit scores represent the extent to which an individual's emotional pattern fits the average emotional pattern of the cultural group. We calculated two types of emotional fit: one for each partner (level 1 variable) and another for each couple (level 2 variable). To obtain the *partner-level emotional fit* score, we correlated the emotional pattern of each partner with the corresponding average emotional pattern of the respective cultural group. To obtain the *couple-level emotional fit* score, we first restructured our dataset such that each case or row in the dataset represented a couple and each variable or column represented the emotional behaviors of the man and woman within that couple. We then correlated each couple's emotional pattern with the average emotional pattern of couples in the respective cultural group. Because correlations were not normally distributed, all correlations were

Fisher-transformed into z-scores to compute the final emotional fit score per partner and couple. We excluded neutral and listener behaviors from the calculation of the emotional fit scores because in each culture these behaviors together constituted at least 75% of the disagreement interaction; including these behaviors resulted in high and less meaningful correlations. Each type of emotional fit score was entered into the model as a predictor of conflict resolution or relationship satisfaction, together with the predictors culture and emotional fit × culture.

4.3. Results

Preliminary Analyses

Topics of Disagreement

Belgian and Japanese couples talked about different topics of disagreement is the lab ($\chi 2$ (17) = 32.19, p = .004): 'Relations with in-laws, family or neighbors' was the topic most frequently discussed by Belgian couples (15.5%) whereas 'Money or possessions relevant to your relationship' was the topic most frequently discussed by Japanese couples (20%) (see Appendix A.3. for the full list of disagreement topics). Despite differences in the chosen topic of disagreement, the degree of disagreement did not differ between Belgian and Japanese couples (t(136) = 0.49, p = .62): couples from both cultures chose topics on which they disagreed to moderate extents (M_{BE} = 32.69 (on a scale from 0 to 100), SD_{BE} = 20.95; M_{JP} = 34.44, SD_{JP} = 20.28). Moreover, in each culture, more than 80% of the couples (BE: 91.4%; JP: 82.5%) chose a topic with a disagreement rate higher than the mean

disagreement rate across all areas of disagreement (M_{BE} = 17.51, SD_{BE} = 12.89; M_{JP} = 20.96, SD_{JP} = 14.19).

Neutral, Listener and Affective Behaviors

Of the 10-minute interaction[4], Belgian partners engaged in neutral behaviors 33.05% of the time (M_{BE} = 198.29 seconds) and listened to each other for 46.38% of the time (M_{BE} = 278.28 seconds), while Japanese partners engaged in neutral behaviors 35.58% of the time (M_{JP} = 231.49 seconds) and listened to each other for 44.56% of time (M_{JP} = 267.38 seconds) on average. Belgian partners engaged in neutral behaviors significantly less (B = 33.20, t(138) = 3.97, p <.001), and in listener behaviors significantly more than Japanese couples (B = -12.20, t(138) = -2.80, p = .006). Across cultures more than 75% of couple interactions consisted of behavior that was arguably not emotional. Belgian couple interactions consisted of slightly more emotions than Japanese couple interactions: 17.84% (M_{BE} =107.06) and 15.11% of the time (M_{JP} = 90.67 seconds), respectively (B = -16.39, t(138) = -2.16, p = .032). In each culture, anger, domineering, defensiveness, criticism, fear/tension, humor and validation were among the emotions with the longest duration.

Do Japanese and Belgian Couples Engage in Different Emotional Behaviors?

We hypothesized that Belgian and Japanese disagreement interactions would be characterized by different emotional behaviors. More specifically, we hypothesized that Belgian partners would engage in anger and domineering behaviors more, and in validation behaviors less

than Japanese partners. Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1 provide an overview of the cultural differences in emotional behaviors and the corresponding statistics. In line with our hypotheses, coders assigned significantly more anger (p<0.001) and domineering (p<0.001) behavior, but significantly less validation (p<0.001) to Belgian than to Japanese partners' behavior. Additionally, we found that Japanese partners engaged in fear/tension (p<0.001) and humor (marginally significant, p=0.054) more than Belgian partners. In Belgian couple interactions, anger and domineering were more prevalent than any other emotional behavior (0<p< 0.01), whereas fear/tension was among the least prevalent (*p<0.001*). In Japanese couple interactions, validation was most prevalent (p<0.001), while anger and criticism were the least prevalent behaviors. Finally, defensiveness and criticism were present to similar extents across cultures.[5] To investigate the role of gender, we added gender and the interaction between gender and culture to the model for each emotional behavior. We found that cultural differences between Belgian and Japanese men and women were in the same direction as the overall cultural differences reported above (statistics not shown).[6]

Table 4.1. Statistics for cultural differences between Japanese and Belgian partners in the mean duration of emotional behavior

Emotional Behaviors	Mean duration (in seconds) Belgium	Mean duration (in seconds) Japan	*B*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI*
Domineering	29.72[a]	10.43[c]	-19.29	-4.24	<.001	[-28.29, -10.29]
Anger	25.24[a]	3.38[d]	-21.86	-8.17	<.001	[-27.15, -16.57]
Criticism	6.61[c]	4.41[d]	-2.20	-1.25	0.21	[-5.67, 1.28]
Validation	14.35[b]	31.22[a]	16.87	5.65	<.001	[10.97, 22.77]
Fear/Tension	2.65[c]	11.52[c]	8.86	4.53	<.001	[4.99, 12.74]
Humor	13.00[b]	18.63[b]	5.62	1.95	.054	[-0.09, 11.32]
Defensiveness	15.49[b]	11.08[c]	-4.40	-1.50	0.14	[-10.19, 1.38]

Note. The reference group is Belgium. Superscripts denote differences in mean duration between emotional behaviors *within* a cultural context; mean durations with different superscripts differ significantly from each other ($0 < p < 0.05$).

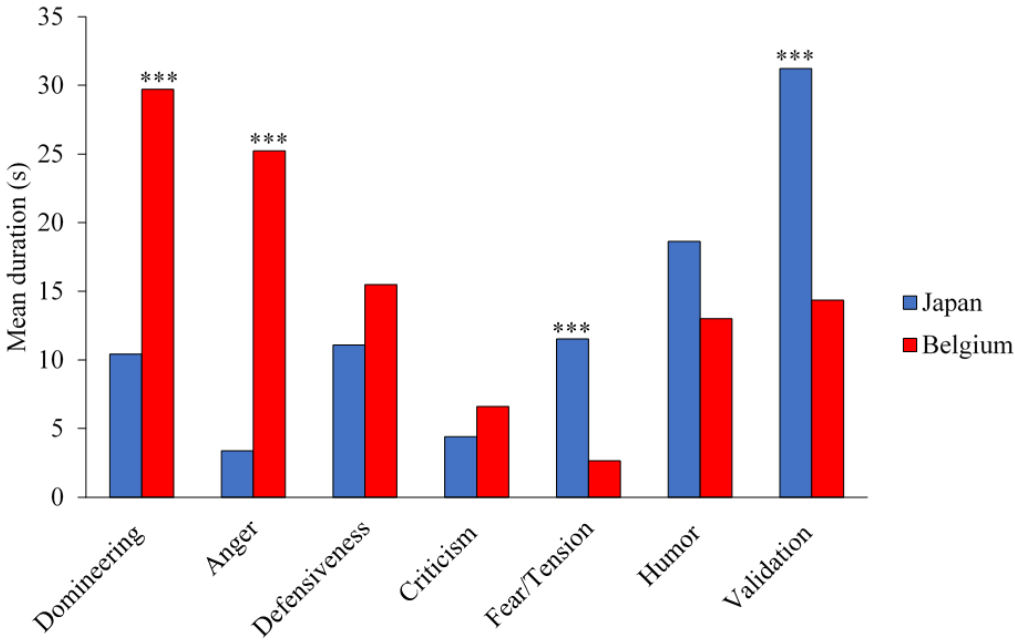


Figure 4.1. Mean duration of emotional behaviors in Japanese (blue) and Belgian (red) partners. *Note.* ***p<0.001

Emotional Fit and Conflict Resolution

We hypothesized that when either individual partners or couples engage in emotional behaviors that fit their culture's average emotional pattern, partners would report higher levels of conflict resolution. We found a significant interaction between culture and partner-level emotional fit (B = -1.54, t(274.97) = -3.76, p < 0.001), as well as between culture and couple-level emotional fit (B = -2.28, t(137.87) = -3.53, p < 0.001). Contrary to our hypothesis, both partner and couple-level emotional fit were negatively, as opposed to positively, associated with conflict resolution in Belgium (p=0.001; p=0.019, respectively) (see table 4.2 for the statistics regarding emotional fit and conflict resolution). However, both emotional fit scores were positively associated with conflict

resolution in Japan, which is in line with our hypothesis; only couple-level fit reached significance (p=0.006). This means that the more individual partners or couples engage in a culturally typical blend of emotional behaviors, the lower conflict resolution in Belgium, whereas the higher conflict resolution in Japan (see fig. 4.2). We did not further investigate the role of gender, because adding the gender and the interaction between gender and culture as predictors to the model, did not improve model fit.

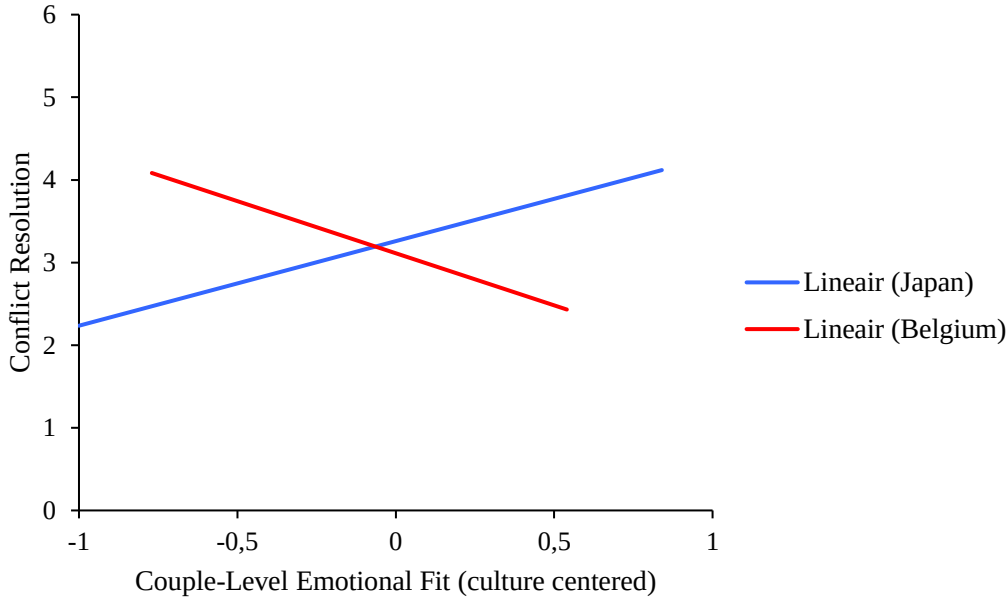


Figure 4.2. Graph depicting the association between couple-level emotional fit and conflict resolution in Japan (blue) and Belgium (red). For the sake of simplicity, data points were omitted from the graph. The association between partner-level fit and conflict resolution is not depicted as it yielded a similar result.

Table 4.2. The association between emotional fit and conflict resolution in Belgium and Japan

	Belgium				Japan			
Predictor	*B*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI*	*B*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI*
Partner-level emotional fit	-1.10	-3.24	0.001	[-1.77, -0.43]	0.45	1.92	0.055	[-0.01, 0.91]
Couple-level emotional fit	-1.25	-2.36	0.019	[-2.31, -0.21]	1.02	2.80	0.006	[0.30, 1.74]

Note. Separate multilevel models were computed for each cultural group and each type of emotional fit as a predictor. In addition to the type of emotional fit, culture and emotional fit × culture were also entered as predictors (estimates are not shown in the table).

Emotional Fit and Relationship Satisfaction

We hypothesized that when individual partners and couples engage in emotional behaviors that fit their culture's average emotional pattern, partners report higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Contrary to our expectations, we found that in each culture, partner-level emotional fit was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. However, the analyses with couple-level emotional fit yielded a significant culture by fit interaction (B = 17.23, t(139.57) = -3.16, p = .002): while couple-level emotional fit was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction in Belgium, it was positively associated with relationship satisfaction in Japan (p=.003) (see table 4.3 for the statistics regarding emotional fit and relationship satisfaction). This means that the more a couple's interaction consisted of a culturally typical blend of emotional behaviors, the higher partner's satisfaction with the relationship, at least in Japanese partners (see Fig. 4.3). As with conflict resolution, we did not investigate the role of gender, because adding gender and the interaction between gender and culture as predictors to the models, did not improve model fit.

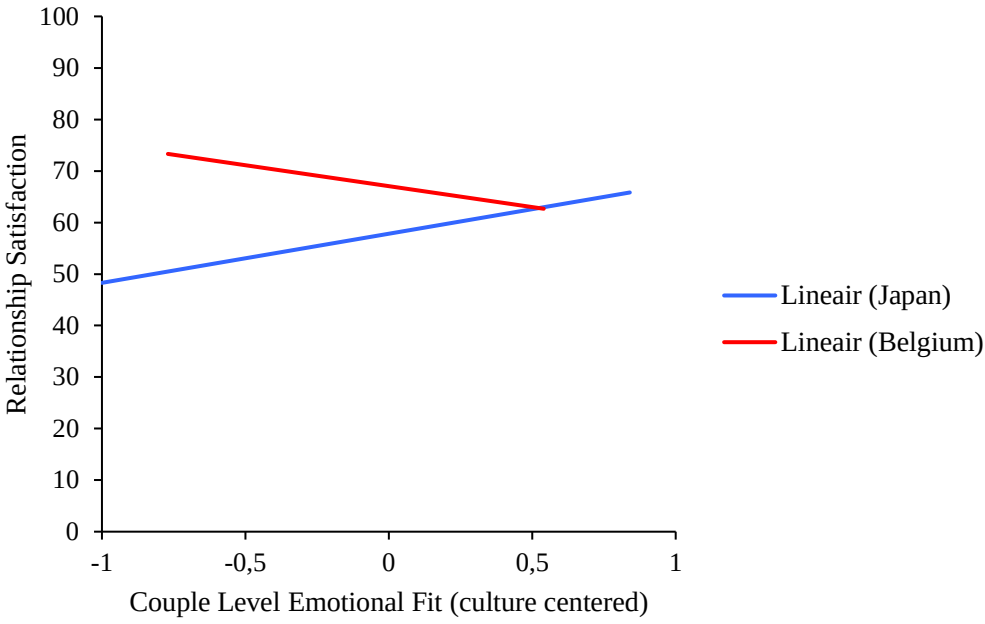


Figure 4.3. Graph depicting the association between couple-level emotional fit and relationship satisfaction in Japan (blue) and Belgium (red). For the sake of simplicity, data points were omitted from the graph.

Table 4.3. The association between emotional fit and relationship satisfaction in Belgium and Japan

	Belgium				Japan			
Predictor	*B*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI*	*B*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI*
Partner-level emotional fit	1.08	0.44	0.66	[-3.72, 5.89]	2.24	1.31	0.19	[-1.14, 5.63]
Couple-level emotional fit	-7.71	-1.71	0.090	[-16.64, 1.21]	2.24	3.10	0.002	[3.45, 15.59]

Note. Separate multilevel models were computed for each cultural group and each type of emotional fit as a predictor. In addition to the type of emotional fit, culture and emotional fit × culture were also entered as predictors (estimates are not shown in the table).

4.4. Discussion

Cultural Differences in Emotional Behaviors

This study is the first to offer a cross-cultural perspective on the role of emotional behaviors in couple disagreement. We hypothesized that Belgian and Japanese couple interactions would be marked by different emotional behaviors in ways that could be understood from the respective relationship ideals in each culture. To examine this hypothesis, we videotaped Belgian and Japanese couples as they discussed a disagreement in the lab, and collected second by second observational data of emotional behaviors using the SPAFF (Coan & Gottman, 2007). We found that Belgian partners engaged in anger and domineering behaviors for longer periods of time, but in validating behaviors for a shorter period of time than Japanese partners. Additionally, anger and domineering were the most prevalent emotional behaviors in Belgian couple interactions, while validation was the most prevalent in Japanese couple interactions. These emotional behaviors appear to be in service of the relationship ideals in each culture. Anger and domineering may reflect Belgian partners' inclination to tackle conflict head on (see Chapter 2, Schouten et al., 2022), negotiate personal goals and needs, and force a change in the partner's behaviors, whereas validation reflects Japanese partners' primary concern of accepting and adjusting to the needs of the partner (Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Morling et al., 2002). Our findings complement but also go beyond earlier findings by Boiger and colleagues (2020), who used the same sample of Belgian and Japanese couples to investigate emotional experiences, rather than behaviors. Emotional behaviors may

be thought of as instrumental tools that connect partners and direct the interaction; examining which behaviors Belgian and Japanese partners engage in as they deal with a disagreement furthers our understanding of how, across cultural contexts, partners relate to each other and 'do' emotions during conflict in culturally specific ways.

In addition to differences in anger, domineering and validation, we also found that Japanese partners showed more fear/tension than Belgian partners. This may the case for three reasons. First, Japanese partners may not be used to dealing with disagreement because partners either refrain from addressing disagreement at all (see Chapter 2, Schouten et al., 2022) or, when they do engage in disagreement, may use implicit forms of communication (i.e., mindreading) (Rothbaum et al., 2000). However, the interaction task used in the study implied that disagreement had to be dealt with head on and explicitly as partners were asked to discuss and solve their disagreement. This may have been an unusual and uneasy situation for Japanese couples, giving rise to anxiety and nervousness. Second, fear/tension in Japanese contexts may be seen as an emotional behavior that promotes relational harmony. Fearful partners struggle to say what they want, i.e., they display speech disturbances and nervous gestures, possibly because they are worried and afraid to hurt the partner, or because they are called out on something they did wrong. Fearful partners thus convey and recognize that relational harmony is threatened, which may in itself promote harmony. This would be consistent with the finding that socially engaging emotions, such as worry or being afraid to hurt someone, are particularly prevalent in Japanese cultural contexts because they support interdependent concerns (Kityama et al., 2000; Kitayama et al., 2006). Finally, fear/tension may reflect Japanese partners' intention to

avoid and escape disagreement, as to remove the risk of jeopardizing relational harmony (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Tamir & Ford, 2009). Interestingly, fear/tension was the among least prevalent behaviors in Belgian couple interactions. This may suggest that Belgian partners were relatively more comfortable with having to openly discuss their disagreement in a lab setting. Another way of seeing this is that the concern for autonomy may have taken precedence over the concern for hurting the partner, resulting in a lower prevalence of fear/tension as compared to anger and domineering.

A pertinent question for the interpretation of our findings concerning emotional behaviors is how comparable the emotional behavioral categories of the SPAFF are across cultural contexts. While we reached acceptable IRRs within cultural contexts, we could not evaluate the IRR between coders from different cultural contexts. We cannot establish if Belgian and Japanese coders applied the behavioral codes in similar ways for two reasons. First, the cultural informant approach of the SPAFF posits that only coders who are sensitive to a specific cultural setting can decode the meaning of behavior within a given cultural context. This means that Belgian coders would not be able to correctly infer the meaning of Japanese partners' behaviors, and vice versa. Second, language differences hinder the observation of couple interactions from a cultural context different than that of the coder. However, our data seems to suggest that the functionality of the emotional behavioral categories included in this study (anger, domineering, criticism, fear/tension, defensiveness, validation and humor) — which were among the most prevalent in *both* cultural contexts — were available as well as decodable to both Belgian and Japanese coders. Nevertheless, future research may complement

quantitative findings like those presented in this study with qualitative ones, such as a discussion panel in which coders from different cultural contexts together observe and talk about couple interactions from each cultural context under study (see Lee et al., 2013 for an example).

Culturally Specific Emotional Behaviors and Relationship Outcomes

We also hypothesized that emotionally responding to disagreement in culturally typical ways is adaptive for relationships. To test this hypothesis, we correlated each partner's and couple's emotional pattern with the average emotional pattern of their cultural group, resulting in a fit score per partner and couple. A high (low) fit score meant that partners or couples expressed emotional behaviors that fit (did not fit) the cultural average. We found that our hypothesis held in Japan, but not in Belgium. In Japan, a couple's emotional fit score contributed to relationship outcomes: the more a couple's interaction was made up of the 'right' blend of emotional behaviors — which often involved validation and fear/tension — the more partners perceived the conflict as resolved, and the happier they were with their relationship. The emotional behaviors shown by Japanese partners were not conflictual in nature, but instead helped partners yield towards each other (i.e., validation) and avoid disagreement (i.e., humor and fear/tension). Because open conflict is preferably avoided in Japanese contexts, and adjustment promoted, these behaviors may contribute to positive relational outcomes. Interestingly, as opposed to couple fit, partner fit did not predict conflict resolution nor relationship satisfaction in Japanese couples. This alludes to the idea that engaging in culturally

valued emotions together, as a couple unit, is especially important for achieving a 'good' relationship in Japanese cultural contexts.

Contrary to our expectations, however, we found that the more Belgian partners or couples engaged in emotional behaviors that fit the cultural average, the less they perceived the disagreement as resolved. This may be because a high emotional fit is reflective of an interaction that is marked by quite some anger and domineering behaviors. While these emotional behaviors may allow for change and resolution in the long run, they may in the moment lead to the perception that partners are not able to resolve the conflict well (Overall et al., 2009). To our surprise, neither a Belgian partner's nor couple's emotional fit predicted relationship satisfaction. Similar to conflict resolution, previous studies with Western couples have found that behaviors such as anger and dissent may be associated with an increase in satisfaction over time, rather than concurrently (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; McNulty & Russell, 2010). In the present study, conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction were either measured shortly before, or directly after the disagreement interaction. Hence, further research would need to determine if these behaviors are in fact beneficial for Belgian relationships longitudinally.

New Insights

This study is one of the first to investigate cultural differences in couples' observed emotions. The findings suggests that we cannot readily assume that how couples deal with disagreement emotionally in Western cultural contexts, is similar to how couples do so in non-Western (i.e., East-Asian) cultural contexts: we found that Belgian and

Japanese partners engaged in different emotional behaviors during a disagreement interaction. These differences appeared to be systematic and meaningful; the most prevalent emotional behaviors in each culture — anger and domineering in Belgium, and validation in Japan — were those that aligned the couple with the cultural relationship ideals.

Also, unlike previous cross-cultural couple studies (Tsai et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2012), we examined cultural differences in specific types of observed emotions. Each emotional behavior represents a different relationship orientation, i.e., anger communicates that a personal boundary has been transgressed, and attempts to change the other's behavior according to one's wishes, while validation conveys a sincere understanding and acceptance of the partner's point of view. By examining specific observed emotions, rather than general valence, we can more comprehensively and accurately describe how couples' relationship orientations differ across cultures. For instance, from our findings we can infer that Belgian partners confront each other with frustrations about the partner's behaviors (i.e., anger), and try to have it their way by getting the partner to submit (i.e., domineering), while Japanese partners engage in a non-confrontational stance by taking each other's perspective and showing understanding (i.e., validation).

Finally, in one of our previous studies (see Boiger et al., 2020), we found that *experiencing* a culturally typical blend of emotions did not predict relationship satisfaction in Japanese couples. One of the explanations for this finding was that in Japanese cultural contexts, emotional interactions may not be the basis on which relationship quality is assessed. However, the present study contradicts this idea; we found that emotional behaviors *do* predict relationship satisfaction in Japanese

couples. This may the case because emotions in Japanese cultural contexts tend to be conceived of as acts that happen between people. This conception of emotions has been dubbed the OURS (OUtside the person, Relational, and Situated) perspective on emotions and is contrasted with the MINE (Mental, INside the person, and Essentialist) perspective prominent in Western cultural contexts, which conceives of emotions as mental or private states (Mesquita, 2022). Hence, the focus on emotions in Japan may be outward instead of inward. Consequently, Japanese partners are inclined to focus on the relational consequences of their behaviors during the disagreement, rather than on how they feel internally. Emotional behaviors may therefore be particularly diagnostic for relationship outcomes in Japan, while emotional experiences are not. Yet, the opposite may be true for Belgian partners, who instead focus on their inward experiences as they assess relationship satisfaction. Indeed, a culturally typical blend of emotional experiences was found to predict relationship satisfaction (Boiger et al., 2020), while emotional behaviors were not.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study comes with several limitations. First, we examined cultural differences for only a subset of the emotional behaviors included in the SPAFF because the majority of the behaviors (10 out of 16 coded behaviors) were observed too infrequently to be able to make meaningful comparisons between cultures. Unlike other studies (i.e., Leuchtmann et al., 2018), we did not aggregate specific emotional behaviors into one positive and negative category to overcome the problem of low incidences of any one single behavior, because we wanted to gain insight in the relational meaning and consequences of

specific emotions in each cultural context. While we successfully gained said insight for several behaviors, we were unable to do so for all emotional behaviors included in the SPAFF. This meant that we were not able to fully map out variation in Belgian and Japanese couples' emotional behaviors and corresponding relationship orientations. To deal with this issue, future research may want to sample more couples per culture. Also, future studies that do yield higher frequencies of emotional behaviors should aim to examine cultural variation in all types of emotional behaviors.

Second, the current emotional behavioral categories were derived based on close observations of North American couple interactions by North American researchers. These researchers likely looked at these interactions through a culturally bound lens (i.e., that of independence) and constructed codes that were especially typical for North American, but not necessarily for Belgian and Japanese couples. Although the current SPAFF categories — because functionally defined — are suitable for coding the emotional behaviors of Belgian and Japanese couple interactions, future research may benefit from keeping track of behaviors that are specific to Belgian and Japanese couples. This would shed light on the culturally unique ways in which partners' relate to each other.

Finally, we focused merely on the total duration of emotional behaviors in partners' interactions. However, this does not allow to fully unpack the occurrence of emotional behaviors in a given interaction, nor does it uncover how emotional behaviors unfold dynamically and interdependently over time between partners (Butler, 2015). For instance, some couples may engage in a given behavior for a shorter period of time than other couples, but this behavior may be more

frequent, i.e., as marked by more frequent onsets. Or one partner may be very angry in the beginning of the interaction and prompt the other partner to reciprocate with anger, while negative reciprocity may only become apparent towards the end of the interaction in another couple (Gottman et al., 1977). Finally, partners may engage in specific emotion sequences, such that sadness elicits guilt in the other partner a few moment later, for example (Overall et al., 2013). These emotional processes may each impact the relationship differently (Randall & Schoebi, 2018). Future research may thus additionally investigate cultural variation in the frequency of emotional behaviors, and in the associations between partner's emotional behaviors (i.e., Schoebi, Wang, Ababkov, & Perrez, 2010). This would provide insight into which (interpersonal) emotional processes in each culture are consistent with cultural relationship ideals and contribute to the couples' wellbeing.

Conclusion

This study suggest that Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different observed emotions: while Kato and Tom, a Belgian couple, engage in anger and domineering behaviors as they try to solve a disagreement, Kenzo and Yumi, a Japanese couple, instead engage in non-confrontational behaviors, such as validating. These differences in emotional behaviors are not random, nor stand alone; rather, Belgian and Japanese couples appear to engage in those emotional behaviors that correspond with the prevalent relationship goals in their respective cultures. Moreover, dealing with disagreement in culturally appropriate ways — that is, engaging in the 'right' emotional behaviors — may come with relational benefits, at least in Japanese couples. Emotional

behaviors thus play a crucial role in interactions and relationships; they reflect a relational stance and provide the interface through which partners negotiate relationship goals. As such, they help partners move towards a culturally desirable relationship. Observing specific types of emotional behaviors in couple interactions — each with their own functionality — gives a glimpse into what these ‘culturally desirable’ relationships may look like.

Notes

1. Data from the same study was used in other research reports (Boiger et al., 2020; Kirchner-Haüsler et al., 2021). The present study is the only one to make use of observational data.
2. The procedure for deciding on a topic of disagreement differed slightly from Levenson and Gottman's original procedure in that the research assistant (RA) chose the topic of disagreement instead of the couple. The RA's choice was based on a conversation with the couple in which partners brought up several areas of disagreement they had each rated as relevant on the CPI prior to the lab session. This allowed the RA to determine the topic of disagreement that elicited the strongest emotional response. However, the pilot made clear that Japanese participants experienced it as a breach of confidence when the RA asked them to share and elaborate on their private answers to the CPI. Therefore, we opted for a procedure in which we presented the couple with a list of topics that (unbeknownst to them) were the ones rated by at least one of the partners as relevant. This way, partner's private answers to the CPI remained confidential.
3. We checked if and how each separate emotional behavior was associated with conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction in Belgium and Japan. In doing so, we regressed conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction onto each emotional behavior and added culture and culture × emotional behavior to the model. In Belgium, we found that validation was positively associated with conflict resolution ($B = 0.06$, $t(273.14) = 4.11$, $p < .001$), while anger was negatively associated with conflict resolution ($B = -0.01$, $t(245.00) = -2.51$, $p = .013$). None of the emotional behaviors

predicted relationship satisfaction in Belgium. In Japan, we found that domineering was negatively associated with conflict resolution (B = -0.01, t(255.09) = -2.10, p = .036), and that criticism was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (B = -0.17, t(193.11) = -2.31, p = .022). Finally, we found two significant culture by emotion interactions. For conflict resolution, the interaction between culture and validation was significant (B = -0.06, t(273.38) = -3.94, p < .001): while validation was positively associated with conflict resolution in Belgium, it was not significantly associated with conflict resolution in Japan. For relationship satisfaction, the interaction between culture and defensiveness was significant (B = 0.14, t(192.95) = 2.35, p = .020): defensiveness was positively associated with relationship satisfaction in Japan (reaching only marginal significance), but not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction in Belgium.

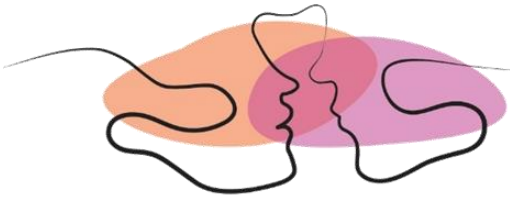
4. The total duration of the interaction was not exactly 10 minutes (i.e., 600 seconds) for two Japanese and two Belgian couples (2035, 2040, 3003 and 2095) due to recording issues or irregularities with the Observer XT. We checked if the analyses yielded the same results without these four couples and found that they did.
5. Because the total duration of emotional behaviors (which equals the sum of the duration of the selected emotional behaviors: anger, defensiveness, domineering, criticism, validation and humor) differed across Belgian and Japanese couple interactions, we checked if hypotheses H1 and H1a-b still held when controlling for total duration of emotional behavior. We controlled for total duration of emotional behavior both as a level 1 partner variable and a level 2 couple variable. In both cases, the analyses yielded the same

results, but with one exception: when controlling for the total duration of emotional behaviors at the partner level, we found that Japanese women expressed significantly more humor than Belgian women (*B* = 6.76, *t*(137.61) = 1.99, *p* = .048)

6. We found a significant interaction between gender and culture on anger: (*B* = -13.66, t(138) = -2.70, p = .008): although anger was more prevalent in both Belgian women and men than in Japanese women and men, respectively (*B* = -28.69, *t*(138) = -6.62, *p* < .001; B = -15.02, *t*(138) = -5.20, *p* < .001), the difference in anger was larger for Belgian and Japanese women (M_{BE} - M_{JP} = 28.69) than for Belgian and Japanese men (M_{BE} - M_{JP} = 15.02).

5

Negotiating Conflict: Interpersonal Sequences of Emotional Behaviors in Belgian and Japanese Couple Interactions



This chapter is based on:
Schouten, A., Bodner, N., Ceulemans, E., Boiger, M., Uchida, Y., Mesquita, B. (2022). Negotiating Conflict: Interpersonal Sequences of Emotional Behaviors in Belgian and Japanese Couple Interactions. *Manuscript in preparation.*

5.1. Introduction

The emotions of two partners unfold dynamically over the course of an interaction, and are interdependent (Butler, 2011; Levenson et al., 2014). For example, imagine my partner is angry with me for not helping with the household chores. His anger is likely to elicit an emotional reaction from me. I may, for instance, show remorse upon his angry stance, i.e., by acknowledging the wrong I committed and apologizing for it. However, I could also engage in angry behavior, i.e., by rejecting what in my eyes is a false accusation. How my partner's anger evolves in the next moments of the interaction depends on my response: his anger may fade away upon my remorseful response, de-escalating the disagreement and mending the relationship, or it may increase upon me getting angry, further deteriorating the disagreement. Taken together, couples' interactions are made up of a variety of interpersonal emotional sequences (Butler, 2015), i.e., anger in one partner is followed by remorse, or by anger in the other partner.

These interpersonal emotional sequences in couples' interactions may vary across cultures in line with what is commonly thought of as a good and healthy relationship in each culture (Mesquita et al., 2014). For example, in Western cultural contexts, a good relationship is one in which partners can be independent and autonomous, whereas in East-Asian cultural contexts, a good relationship is characterized by interdependence and relational harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). We propose that cultural relationship ideals and beliefs may be enacted in couples' everyday interactions, such that these couple interactions are made up of different interpersonal emotional sequences across cultures. For example, anger helps to draw personal boundaries (Kuppens et al., 2003), and is

consistent with the Western relationship goal of independence (Kitayama et al., 2006). Partners in Western cultural contexts may therefore be likely to attend to and legitimize each other's anger, i.e., by being angry in return, or responding with a validating stance. In contrast, partners in East-Asian cultural contexts may be likely to move away from states of anger, i.e., by ignoring it or responding to it with remorse. Doing so would be conducive to the goals of interdependence and harmony. In sum, to the extent that the prevalent relationship ideals and beliefs differ across cultures, couples' interpersonal sequences of emotion may come to vary as well.

In studying couples' interpersonal emotional sequences, we focused on partners' emotional *behaviors*. Both verbal and nonverbal emotional behaviors, i.e., saying that you feel hurt and shedding a tear, or raising your voice and commanding the other to stop behaving in a certain way, are visible forms of communication that likely serve as input for the response of the partner (Parkinson, 2021; Van Kleef, 2009). Accordingly, we observed the emotional behaviors of Belgian and Japanese couples who discussed a disagreement in the lab, and set out to explore how partners' emotional behaviors were associated in each culture. To this end, we computed interpersonal sequences between partners' emotional behaviors using a dynamic network approach.

Emotional Sequences and Relationship Ideals Across Cultures

Relationship research on emotions increasingly focuses on the *inter*personal emotional processes that constitute couple interactions (Schoebi & Randall, 2015). This research highlights that partners

dynamically orient towards each other's emotions in a variety of ways, giving rise to a complex network of interpersonal emotional sequences, whereby partners' emotions are associated either concurrently or over time (Butler, 2011, 2015). The emotions of two partners are most likely associated because emotions have social functions; they convey our concerns and intentions in the interaction, and thereby position and connect two partners (Fischer & Manstead, 2016; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). For example, your sadness during a disagreement communicates that you are hurt and in need of your partner's comfort and support (Clark, Pataki, & Carver, 1996; Hasson, 2009). In turn, your partner may engage in positive emotional behaviors, such as showing affection by way of comforting. Also, your sadness may stop, or help to avoid altogether, your partner's getting angry (i.e., see Sanford et al., 2007). Together, the emotions of you and your partner represent several interpersonal emotional sequences.

Partners' emotions are inextricably linked, but given cross-culturally different relationship goals, there may be cultural variation in the most prevalent links. In the present study, we investigate how Belgian and Japanese partners' emotions are linked during a disagreement interaction. We build on cross-cultural research that compares close relationships in U.S. and Japanese cultural contexts (Rothbaum, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991;2010); people in U.S. contexts emphasize independent relationship goals, while members from Japanese cultures foreground interdependent relationship goals. We assume that the prevalent relationship goals in U.S. cultural contexts are largely similar to those in Belgian contexts (Kitayama et al., 2009). Much like U.S. versus Japanese contexts, then, relationship goals in Belgian and Japanese cultures can be seen to differ along the

lines of independence and interdependence, respectively. We suggest that disagreement interactions of Belgian and Japanese couples may be made up those emotional links that align with the respective relationships goals in each culture..

For example, in line with the notion of independence, partners in Belgian cultural contexts value autonomy in their relationships (Rothbaum et al., 2000). Each partner focuses on and readily makes known their personal needs, goals and desires to their counterpart, i.e., through self-assertion and self-disclosure (Chen, 1995; Heejung & Sherman, 2007; Kito, 2005). Accordingly, engaging in certain degrees of *mutual anger* may be instrumental for dealing with disagreement, as this allows each partner to underline and renegotiate unmet needs (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Also, a common mode of action in Belgian cultural contexts is to take control and influence others in a way that fits personal needs (Markus & Kitayama, 2003) which may be adopted especially during disagreement. This mode may be adopted especially during disagreement as it is considered helpful in instigating relational change that meets one's wishes. Hence, *angry partners may be met with dominant behaviors* that invalidate the partner's view, and get the partner to retreat and submit. However, at the same time, Belgian partners wish to maintain closeness, proximity and intimacy in their relationship (Erbert, 2000; Rothbaum et al., 2000), i.e., by compromising and yielding towards the partner (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010). In trying to juggle the relational task of autonomy with that of closeness, *partners may respond to their dominant or angry partner with an understanding and validating stance,* for example. This would be in line with the idea that occasional negative reciprocity, so

long as balanced by positive behaviors, is healthy for relationships in Western cultural contexts (Gottman, 1994).

In contrast, in East-Asian cultural contexts, individuals consider themselves as fundamentally connected to each other; they are defined by the relationship of which they are part (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; 2010). Japanese partners value relatedness, mutual dependence, harmony and self-criticism in their relationships (Doi, 1986; Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 1997; Rothbaum et al., 2000). A central relational task for partners is to fit in with the relationship and adjust the self to the expectations and needs of their counterpart, rather than focus on personal needs (Morling et al., 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Japanese partners may therefore be less likely than Belgian partners to engage in mutual sequences of anger during a disagreement, as anger draws attention to the self and impedes adjustment. Indeed, Japanese couples have been found to avoid negative emotional behaviors during a disagreement discussion (Lee et al., 2013). Harmony and relatedness are best restored during a disagreement when partners prioritize each other's needs, i.e., through mindreading, perspective-taking, and *mutual cycles of validation* (Matsunaga, et al., 2009). Finally, in good relationships, partners should be sensitive to information that signals they have fallen short to meet relational expectations, and use it to improve behavior accordingly (i.e., self-criticism). This ensures that partners maintain and affirm interdependence (Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 1997). Partners may thus pay attention to *criticism* during a disagreement; in turn, expressing criticism urges partners to change and adjust behavior. *Engaging in validation upon a partner's critical stance*, for example, could be adaptive to dealing with a disagreement in Japanese cultural contexts. In sum, because Belgian

and Japanese couples have different relationship ideals and goals, they are expected to engage in different emotional sequences during a disagreement.

Cultural Differences in Partner's Sequences of Emotional Experience

Two cross-cultural studies find evidence for the idea that couples' interpersonal emotional sequences may vary across cultures; these studies focus on emotional experiences. For instance, Boiger et al., (2020) found that Belgian and Japanese couple interactions moved towards and kept returning to different dyadic emotional states. The couples discussed a disagreement in the lab that was video recorded. Next, each partner separately watched the video of their disagreement interaction using video-mediated recall, a method whereby partners reported the extent to which they experienced 12 emotions every 30 seconds of the interaction (the video paused 20 times). This method allowed the authors to examine how couples' joint emotional states changed dynamically from one 30 second episode to the next. Boiger et al., (2020) found that, over the course of the interaction, Belgian couples recurrently moved towards mutual states of anger, while Japanese couples frequently experienced and returned to mutual states of empathy. Belgian partners were thus likely to both experience anger at the same time, which is consistent with the goal of independence and autonomy, while Japanese partners mutually experienced empathy, which promotes perspective taking and mutual adjustment.

In another study, Schoebi and colleagues (2010) examined if there were cultural differences in how one partner's anger was

associated with the other partner's anger and sadness/depressed feelings the next day. Using a daily diary method, partners of a couple separately reported whether they had experienced anger and sadness/depressed feelings three times a day for seven consecutive days. Zooming in on the results for Belgium and China specifically — the two cultural samples that lie closest to the cultural samples under investigation in the present study — we see that the wife's anger was more strongly associated with the husbands' sadness/depressed feelings in China than in Belgium (no partner effects were found for the husbands' anger). Possibly, in Chinese couples, the wife's anger implies that the husband failed to live up to relational expectations, thereby impeding interdependence. Yet, in Belgian couples, anger is not considered harmful to the relationship, as standing up for your own needs through anger fosters individual autonomy. Chinese husbands may therefore be more likely than Belgian husbands to experience sadness/depressed feelings upon their wife's anger. Taken together, the studies by Boiger et al., (2020) and Schoebi et al., (2010) provide some evidence for the idea that couples across cultures engage in different interpersonal emotional sequences, and that these differences can be understood from the prevalent relationship ideas and beliefs in each culture.

The Present Study: Interpersonal Sequences in Partner's Behaviors

In the present study, we examine interpersonal sequences between partners' emotional *behaviors* in Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement. We started from a finding in one of our previous studies

which yielded evidence for cultural differences in Belgian and Japanese couples' mean-levels of emotional behaviors (see Chapter 4, Schouten et al., 2022, manuscript in preparation); this study used the same sample of couples as the present study. We coded how long partners engaged in various emotional behaviors (i.e., anger, domineering, validation, humor, criticism and fear/tension) using the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) (Coan & Gottman, 2007). We found that Belgian partners engaged in anger and domineering behaviors more, but in validation and fear/tension less than Japanese partners. Also, out of all coded emotional behaviors, anger and domineering were the most prevalent emotional behaviors in Belgian couples, while validation was the most prevalent in Japanese couples. In the present study, we move beyond mean levels of emotions. We take seriously the idea that emotional behaviors are primarily distributed *between* people, by computing all interpersonal emotional sequences in Belgian and Japanese couples using a dynamic network approach. As such, we shed light on how partners 'do' emotions *together* to conjointly navigate their interactions and relationships in culturally specific ways. With this approach we also extend previous research which considered only a few sequences between one or two emotions (i.e., Schoebi et al., 2010), rather than mapped all possible sequences between partners' emotional behaviors at once.

We expected that in each culture, couples' relationship goals would be reflected in their actual disagreement interactions, such that the Belgian and Japanese couple interactions would be made up of different interpersonal emotional sequences. Our general hypothesis therefore was that *Belgian and Japanese couples engage in different interpersonal emotional sequences.* As we found that the most prevalent

emotional behaviors in Belgian and Japanese couple interactions (i.e., anger and domineering in Belgium, and validation in Japan) were also those that appeared to be consistent with the cultural relationship goals, we assumed these behaviors would likely constitute partners' emotional sequences as well. We predicted that *Belgian couple interactions are characterized by anger-anger, anger-validation, anger-domineering and domineering-validation sequences.* Two partners who together engage in anger and domineering, can be seen as negotiating their individual autonomy. Also, validating the other's anger or domineering behavior, encourages partners to speak up about relational needs, and may be a way of granting the other their autonomy. Japanese partners may be unlikely to engage in mutual anger, as fulfilling personal needs is not a central concern. Instead, for *Japanese couples we predicted that their interactions are characterized by validation-validation and criticism-validation sequences.* These behavior sequences reflect two partners who engage in mutual perspective taking and critically reflect on each other's behaviors, supporting interdependence relationship goals.

5.2. Methods

Participants

80 Japanese couples and 58 Belgian couples participated in the study[1]. Belgian couples were recruited through advertisements on social media and flyers spread in and around the city of Leuven, and Japanese couples were recruited in the greater Tokyo/Kansai Area by a recruitment company. Participants met the following criteria: They were native Japanese/Dutch speakers, between 35 and 50 years old, in a

heterosexual relationship for at least two years and cohabiting. Each couple received a monetary compensation of 100 euros for completing the study (the Japanese couples received this amount from the recruitment company through an internal point system).

Belgian partners were significantly younger than Japanese partners (M_{BE} = 41.22, SD_{BE} = 5.15; M_{JP} = 42.98, SD_{JP} = 4.34, $t(221.20) = 3.00$, $p < 0.01$). The cultural difference in age was primarily driven by an age difference between females: Belgian females were slightly younger than Japanese females (M_{BE} = 39.90, SD_{BE} = 4.97; M_{JP} = 42.29, SD_{JP} = 4.21, $t(136) = 3.05$, $p < .01$), while the age of male partners was similar across cultural groups (M_{BE} = 42.53, SD_{B} = 5.03; M_{JP} = 43.68, SD_{JP} = 4.37; $t(136) = 1.42$, $p = .16$). The self-assessed socioeconomic status also differed between samples: while Belgian couples were more frequently higher middle class (29.3% in Belgium; 10% in Japan), Japanese couples were more likely middle class (58.6% in Belgium, 64.4% in Japan). The average relationship duration for both samples was approximately 15 years (M_{BE} = 15.55, SD_{BE} = 8.18; M_{JP} = 14.98, SD_{JP} = 7.18; $t(274) = -.62$, $p = .54$), and in line with the customs of the respective cultures, Belgian couples were less likely to be married than Japanese couples (BE: 72.4%; JP: 97.5%, $\chi 2$ (1) = 37.31, $p < 0.001$).

Procedure

This study was part of a larger study on couple conflict (Boiger et al., 2020) in which couples participated in a dyadic interaction task that was originally developed by Levenson and Gottman (1983) to study marital processes. The task involved three interactions in the lab of which the

disagreement interaction was of particular interest to this study. The laboratory phase was preceded by a pre-laboratory phase, in which participants filled out a set of questionnaires separately at home (i.e., the couple's problem inventory (CPI)), and followed by the video mediated recall phase, during which participants watched the video-recording of their disagreement interaction and reported on the emotions they experienced. These phases are not reported in detail here.

Laboratory Phase: Disagreement Interaction

After the pre-laboratory phase, couples visited the laboratory to engage in the disagreement interaction. The dyad room in which the interaction took place was equipped with three cameras: one camera recorded an overview of the interaction (both partners were visible from the side), and two other cameras recorded the frontal view of each partner. Partners were seated face to face; the woman was seated on the right, and the man on the left side of the table that was positioned in the middle of two chairs. Prior to the disagreement interaction, couples discussed a neutral topic for five minutes to acclimatize to the new environment. Next, couples engaged in the disagreement interaction for ten minutes. Couples first chose a disagreement topic from a list of disagreement topics that they had rated as relevant on the CPI in the pre-laboratory phase. Once the disagreement topic was chosen, the RA instructed couples to (a) talk about the disagreement as if they were at home, (b) start the conversation by having each partner state their point of view, and (c) try and solve the disagreement. After the disagreement interaction, partners played a cooperative card-matching game to end on a positive note.

Measures

Emotional Behaviors

We coded the partners' emotional behaviors in a previous study using the SPAFF (see Chapter 4, Schouten et al., 2022, manuscript in preparation), a coding scheme originally developed by Gottman and Coan (2007). The SPAFF is based on the premise that verbal and nonverbal behaviors have a social function and that this social function can be inferred from behavior by means of the cultural informant approach. This approach assumes that individuals who have knowledge about a specific cultural group, are uniquely able to infer whether a given behavior, in combination with other behaviors and in a specific (cultural) context, is affective and conveys a social function. Also, the non(verbal) behaviors that represent an emotional behavioral category are considered illustrative rather than exhaustive, giving leeway for the possibility that some emotions may go accompanied with different (non)verbal behaviors across cultures. Because the SPAFF offers a) a systematic way of perceiving the social function of behavior against the background of the cultural context, and b) does not focus on a fixed list of non(verbal) cues that ought to be present to be able to code for a category, we deem it especially suitable for usage across cultural contexts.

The SPAFF includes 16 emotional behaviors, of which five positive (affection, enthusiasm, humor, interest and validation) and 11 negative emotional behaviors (anger, domineering defensiveness, belligerence, threat, criticism, contempt, fear/tension, sadness, disgust and whining) (see Appendix A.4 for an overview of each SPAFF code).

Each emotional behavior (i.e., SPAFF code) is based on a combination of facial expressions, gestures, postures, verbal content, voice, and speech rate. Belgian couple interactions were coded by three Dutch-speaking coders and Japanese couple interactions were coded by three Japanese coders, using the software The Observer XT. Coders were trained for 20-30 hours, during which they watched example videos, did coding exercises, and coded collectively. To ensure that coders continued to interpret the SPAFF codes in a similar way, regular coding meetings were organized to discuss fragments that were difficult to code or that coders disagreed on. Emotional behaviors, if present, were coded each speech turn (usually a phrase); the coding yielded second by second data. Coders coded behavior as neutral when exchanges were non-affective (i.e., mere informational exchanges such as 'what are we eating for dinner tonight'), or when it was unclear if a behavior was affective. For each moment a partner was not speaking, a positive, negative, or neutral listener behavior — or stonewalling — was coded.

To assess inter-rater reliability (IRR), at least 30% of the couples in each cultural group were coded by several coders: 29 (50%) Belgian couples were coded by all three coders and 32 (40%) Japanese couples were coded by at least two out of three coders (not a fully crossed design; each coder was paired with every other coder). We computed the average Gwet's AC (i.e., across couples) for each emotional behavior per partner, and compared it against a minimum Gwet's AC (derived with permutation based simulation, see Bodner, Tuerlinckx, Bosmans, & Ceulemans, 2021), which represented coder agreement based on chance variation between the coder's ratings. Adequate IRR was achieved when a behavior's average Gwet's AC exceeded the minimum Gwet's AC, which meant that coders' agreement for a

behavior was higher than could be expected based on chance. We excluded those emotional behaviors for which the IRR could not be reliably determined because of non-existent or low frequencies (i.e., observed less than 5% of the time in at least 266 participants across both cultures): behaviors that did not occur at all were threats, whining, disgust and enthusiasm, and behaviors with low frequencies were affection, interest, belligerence, contempt, sadness, and stonewalling. For the remaining emotional behaviors, which were anger, domineering, defensiveness, criticism, fear/tension, validation, and humor, we achieved adequate IRRs for the behaviors of both partners (see table 5.1).

Control Measures

Conflict Topic and Intensity

To select a disagreement topic for the conflict interaction, partners completed an adapted version of the Couple Problem Inventory (CPI, Gottman et al., 1977) during the pre-laboratory phase. This adapted version of the CPI consisted of 22 areas of disagreement (i.e., children, in-laws, and finances). We supplemented these original areas of disagreement with items from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and items suggested by our Japanese collaborators, such as face (e.g., losing face), role division and gender expectation. For each area of disagreement, partners rated the degree of disagreement on a scale ranging from 0 (*no disagreement at all*) to 100 (*high disagreement*). Each area of disagreement rated by either one of the partners as higher than 0 was incorporated in a list from which couples chose a disagreement topic for the disagreement interaction.

Table 5.1. Gwet's AC for each emotional behavior per partner in Japan and Belgium

	Japan		Belgium	
	Average Gwet's AC (range)	Minimum Gwet's AC	Average Gwet's AC (range)	Minimum Gwet's AC
CritF	0.99 (0.90-1)	0.77	0.97 (0.77-1)	0.77
DefeF	0.99 (0.87-1)	0.78	0.96 (0.78-1)	0.78
DomiF	0.95 (0.42-1)	0.77	0.91 (0.62-1)	0.77
AngeF	0.98 (0.77-1)	0.77	0.91 (0.64-1)	0.77
FearF	0.96 (0.63-1)	0.78	0.99 (0.91-1)	0.79
HumoF	0.94 (0.81-1)	0.78	0.97 (0.93-1)	0.79
ValiF	0.88 (0.64-1)	0.78	0.95 (0.86-1)	0.79
CritM	0.99 (0.80-1)	0.78	0.99 (0.92-1)	0.78
DefeM	0.95 (0.42-1)	0.77	0.96 (0.82-1)	0.78
DomiM	0.97 (0.75-1)	0.77	0.93 (0.64-1)	0.78
AngeM	0.99 (0.83-1)	0.77	0.95 (0.76-1)	0.78
FearM	0.94 (0.65-1)	0.78	0.99 (0.91-1)	0.78
HumoM	0.95 (0.83-1)	0.78	0.97 (0.85-1)	0.79
ValiM	0.89 (0.63-0.97)	0.78	0.95 (0.87-1)	0.79

Note. F = female, and M = male, Vali = validation, Humo = humor, Fear = fear/Tension, Ange = anger Domi = domineering, Defe = defensiveness, Crit = criticism.

Statistical Analyses

We used a dynamic network approach to examine partners' interpersonal emotional sequences per culture, using binary time series data. To quantify the strength of the interpersonal emotional sequences (which consisted of two emotional behaviors, one of the woman and one of the man), we computed contingency values using Cohen's Kappa:

$$\kappa(X,Y) = \frac{P_A - P_E}{1 - P_E}$$

PA denotes the proportion of time points at which both partners engage in, plus the time points at which both do not engage in the emotional behaviors under investigation. PE denotes the chance agreement, which is the product of the relative frequencies of the emotional behaviors, plus the product of their complements. Cohen's Kappa ranges from -1 to 1: a negative contingency value indicates that the interpersonal emotional sequence occurs less than could be expected based on chance, and a positive contingency value indicates that it occurs more than could be expected based on chance. A value of 0 indicates chance occurrence. In this study, we examined the *temporal* interpersonal emotional sequences between the partners' emotional behaviors. This means that contingency values depict how likely it is that a behavior of one partner is followed by a behavior of the other partner five seconds later. We chose a lag of five seconds because we found that five seconds was approximately the mean length of a behavioral event. The contingency values were calculated per culture, on the population data. Because we considered all possible combinations of behaviors, the calculations yielded a total of 98 Cohen's Kappa's per culture (7 emotional behaviors woman * 7 emotional behaviors man * 2 partners (lagged behavior of each partner)).

We determined the *significance* of contingency values for the interpersonal emotional sequences in two steps. First, we computed the relative frequency and serial dependency of each behavior (see table 5.2.). The relative frequency is the proportion of time points during which

an emotional behavior occurs, and the serial dependency is the likelihood that the emotional behavior is followed by the same emotional behavior in the same partner one second later (e.g., the likelihood that the woman's anger is followed by anger in the woman 1 second later). Second, we examined whether the contingency values of the sequences were significant, given the relative frequency and serial dependence of the behaviors. We used an extension of the permutation-based simulation approach by Bodner et al., (2021) to test the hypothesis for each sequence that partners' behaviors *are* associated, against the null hypothesis that they *are not* associated. The significance of each sequence was tested on the population data, rather than per couple. A significant interpersonal emotional sequence thus indicates that, on average per culture, partners' emotional behaviors are associated more or less (i.e., a positive vs. a negative sequence) than can be expected based on chance variation.

We computed and tested the significance of contingency values on the population data per culture, rather than by couple, as we lacked the power. Unfortunately, this implied that we could not make any direct comparisons between cultures. In the results section, we therefore describe the cultural emotional networks separately. We focus on sequences that were present in at least 10% of a culture's couples, and that were significantly associated at a level of $p < 0.01$. These sequences are depicted in the networks, represented in Figures 5.1 and 5.2. An overview of all behavioral sequences can be found in Tables 5.3. and 5.4. for Belgium and Japan respectively.

Table 5.2. Relative frequency and serial dependence of emotional behaviors in each culture

	Japan		Belgium	
	Mean (SD)	p1.1	Mean (SD)	p1.1
CritF	0.012 (0.029)	0.877	0.014 (0.034)	0.893
DefeF	0.019 (0.045)	0.873	0.018 (0.026)	0.872
DomiF	0.036 (0.087)	0.881	0.052 (0.089)	0.885
AngeF	0.013 (0.033)	0.880	0.055 (0.068)	0.887
FearF	0.027 (0.045)	0.795	0.002 (0.006)	0.800
HumoF	0.048 (0.059)	0.806	0.025 (0.029)	0.816
ValiF	0.116 (0.086)	0.624	0.032 (0.028)	0.624
CritM	0.008 (0.030)	0.893	0.006 (0.020)	0.883
DefeM	0.034 (0.066)	0.851	0.031 (0.053)	0.871
DomiM	0.018 (0.045)	0.864	0.044 (0.065)	0.898
AngeM	0.006 (0.017)	0.792	0.026 (0.043)	0.888
FearM	0.035 (0.058)	0.832	0.004 (0.016)	0.919
HumoM	0.042 (0.047)	0.804	0.024 (0.029)	0.791
ValiM	0.092 (0.083)	0.639	0.032 (0.026)	0.620

Note. p1.1 is the serial dependence, which is the chance that an emotional behavior occurs at time point 2 given that it also occurred at time point 1. F = female, and M = male, Vali = validation, Humo = humor, Fear = fear/Tension, Ange = anger Domi = domineering, Defe = defensiveness, Crit = criticism.

5.3. Results

Preliminary Results

Topic of Disagreement

Belgian and Japanese couples talked about different topics of disagreement is the lab ($\chi 2$ (17) = 32.19, p = .004): ‘Relations with in-laws, family or neighbors’ was the topic most frequently discussed by

Belgian couples (15.5%) whereas 'Money or possessions relevant to your relationship' was the topic most frequently discussed by Japanese couples (20%) (see Appendix A.3 for the full list of disagreement topics). Despite differences in the chosen topic of disagreement, the degree of disagreement did not differ between Belgian and Japanese couples ($t(136) = 0.49$, $p = .62$): couples from both cultures chose topics on which they disagreed to moderate extents ($M_{BE} = 32.69$ (on a scale from 0 to 100), $SD_{BE} = 20.95$; $M_{JP} = 34.44$, $SD_{JP} = 20.28$). Moreover, in each culture, more than 80% of the couples (BE: 91.4%; JP: 82.5%) chose a topic with a disagreement rate higher than the average disagreement rate across all areas of disagreement ($M_{BE} = 17.51$, $SD_{BE} = 12.89$; $M_{JP} = 20.96$, $SD_{JP} = 14.19$).

Average Belgian Emotional Dynamic Network

Figure 5.1 visualizes the dynamic network of behavioral sequences in Belgian couples. We find that part of the network centers around anger. For example, there is a positive association between anger and validation: the wife's anger is often followed by the husband's validation (i.e., by the husband's backchanneling or agreement). This suggests that Belgian husbands legitimize and even encourage their wife's anger. There are also negative associations between fear/tension or humor on the one hand, and anger on the other. Thus, Belgian partners are less inclined to be angry after the other partner has shown fear/tension (e.g., express worry and nervousness), and Belgian husbands are less likely to be angry after their wife had cracked a joke.

We also find that part of the Belgian network centers around fear. In addition to the negative fear male-female anger sequence, we find a

negative association between fear/tension and domineering: Belgian wives do not readily dominate (i.e., invalidate or patronize) their husbands, after the latter have shown fear. There is also a negative association between fear/tension and validation: Belgian husbands do not readily validate the wife's fearful attitude. Notably, this is in contrast with anger, as a woman who conveys anger, *is* met with a validating and understanding stance by the man.

Finally, we find a positive association between criticism and defensiveness, and a negative association between domineering and humor. Thus, Belgian husbands are likely to defend themselves when their wives have shown criticism, and Belgian wives do not readily crack a joke or cause mutual laughter after their husbands have domineered them. Criticism and domineering appear to contribute to a negative atmosphere. Last, we find a positive association between humor in one and humor in the other partner, and a negative association between validation and defensiveness: humor in either spouse renders subsequent humor in the other spouse more likely, and Belgian wives become less defensive after they have been validated by their spouse.

Table 5.3. Significant links in the Belgian dynamic emotion network

Sequence	Strength and sign. level	% Couples
AngeF-ValiM	0.0262**	65.52
AngeM-CritF	-0.0186*	18.96
AngeM-ValiF	0.0276*	46.55
CritF-DefeM	0.1025***	32.76
CritM-FearF	-0.003***	3.45
DefeF-AngeM	-0.0126*	36.21
DomiM-HumoF	-0.0329***	41.38
FearF-AngeM	-0.0038***	10.34
FearF-CritM	-0.003***	3.45
FearF-FearM	-0.0028***	1.72
FearF-ValiM	-0.0038***	15.52
FearM-AngeF	-0.008***	10.34
FearM-CritF	-0.0066***	8.62
FearM-DefeF	-0.007***	8.62
FearM-DomiF	-0.008***	10.34
FearM-FearF	-0.0028***	1.72
HumoF-AngeM	-0.0261**	32.76
HumoF-HumoM	0.1047***	51.72
HumoM-HumoF	0.1148***	51.72
ValiF-FearM	0.0181*	13.79
ValiF-HumoM	-0.0158*	58.62
ValiM-DefeF	-0.0228**	44.83

Note. ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05. The table includes all significant links, irrespective of significance level and % couples. The links in light grey either have a significance level of 0.01<p<0.05 and/or occur in less than 10% of the couples. F = female, and M = male, Vali = validation, Humo = humor, Fear = fear/Tension, Ange = anger Domi = domineering, Defe = defensiveness, Crit = criticism.

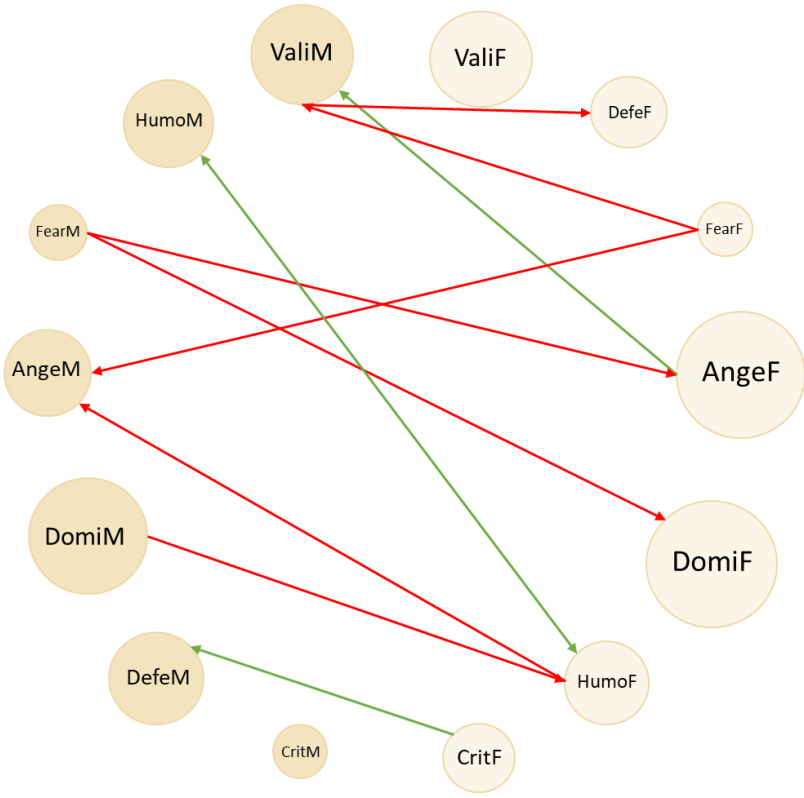


Figure 5.1. The average Belgian dynamic emotion network (Cohen's Kappa index computed on 5s lagged data). The network depicts sequences of which both emotional behaviors are present in at least 10% of the couples and that have a significance level of at least $p<0.01$. Red arrows represent negative sequences (i.e., a negative Cohen's kappa) and green arrows represent positive sequences (i.e., a positive Cohen's kappa). Emotional behaviors with a negative red sequence are associated less than expected by chance, while emotional behaviors with a positive green sequence are associated more than expected by chance. The sizes of the nodes represent the relative frequencies of the emotional behaviors. F = female, and M = male, Vali = validation, Humo = humor, Fear = fear/Tension, Ange = anger Domi = domineering, Defe = defensiveness, Crit = criticism.

Average Japanese Emotional Dynamic Network

Figure 5.2 visualizes the dynamic network of behavioral sequences in Japanese couples. We find that only seven of the possible 98 interpersonal emotional sequences are significant, which means that there are few associations between the emotional behaviors of Japanese partners. The few sequences that are significant, show that Japanese couples' emotional sequences center around 1) validation, 2) humor and 3) criticism, which we discuss in this order.

We find a negative (rather than positive) association between validation in one and validation in the other partner: Japanese spouses are unlikely to reciprocate validation. Validation appears to be one-directional where either one spouse lays out their point of view and the other shows understanding. In contrast, there is a positive association between humor in one and humor in the other partner; humor (i.e., making a joke, teasing the partner) tends to be reciprocated. Furthermore, as depicted by a negative association between humor and validation, Japanese husbands' attempts at humor often do not meet their wives' validation. This suggests that humor is not always considered funny or well-placed, such as when it is supposed to distract from a personal attack or a serious conversation (see the criticism-humor sequence later). Finally, we find a positive association between criticism and defensiveness: Japanese husbands defend themselves after being criticized by their wife. However, as depicted by a negative association between domineering and criticism, Japanese wives are less likely to engage in criticism, after their husbands have domineered them.

Robustness of the Findings

We find that the findings are rather robust across cultures: when we leave out those couples for which the partners do not show both behaviors of a sequence, the contingency values become stronger, more significant and do not change sign in both Belgium and Japan (see Appendix A.5 for an overview). However, remarkable in Japan is that when partners *do* engage in both emotional behaviors of a sequence, the average network goes from including very few significant sequences, to many more strongly significant sequences (mostly $p < 0.001$). For example, the contingency values of the sequences that involve criticism (see above), become more significant when we include only those couples for which partners show both behaviors of a sequence. We also find other types of sequences that involve criticism. For instance, as depicted by a negative association, Japanese wives are less inclined to engage in criticism after their husbands have shown validation. There are also positive associations between criticism in husbands on the one hand, and criticism or defensiveness in the wives on the other. Thus, Japanese wives are likely to either attack the husband's character and blame him, or to deny responsibility and blame, after the husbands have shown criticism. Finally, we find a positive association between criticism and humor: Japanese husbands are likely to crack a joke and cause mutual laughter, after the wives have criticized them. These sequences, which are all carried by more than 10% of the Japanese couples, provide further evidence for the idea that the Japanese network centers around criticism. Finally, there is a positive association between the Japanese husbands' and wives' anger, and between the husband's domineering and wife's defensiveness.

Thus, Japanese wives are inclined to engage in anger after their husband has shown anger, and they readily engage in defensive behavior after their husband has domineered them.

Table 5.4. Significant links in the Japanese dynamic emotion network

Sequence	Strength and sign. level	% Couples
AngeM-AngeF	0.0332*	10.00
CritF-DefeM	0.0735***	28.75
CritF-HumoM	0.0035*	25.00
CritM-CritF	0.0174*	12.50
CritM-DefeF	0.0784*	17.50
DefeF-DomiM	0.0592*	25.00
DomiM-CritF	-0.0148**	18.75
FearF-DefeM	-0.0214*	48.75
FearF-FearM	0.0357*	63.75
HumoF-HumoM	0.1862***	78.75
HumoM-HumoF	0.2035***	78.75
HumoM-ValiF	-0.0349***	83.75
ValiF-HumoM	-0.0095*	83.75
ValiF-ValiM	-0.0205***	100
ValiM-CritF	-0.0133*	32.50
ValiM-HumoF	-0.0135*	82.50
ValiM-ValiF	-0.0133***	100

Note. ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05. The table includes all significant links, irrespective of significance level and % couples. The links in light grey either have a significance level of 0.01<p<0.05 and/or occur in less than 10% of the couples.

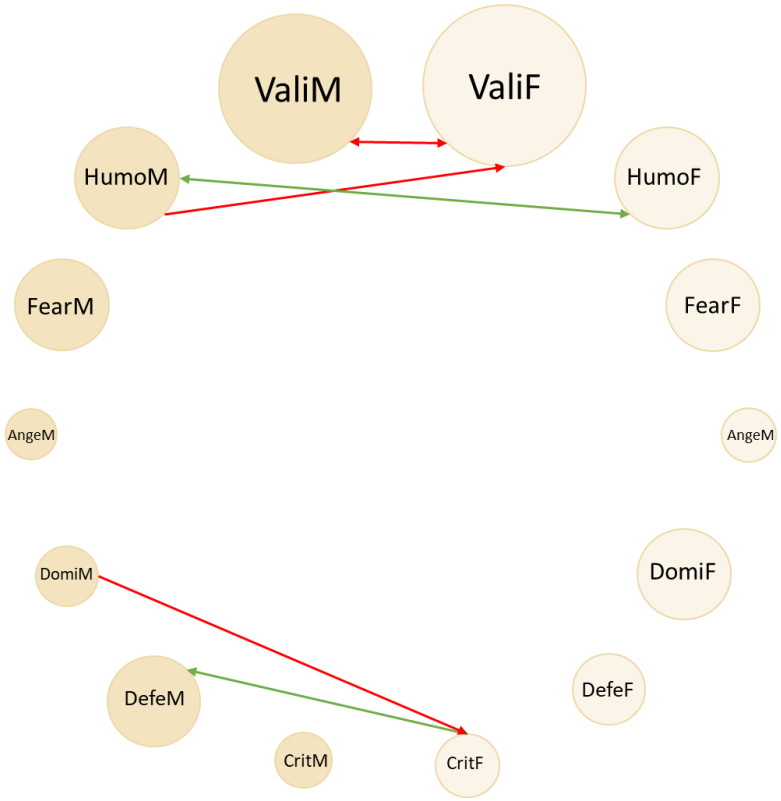


Figure 5.2. The average Japanese dynamic emotion network (Cohen's Kappa index computed on 5s lagged data). The network depicts sequences of which both emotional behaviors are present in at least 10% of the couples and that have a significance level of at least $p<0.01$. Red arrows represent negative sequences (i.e., a negative Cohen's kappa) and green arrows represent positive sequences (i.e., a positive Cohen's kappa). Emotional behaviors with a negative red sequence are associated less than expected by chance, while emotional behaviors with a positive green sequence are associated more than expected by chance. The sizes of the nodes represent the relative frequencies of the emotional behaviors. F = female, and M = male, Vali = validation, Humo = humor, Fear = fear/Tension, Ange = anger Domi = domineering, Defe = defensiveness, Crit = criticism.

5.4. Discussion

In this study, we explored the interpersonal sequences of emotional behaviors during Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement interactions. To examine these sequences, we used a dynamic network approach (Bodner et al., 2021) on SPAFF-coded data; the SPAFF is a coding scheme specifically developed for coding emotional behavior in marital interactions (Coan & Gottman, 2007). Couples' temporal interpersonal emotional sequences consisted of either a positive or negative association (i.e., contingency value, Cohen's Kappa) between two emotional behaviors, one of each partner, and if significant, indicated whether one partner's behavior was more or less likely to be followed by the other partner's behavior five seconds later, as compared to chance. Per culture, we computed contingency values for all possible sequences at once, and considered only those sequences for which the contingency values were sufficiently significant and occurred in at least 10% of the culture's couples. We predicted that Belgian and Japanese couple interactions would be characterized by different sequences: we proposed that the sequences of Belgian couples would center around anger and domineering, and those of Japanese couples around validation. We found some evidence for these predictions — even though we were not able to test for the significance of cultural differences. In what follows, we summarize some of the key findings for each culture, highlighting how these findings are consistent with Belgian and Japanese relationship goals.

Interpersonal Sequences of Emotional Behaviors in Belgian Couples

The Belgian couple interactions constituted of several sequences that are compatible with the idea that Belgian partners each negotiate their autonomy in the relationship. First, Belgian husbands condone or justify their wives' anger by validating them. As anger claims (individual) rights (Kuppens et al., 2003), this sequence can be seen to bolster (the wife's) autonomy. Second, the Belgian wife criticism-more husband defensiveness sequence suggests that the husband draws his boundaries: by being defensive, he turns the tide of blame that his wives casts upon him, thus arguably protecting his self-esteem over any relationship concerns. Finally, the Belgian husband domineering-less wife humor sequence suggests that Belgian wives do not want to make light of their husband's forceful perspective. In sum, all three sequences can be seen as supporting one spouse's independence and autonomy: one partner claims autonomy (i.e., anger, criticism domineering) and the other either protects their own autonomy (i.e., defensiveness), or grants autonomy (i.e., validation).

The Belgian couple interactions also constituted of interpersonal emotional sequences that involved fear/tension, which appeared compatible with the idea that while spouses may readily assert their needs during a disagreement, they do not do so at disproportionate cost to the other (Chapter 2, Schouten et al., 2022, manuscript submitted). We found that either spouse was less likely to be angry when the other showed fear/tension, and that Belgian wives were less inclined to be dominant. Fear/tension conveys that partners struggle to say in a clear and direct way what they think, i.e., through speech disturbances,

nervous laughter and gestures. Being angry and dominant in turn, for instance, may only render fearful partners more afraid of communicating clearly and directly, which can be seen in Belgian contexts as destructive for solving disagreement. This idea is further emphasized by the sequences female anger-more male validation and female fear/tension-less male validation; Belgian husbands show understanding for their wives' assertive behavior, but not readily for their wives' fear of communicating directly and openly.

Finally, the Belgian couple interactions were made up of several sequences that were consistent with the idea that disagreement ought to involve acceptable levels of escalation to remain productive (Gottman, 1994): on the one hand, partners assert their needs even if this taints the atmosphere, and on the other hand, partners make sure that the conversation remains sufficiently positive. We found that humor in one spouse elicited humor in the other, and that humor in women was less likely to be followed by anger in men. Shared laughter contributes to a light atmosphere and conveys that partners can put into perspective whatever problem they are discussing. Moreover, humor may foster relational closeness (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Horn, Samson, Debrot, & Perrez, 2019). Lastly, the husband validation-wife less defensiveness sequence might suggest that it was less necessary for wives to protect their autonomy, after they had been validated by their husbands.

Interpersonal Sequences of Emotional Behaviors in Japanese Couples

The Japanese network of sequences is compatible with the Japanese emphasis on harmony and relatedness (Rothbaum, 2000). It was

characterized by very few significant interpersonal emotional sequences, and by a negative validation-validation sequence. In general, then, Japanese couples are not emotionally reactive, which reflects a calm interaction. Furthermore, non-reciprocal validation appears to suggest that one spouse accommodates the other's point of view. Taken together, these sequences (or the non-existence thereof), seem to fit the Japanese relationship goals of harmony and relatedness: Japanese partners do not reactively respond to the partner's emotional behaviors, nor negotiate their concerns, but instead proactively accommodate their spouse.

The Japanese network of sequences also aligned with the value Japanese partners place on adjustment and self-criticism (Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama et al., 1997). We found that several sequences involved criticism, which can be seen in Japanese contexts as conveying a need for partners to change and adjust behavior, i.e., by pointing out the partner's flaws and shortcomings. How Japanese partners respond to criticism may be crucial; it reflects whether partners are willing to improve and adjust their behavior for the sake of the relationship. We find that Japanese husbands may protect their own rights and refuse to accommodate, i.e., by responding defensively after the wives had shown criticism. Also, dominant husbands are less likely to be met with a critical stance; wives who are urged to submit to the husband's point of view, may not feel room to request change and adjustment. In sum, the interpersonal sequences that center around criticism reflect two partners who negotiate responsibility for restoring relatedness.

Finally, although Japanese partners are, in general, not emotional reactive, we found that when partners *both* engage in the behaviors that constitute a sequence, their behaviors are also likely to

be linked. In addition to the sequences involving criticism described above, we also found a male validation-less female criticism sequence, a female criticism-more male humor sequence, a male criticism-more female defensiveness sequence, and a male criticism-more female criticism sequence. This provides further evidence for the idea that Japanese partners together negotiate the relational task of adjustment. Finally, we found other sequences that involve negative emotional behaviors: male anger-more female anger, and female defensiveness-more male domineering. These sequences possibly reflect that some Japanese couples were unable to use indirect forms of communication, such as mindreading and emotional control, and therefore had to rely on open and direct communication (see Chapter 2, Schouten et al., 2022, manuscript submitted). Another explanation could be that the angry or dominant partner necessitated a response from the other, since being angry and dominant is particularly out of line with what Japanese partners value in their relationships, i.e., adjustment and interdependence.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few caveats when it comes to interpreting Belgian and Japanese couples' interpersonal emotional sequences. As explained in the method section, we calculated the average interpersonal emotional sequences per culture, rather than per couple, because we lacked power. This meant that we were unable to determine whether certain sequences occurred significantly more in one culture than in the other. However, we were able to compare the types of sequences that were or were not significant on average in each culture. For instance, significant

sequences in Belgian couple interactions involved anger and fear/tension, while none of the sequences included these emotional behaviors in Japan. Also, many sequences in Japan centered around criticism, while only one sequence involved criticism in Belgian couple interactions. Future research should increase power to be able to compare the prevalence of the sequences between cultures.

Second, and related to the first limitation, there are many episodes during which an emotional behavior was not coded because a partner is either listening or simply laying out his/her point of view in a non-affective way. This resulted in many time points during which a) both partners did not engage in an emotional behavior, or b) one partner engaged in an emotional behavior and the other did not, which possibly contributed to fewer strong and significant links. Consequently, we obscured characteristics of interpersonal emotional sequences during 'pure' emotional episodes. Future research may want to include only those episodes that are coded as emotional, while accounting for intercouple differences in the total duration of emotional episodes.

Third, the dynamic network approach that we used in the present study computed contingency values (i.e., Cohen's Kappa) to examine how the emotional behaviors of partners were associated. An advantage of this approach was that we could consider sequences between all combinations of partners' emotional behaviors at once, providing a thorough insight into which sequences were prevalent in Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement interactions. However, this approach did not allow us to make causal inferences, i.e., did one partner's emotional behavior predict the emotional behavior of the other partner? Such causal inferences can be more readily made with longitudinal multilevel dyadic regression models (Kenny et al., 2006), for example.

Yet, with these models, we cannot consider all possible sequences simultaneously, like we did with the dynamic network approach. Future research may therefore benefit from using networks based on regression models (Van Borkulo et al., 2014), or combine the network approach with a regression approach, whereby the network can serve as input to know which specific partner-effects should be examined more closely by means of regression (Lumino, Ragozini, van Duijn, & Vitale, 2017).

Finally, we focused solely on temporal sequences between *two* emotional behaviors, rather than three or more emotional behaviors. We were therefore unable to examine multistep sequences over time, i.e., if anger is likely to be followed by validation, then what happens in turn to the anger in the following moments? The networks seem to suggest that such multistep sequences could be at play in couples' interactions: for example, from the Belgian network we can infer that domineering in Belgian men, gives rise to less humor in Belgian women, which in turn will render humor more, and anger less likely in Belgian men. Adapting the network to unravel more complex patterns and behavioral cycles among partners gives more precise insight into how partners influence each other's emotions over time, and possibly towards culturally desirable states.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the present study is, to our knowledge, one of the first to examine interpersonal sequences between partners' emotional behaviors across cultures. Previous cross-cultural studies had solely examined cultural variation in couples' mean levels of

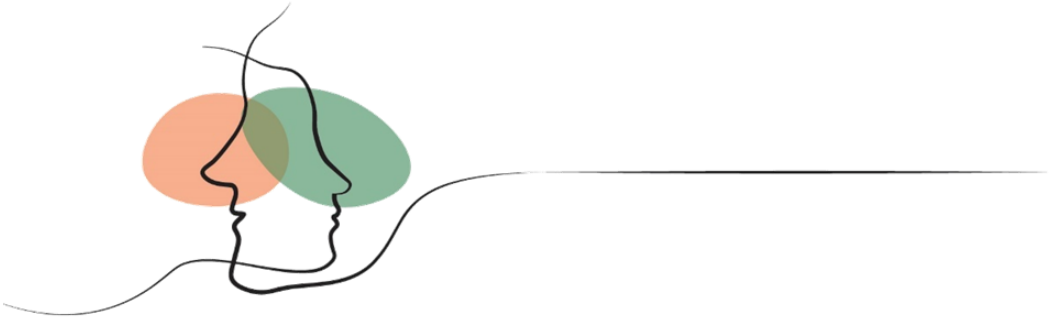
emotional behaviors (Tsai et al., 2006; Chapter 4, Schouten et al., 2022, manuscript in preparation). While these studies showed that couple interactions are characterized by different emotional behaviors across cultures, they did not fully appreciate that emotional behaviors happen primarily *between* partners, such that their behaviors are associated (over time). In fact, emotional behaviors can be considered relational movements quite literally, which convey how partners' position themselves in relation to their counterpart (Parkinson, 2019). For example, by looking away and refusing to answer, partners withdraw from the conversation, and by leaning forward, raising one's voice, and saying that you are frustrated, partners confront the partner and tackle the conversation. As relational movements, emotional behaviors are likely to elicit an emotional reaction in the partner and transform the interaction (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Van Kleef, 2009). Examining partners' interpersonal emotional sequences across cultures, acknowledges the relational nature of emotional behaviors, and provides insight into how partners orient emotionally towards each other in culturally specific ways.

Finally, this study provides preliminary evidence for the idea that the interpersonal emotional sequences that make up Belgian and Japanese couple disagreement, emerge against the backdrop of the prevalent cultural relationship ideals. For example, the female anger-more male validation sequence prevalent in Belgian couple interactions, fits independent relationship goals foregrounded in Belgium, and the negative validation-validation sequence in Japanese couple interactions, appears to be consistent with interdependent relationship goals emphasized in Japan. This means that partners' emotional sequences are not random, but occur systematically in line with what it

means to have a good relationship in a respective cultural context (Mesquita et al., 2014). It also highlights the importance of taking the cultural meanings and relationship practices into account in trying to understand the specific roles of interpersonal emotional processes in couple interactions.

6

Discussion



6.1. The Interplay Between Emotions and Culture at the Interpersonal Level

The aim of this dissertation was to map cultural variation in couples' emotional interactions. To date, much cross-cultural emotion research set out to examine cultural differences in emotions as experienced by individuals. In contrast, this dissertation started from the premise that emotions are inherently relational, and that cross-cultural emotion research should therefore focus on cultural variation in people's ongoing emotional interactions — here, we examined variation in the emotional interactions of couples in situ, during a disagreement discussion. We assumed that couples' emotional interactions during disagreement would differ across sociocultural contexts along with differences in relationship practices, goals and values. In three studies with Belgian and Japanese couples, we investigated four research aims: we studied cultural variation in 1) partners' conceptions of couple disagreement, 2) couples' emotional behaviors, 3) the patterns of emotional behaviors that were associated with relationship outcomes, and 4) partners' interpersonal emotional sequences.

The research presented in this dissertation is innovative in several ways. First, we present one of the few cross-cultural studies that examines how couples' *emotional behaviors* vary across cultures. We went beyond the valence of behaviors to describe specific types of emotional behaviors. In contrast to positive and negative behaviors, specific emotional behaviors (e.g., anger, validation) each represent different relationship orientations. Mapping the specific types of emotional behaviors that are prevalent in Belgian and Japanese couples therefore provide insight into the important themes of couple

interactions in each culture. For instance, knowing that Belgian couples more often engage in anger than Japanese couples tells us something about the importance Belgian and Japanese partners assign (or do not assign) to asserting and fulfilling personal needs during a disagreement. Second, to our knowledge, we present one of the first studies that examines cultural differences in how partners' emotional behaviors are associated over time, thereby uncovering how partners do emotions together in culturally specific ways. These findings, however modest, may provide a jumping board for further investigating the role of interpersonal emotional processes in achieving culturally desirable and beneficial relationships. Finally, the findings of this dissertation suggest that the cultural variations in couples' emotional behaviors can be understood from the differences in the prevalent meanings and beliefs about couple disagreement and relationships across cultures. This is the first study to suggest systematic differences in observed behaviors; a finding that both validates and complements earlier cross-cultural studies on emotional experience.

In what follows, I give an overview of the main findings from each study. Next, I explain the theoretical and practical implications of the research, and finally, I address some limitations and future directions.

6.2. Overview of Findings

Different Conceptions of Couple Disagreement in Belgium and Japan

The first aim of this dissertation was to investigate Belgian and Japanese partners' conceptions of couple disagreement. We started from the observation that relationship researchers in Western cultural contexts (predominantly the U.S. cultural context) have specific assumptions about couple disagreement, one of them being that what matters for the relationship is not *that* disagreements happen, but *how* partners deal with them (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman, 1994; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). These assumptions have guided relationship research on emotions, with many relationship researchers setting out to examine which emotional behaviors during a disagreement are, and which ones are not adaptive for the relationship (i.e., Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002; Johnson et al., 2005; Markman et al., 2010). This research found that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, i.e., a combination of contempt, criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling, predict divorce, while anger does not, for example (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). We wanted to explore if researchers' assumptions on couple disagreement, which have been formed against the backdrop of a Western cultural context, were similar or different from lay people's assumptions with varying (i.e., non-Western) cultural backgrounds. We suggested that Belgian partners, being based in a Western-European culture, would largely share the assumptions on couple disagreement put forward in relationship literature, but that Japanese partners would not. In other words, we proposed that *Belgian and Japanese partners*

would conceive of couple disagreement differently because they derive meaning from the salient relationship goals, values, and practices in their cultural context.

Chapter 2 supported the idea that Belgian and Japanese conceptions of couple disagreement differ in meaningful ways. In a focus group study, we asked Belgian partners in Belgium and Japanese partners in Japan what they consider 'good' and 'bad' ways of dealing with disagreement, which emotions they typically experience, which behaviors they engage in, and how they influence each other's behaviors during a disagreement. In line with relationship researchers' conceptions of couple disagreement in (predominantly) U.S. cultural contexts, we found that Belgian partners considered disagreement as inevitable and necessary for the relationship: they view disagreement as an opportunity to negotiate individual needs, gain understanding of each other's differences, and grow closer to each other. They also emphasized that it was important to have open and direct communication about any dissatisfaction with the relationship. Belgian couples considered this open communication a prerequisite for solving the disagreement. In contrast, Japanese partners were reluctant to address disagreement head on. They shared in the focus groups that they would gauge if the situation truly required that the partners discussed their differences at all. If they judged it did, the Japanese couples might still try to avoid disagreement, resign, refrain from showing their emotions, anticipate what the partner needs and feels (i.e., mindreading), and adjust to the partner.

Belgian and Japanese partners' conceptions of couple disagreement can be read to reflect the dominant relationship goals and values in each culture. In talking openly about dissatisfactions, Belgian

couples focus on their personal needs, which may be seen to promote individual autonomy. In avoiding disagreement and anticipating the needs of the partner, Japanese partners may foster harmony and mutual adjustment, which are important aspects of interdependence. This study thus supports the idea that conceptions of couple disagreement and conflict strategies draw on, as well as materialize, the respective cultural relationship models that are prevalent in Belgian and Japanese cultural contexts. In the subsequent studies, we examined if the cultural ideas and beliefs of how to deal with disagreement in healthy and constructive ways, converged with the behaviors in actual couple interactions.

Cultural Differences in the Emotional Interactions of Belgian and Japanese Couples

Emotional Behaviors

In Chapter 4, we observed and coded the emotional behaviors of Belgian and Japanese couples who discussed a disagreement in the lab. We predicted that *Belgian and Japanese couples would engage in different emotional behaviors in line with the cultural relationship goals.* Confirming our prediction, we found that Belgian couples spent more time than Japanese in angry and domineering behavior, and that Japanese couples spent more time in validation and fear/tension than their Belgian counterparts. Angry partners expressed frustration about the partner's behavior or the situation; domineering partners invalidated or belittled their partner. Both anger and domineering behaviors may in the Belgian context be viewed as ways of direct and open

communication. They assert personal needs, and influence their counterpart to submit to these needs (Kuppens et al., 2003; McNulty & Russell, 2010). In contrast, in the Japanese context anger and domineering may be seen to interfere with relational harmony. Yet, validation and fear/tension fit the goal of interdependence better. Validating partners show understanding (i.e., backchannels), apologize and express agreement, behaviors that may be particularly adaptive in Japanese couples, as they foster perspective taking and mutual adjustment. Although validation may not necessarily be maladaptive for Belgian couple interactions (Gottman et al., 1998), an exclusive focus on the other by means of validation may be devalued, as this would lead partners to lose out of sight and stand up for their own needs. Finally, fearful/tense partners conveyed worry, embarrassment and nervousness through speech disturbances, fidgeting and nervous laughter, for example. In Japanese contexts, these behaviors may help partners to either avoid disagreement (Tamir et al., 2009) or show consideration for the other's feelings (as was the case for Kuma, for instance), which can be seen as fitting with interdependent relationship goals. In contrast, in Belgian interactions, these behaviors may signal a hesitancy to speak up and say what is wrong, which is considered maladaptive for solving disagreement and achieving personal needs. Taken together, cultural differences in the emotional behaviors that were observed in an actual disagreement interaction were consistent with the culturally imbued ideas and beliefs of how to deal with disagreement in 'good' ways.

In Chapter 3, we examined suppression of emotions through video-mediated recall: we had the same Belgian and Japanese couples repeatedly report their suppression as well as the specific emotions they

experienced throughout the disagreement interaction. Previous research has suggested that suppression and emotional behavior are negatively associated (Gross, 1998; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Therefore, the suppression data provide another window onto behavior. Consistent with the observation data, the suppression data could be explained from the culture-specific relational goals. We hypothesized that Japanese partners would suppress their emotions more than Belgian partners, as Japanese partners value emotional moderation and refrain from articulating their feelings during disagreement, whereas Belgian partners do not (Chapter 2). Also, we hypothesized that the cultural difference in emotion suppression would be especially pronounced when negative disengaging emotions (i.e., anger, aloof) take precedence over negative engaging emotions (i.e., worry, guilt), but not when negative engaging emotions take precedence over negative disengaging emotions. Disengaging emotions such as anger, may be readily suppressed by Japanese partners as they unwillingly draw attention to partner's personal desires, and stand in the way of accommodating to the other (Chapter 2). Yet, engaging emotions may not necessitate suppression as they acknowledge Japanese partners' wrongdoings, and hence reaffirm interdependence. In line with our hypotheses, we found that, overall, Japanese partners suppressed their emotions more than Belgian partners. However, no cultural difference in emotion suppression was found when negative engaging emotions took precedence over negative disengaging emotions. Conversely, Japanese partners *did* suppress their emotions more than Belgian partners when they predominantly experienced negative disengaging over negative engaging emotions. These findings are consistent with those from Chapter 4, which show that Japanese partners engage is

less emotional behavior on average, and more particularly, in less angry and domineering behavior than Belgian partners. Although consistent with Chapter 4, Chapter 3 does not account for the findings in Chapter 4: we cannot assume that, for example, low (high) durations of coded angry behavior implicate that partners are (are not) suppressing their angry emotional experience. This is because a partner's experiences may not directly be translated to corresponding behaviors for reasons other than emotion suppression. For example, a Japanese partner may not engage in angry behavior because he/she accepts the situation as is, or tries to avoid disagreement. Nonetheless, Chapters 3 and 4 together support the idea that couples' emotional interactions are aligned with the cultural relationship goals and values.

Interpersonal Sequences of Emotional Behaviors

In Chapter 5, we moved beyond the mean duration of emotional behaviors, and aimed to investigate if partners' emotional behaviors were interconnected in culturally specific ways. We started from the idea that *Belgian and Japanese partners would engage in different interpersonal emotional sequences, and that these differences could be understood from the relationship goals and values in each culture.* For instance, we thought that in Belgian couples, one partner's anger would be followed by another partner's anger, as this is reflective of two partners who each negotiate autonomy in their relationship. In contrast, in Japanese couples, one partner's validation would possibly be followed by another partner's validation, as this implies that both partners take each other's perspective into account, which may in turn foster interdependence. As a first exploration, we examined temporal sequences for all the combinations of partners' emotional behaviors,

using a dynamic network approach (Bodner et al., 2021). In line with our predictions, we found that Belgian and Japanese couple interactions were marked by different interpersonal emotional sequences that appeared to be consistent with the cultural relationship goals. More concretely, Belgian couple interactions were made up of several sequences that involved anger and fear/tension. For example, Belgian husbands reciprocated their wives' anger with validation, suggesting that they legitimized and attended to their wife's anger during the disagreement. Also, Belgian partners refrained from angry behavior, and Belgian wife's were less inclined to be dominant, if the counterpart had shown fear/tension. This implies that partners do not override an already submissive and nervous partner. These and other sequences can be read as two partners who negotiate the tasks of autonomy and closeness: partners claim their autonomy in the relationship, but only to the extent that it does not unnecessarily hurt the partner.

In contrast, Japanese partners did not readily respond to each other's emotions, as depicted by few significant associations between the partner's behaviors. This is consistent with the idea that Japanese partners value calm interactions and emotional control (Chapter 2). However, some sequences stood out in that they were primarily targeted at validation and criticism. First, Japanese partners did not readily reciprocate validation after their counterpart had engaged in validating behaviors. This suggests that perspective-taking and adjustment is one-way, whereby one partner focuses primarily on the needs of the other. Second, Japanese husbands were inclined to defend themselves when their wives criticized them, and Japanese wives less readily engaged in criticism after their husbands domineered them. Criticism conveys, i.e., through blaming and character attacks, that the other partner's

personality is defect, and that he/she structurally makes the same mistakes. This may prompt partners to improve and adjust behavior, to the extent that they are sensitive to negative self-information (i.e., self-criticism) (Heine et al., 1999). The sequences that involve criticism, then, can be seen to reflect two partners who negotiate the central relational task of mutual adjustment. The study in Chapter 5 is among the first to suggest that Belgian and Japanese partners' emotional behaviors are connected in culturally specific ways that align with the relationship goals and practices that prevail in their respective culture.

Culturally Specific Emotional Interactions Make for Good Relationships

A final aim of this dissertation was to examine whether a couple's fit with culturally typical patterns of emotional behaviors would make for better relational functioning. After all, culturally valued emotional behaviors are those that presumably support the prevalent cultural relationship goals, and therefore help couples function in ways that are considered healthy and good in their respective cultures. To test this idea, we examined the link between emotional behaviors and relationship outcomes in Chapters 3 and 4. We predicted that those couples who engage in culturally typical or desirable emotional interactions, are better at resolving the disagreement, and more satisfied with their relationship. In Chapter 3, we found that emotion suppression contributed to conflict resolution differently in Belgium and Japan: in Belgium, emotion suppression was associated with low levels of conflict resolution, while in Japan, emotion suppression was unrelated to conflict resolution. High levels of emotion suppression imply that partners refrain from engaging

in emotional behaviors openly. Yet, in Belgian contexts, self-disclosure and open communication are considered key for solving disagreement (Rusbult et al., 1982). Emotion suppression may therefore impede resolution in these contexts. In contrast, in Japanese contexts, it is seen as mature when partners can infer each other's feelings without openly talking about them, and so emotion suppression may no impact conflict resolution negatively. In Chapter 4, we found that a culturally typical pattern of specific emotional behaviors — calculated by correlating each couple's emotional pattern to the average cultural emotional pattern — made for more satisfied relationships, at least in Japan. In Belgian couples, engaging in a culturally typical pattern of emotional behaviors, which involved mainly anger and domineering, resulted in low conflict resolution, whereas for Japanese couples, engaging in a culturally typical pattern involving mostly validation, resulted in high conflict resolution. Our hypothesis for conflict resolution was thus only borne out in Japanese couples. However, in Belgium, a culturally typical pattern of emotional behaviors was not associated with relationship satisfaction, suggesting that although anger and dominant behavior may be maladaptive for resolving a disagreement, they are not harmful for relational functioning more generally. In Japan, we found that couples who engaged in a culturally typical pattern of emotional behaviors, were more satisfied with their relationship. In sum, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 provide some evidence for the idea that different emotional behaviors contribute to relational functioning across cultures, possibly because these behaviors serve cultural relationship goals to different extents.

6.3. Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation makes several theoretical contributions to the field of emotion research and cultural psychology. First, it highlights that emotions are inherently relational. That is, emotions do not occur inside an individual's head, but between people, in interactions and relationships. Emotional behaviors — the focus of this dissertation — arguably provide direct channels of communication between partners, as they are visible on the outside and reveal partners' relational intentions, i.e., through facial expressions, tone of voice, and verbal cues (Parkinson, 2021; Van Kleef, 2009). As such, emotional behaviors have the potential to coordinate and influence the course of an interaction and relationship (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). For example, anger, as expressed through frustration, a raise in voice tone, and the body moving forward, conveys a non-accepting stance of the partner's behaviors, and pressures the partner to change behaviors according to one's wishes (Kuppens et al., 2003). As such, anger may worsen the atmosphere during disagreement and render conflict resolution difficult, or it may put an end to the partner's unpleasant behavior. Also, a sudden offset of yelling and irritation may lead to desirable changes in a stable relationship, yet could put at risk an already unstable relationship. We take seriously the idea that emotions are relational by studying the prevalence (Chapter 4) and interpersonal processes (Chapter 5) of emotions in ongoing couple interactions.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, this dissertation shows that culture plays a significant role in the construction of emotions at the interpersonal level (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; De Leersnyder et al., 2021). Couples' emotional behaviors appear to be informed by culture-

specific relational goals and values. For example, Belgian partners are less inclined than Japanese partners to suppress their emotions (Chapter 3), which consistent with the value placed in Belgian contexts on open communication and emotional expression during disagreement. In contrast, Japanese partners' greater tendency to suppress emotions is consistent with the value placed on emotional control (Chapter 2) (Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kito, 2005). In a similar vein, Belgian partners engage in anger more than Japanese partners; anger is beneficial in granting each partner individual autonomy, a relational goal foregrounded in Belgian relationships, yet stands in the way of interdependence and harmony, aspects that are valued in Japanese relationships (Kitayama et al., 2000). In examining the interplay between culture and emotions at the interpersonal level, we move beyond previous research that either a) examined emotions in the context of interactions and relationships, but not across different cultures, or b) studied emotions in a variety of cultures, without considering the role of interactions and relationships (for an exception, see Trommsdorff & Friedlmeier, 2010). The research in this dissertation is one of the first to consider the multiple contexts of emotions: interactions, relationships, and culture, each embedded in the next.

Finally, in this dissertation we highlight the idea that culture resides in the world, i.e., in our everyday interactions, rather than inside people's heads, as cultural values and beliefs (Adams & Markus, 2003). In this way, culture can be considered a dynamic pattern that is continuously produced and reproduced in our social (i.e., emotional) encounters (i.e., between partners, friends parents and children) (Adams & Markus, 2003; Kashima, 2008). The ways in which we *emote* with one another, may play an important role in negotiating and

determining which cultural patterns perpetuate (Kashima, Coman, Pauketat, & Yzerbyt, 2020); emotions reflect our values and concerns. Taking seriously that culture resides between people, and that emotional interactions constitute culture, means that we ought to study the interplay between culture and emotions at the micro-level. This is exactly what we did in the current dissertation. In particular, in Chapter 5 we moved beyond the mean duration of emotional behaviors, and investigated how partner's emotional behaviors are connected over time. Although the findings are preliminary, they suggest that the ways in which partners' emotional behaviors unfold dynamically and interdependently over time, may be geared towards cultural relationship goals. The findings from Chapter 5 may also provide a jumping board for further investigating the cultural process by which cultural differences in emotional behaviors come about. This would shift the question from cultural differences in the most prevalent emotions in couples' interactions, to how partners emote together in culturally specific ways that may account for these differences in prevalence.

6.4. Practical Implications

The findings of this dissertation have several practical implications. First, they may inform couple therapy. To date, much of the literature on couple therapy is based on relationship research primarily conducted in Western (i.e., U.S. and Western-European) cultural contexts. This means that current therapy interventions may be especially suitable for treating couples with a Western cultural background, but not for couples who come from a non-Western cultural context. For example, emotion suppression is commonly seen as a destructive way of dealing with

disagreement in Western cultural contexts; without sharing how partners truly feel and think, they won't get to the core of their relational problems, nor be able to solve their issues (Chapter 2) (Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). Many couple interventions are therefore targeted at getting partners to communicate about their feelings and thoughts openly, rather than suppress them (Johnson & Greenberg, 1987). While this may be an important skill to develop for Western couples — indeed, we found that emotion suppression in Belgian couples might be best avoided as it impedes conflict resolution — this may not necessarily be the case for Japanese couples, who value emotion suppression in their relationships (Chapter 2) and can better resolve their disagreement when they engage in emotion suppression (Chapter 3). Couple therapists in Japan should thus be careful to use interventions that are based on evidence from research with Western couples. By extension, the same is true for Western therapists who treat couples with a cultural background different than their own. Taken together, then, it is important that couple therapists understand and acknowledge the impact of culture on the type of intervention used (Bhugra & De Silva, 2000; Poulsen & Thomas, 2007).

Finally, this dissertation may inform those couples who navigate intercultural relationships. When two people with different cultural backgrounds come together, they bring to the interaction and relationship their own cultural meanings and ideas of how to relate with others in good ways, and they may also draw from different emotional repertoires. This could lead to misunderstandings between partners, and render conflict more likely (Dewaele, 2018; Fonseca, Ye, Koyama, Curran, & Butler, 2020). For example, a Belgian partner may be eager to share feelings and assert personal needs — i.e., by expressing

frustration about something their partner has done wrong — while the Japanese partner may keep thoughts and feelings to the self, and — in the eyes of the Belgian partner — fails to express their personal goals and needs. This could lead to mutual frustration. The Japanese partner may think their Belgian partner is selfish and does not consider the relationship, whereas the Belgian partner may feel their Japanese partner is avoidant, or that they lack a true understanding of what goes on inside them. Intercultural couples may have to put in more effort to attune to each other emotionally and coordinate their emotional interactions. Other types of relationships that involve two cultural strangers (i.e., employee and employer, majority-minority friendships) may face similar problems. Hence, when two cultures “meet”, it is important to be aware that each interaction partner may have different relationship goals, and therefore engage in different emotional patterns. Such an awareness of each other’s cultural background can foster mutual understanding, and allow for smooth(er) emotional interactions.

6.5. Limitations and Future Directions

This dissertation comes with several limitations. First, we studied emotions solely in the context of couple disagreement. While it made sense to focus on this context as a starting point (see 1.6. Research Aims), couple disagreement only represents a small slice of the scant variety of interactions that couples may encounter over the course of (oftentimes) life-long relationships. For example, couples may engage in mutual cooperation interactions, interactions that involve sharing positive/negative news, and support interactions. From these interactions may emerge different kinds of emotional interactions,

involving other types of emotions. Moreover, and as can be gathered from Chapter 2, conceptions of couple disagreement differ between Belgium and Japan; in Japanese cultural contexts, couple disagreement may be encountered less frequently, and couples also feel less inclined to directly confront disagreement. Japanese couples may therefore have felt especially at unease with the task that was required from them in the couple conflict paradigm — that is, openly discussing and solving a disagreement — above and beyond the general uneasiness that may be experienced by all couples when discussing a disagreement in the lab. From this it follows that couple disagreement in general, and particularly in a lab setting, may not be the ideal context to study Japanese couples' emotional lives. Future research should thus include other types of interactions as to broaden our insight in couples' emotional lives, and in the variety of (romantic) relationship practices and ideas that prevail across cultures. Finally, future research would benefit from examining other types of relationships, in which other types of relationship goals are likely at play, such as employee and employer relationships, friendships, etc. This would allow us to examine if the idea that emotional interactions align with the dominant cultural relationship models, holds beyond romantic relationships as well.

Second, in all studies we focused on two cultures only, Belgium and Japan, because these cultures represent two different and well-known relationship models — the models of independence and interdependence, respectively (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, comparing a Western versus an East-Asian culture may paint a limited picture of cultural diversity, as it obscures how cultures within each category (Western vs. East Asian) differ from one another, and how both Western and East-Asian cultures differ from yet other non-Western

cultures, i.e., Latin American and African cultures (Vignoles et al., 2016). Moreover, for the sake of comparison, we assumed that Belgian couples score high on independence and low on interdependence, and that the opposite was true for Japanese couples. However, this obscures the many different ways in which independence and interdependence can be manifested. For example, couples may either score high or low on both independence and interdependence (the two ways of relating do not need to be mutually exclusive) (Kagitcibasi, 2005), or couples may internalize and enact different facets of independence and interdependence (see Vignoles et al., 2016; Güngör, Karasawa, Boiger, Dinçer, & Mesquita, 2014). Taken together, contrasting Western and East-Asian cultures, as well as the notions of independence and interdependence, fails to fully capture the variety of relationship models that prevail across the world. Future research would thus benefit from moving beyond these dichotomies, by examining couple interactions in other cultures, and by considering different facets of in- and interdependence, and/or different cultural relationship models altogether (i.e., power, honor and face).

Third, throughout the dissertation, we argue that couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures because of different relationship goals. Chapter 2 does provide some evidence for the idea that goals pertaining to couple disagreement differ across cultures: Belgian couples aim to communicate openly and focus on achieving personal needs, while Japanese couples prefer indirect forms of communication and strive for mutual adjustment. However, in the subsequent studies (Chapters 3-5), we inferred rather than explicitly measured Belgian and Japanese couples' relationships goals; we assumed that Belgian and Japanese couples uphold different

relationship goals *because* they interacted in emotionally different ways. On the one hand, this does not need to pose a problem: some researchers have argued that we may want to move away from using subjective measures of culture (see Adam & Markus, 2003) by tapping into cultural patterns instead (see earlier). On the other hand, it may be useful to measure independence and interdependence, and different facets thereof, to understand why couples' emotional interactions differ across cultures. To resolve this query, future research should examine cultural relationship goals more closely by measuring relationship goals explicitly both in general and in situ, during an ongoing interaction. This would allow us to, first of all, establish whether partners are able to report on their relationship goals. If so, we could 1) gain a better insight into the *romantic* relationship models that prevail across cultures, and 2) further uncover the role of cultural relationship goals in shaping couple's emotional interactions.

Finally, the current dissertation did not examine how the different modalities of emotions are associated with each other, both concurrently and over time. We examined emotional experiences on the one hand (Chapter 3) and emotional behaviors on the other (Chapter 4), but we do not know to what extent experiences and behaviors (and other modalities, for that matter) are associated. Examining associations between emotional modalities would allow to further penetrate the 'black box of the interpersonal system', which to date, still remains largely opaque. For example, how do Japanese couples gravitate towards a mutual state of empathy, or what follows a mutual state of anger in Belgian couples, as was found in the study by Boiger et al., 2020? Is there something these couples do, certain culturally specific behaviors they engage in, that steer the interaction towards

empathy or annoyance, respectively? Also, how do experiences and behaviors evolve dynamically and interdependently over time? Perhaps, Japanese partners act annoyed towards each other, and then move to empathy to mitigate the negative impact of anger on the relationship, or perhaps they are understanding from the start. It is also possible that Belgian partners act annoyed and defensive only to then move on to a more positive state. We attempted to penetrate this black box in Chapter 5 by showing that couple's emotional interactions are marked by different interpersonal emotional sequences; these sequences may savor some emotions, but constrain others. However, more complex and fine-grained temporal patterns should be examined to uncover the black box, using sophisticated dyadic analyses. This would provide more insight into how culture, as reflected in these emotional interactions between partners, is maintained and reproduced over time (Kashima, 2008).[1]

6.5. Conclusion

To conclude, in this dissertation we proposed that Belgian and Japanese couples' emotional interactions during a disagreement discussion are scaffolded by the cultural meanings and practices of relationships, i.e., independence in Belgium and interdependence in Japan. First, we proposed that Belgian and Japanese partners would have different cultural beliefs and ideas about couple disagreement. Indeed, we found that Belgian partners viewed disagreement as an invertible process by which partners assert their needs and communicate openly about feelings and thoughts around these needs. In contrast, Japanese partners viewed disagreement as avoidable,

preferred to engage in indirect forms of communication, such as mindreading and emotional control, and valued a focus on mutual adjustment. However, as Adams & Markus (2003) point out eloquently, “cultural influence is not limited to values, beliefs, or ideas about reality, but includes differences in reality itself”. Next, therefore, we examined if the cultural conceptions of couple disagreement were reflected in couple’s emotional interactions during an actual disagreement discussion. We showed that the Belgian and Japanese conceptions of couple disagreement, as well as the notions of independence and interdependence, are not merely ideas about reality. Instead, they are linked to an actual reality where a Belgian couple’s disagreement interaction, like that of Susan and Erick, involves emotional expression, anger and dominant behavior, and where a Japanese couple’s disagreement interaction, like that of Hiroto and Kuma, is characterized by emotional moderation, guilt experiences, validation and fear/tension. Hence, the prevalent cultural beliefs, values and ideas pertaining to couple disagreement and relationships do not merely shape a couples’ emotional interactions, but they are built into these emotional interactions, and as such, they *are* culture.[2]

Notes

1. This paragraph is based on a paragraph from Schouten A., Boiger, M., Kirchner-Häusler A., Mesquita, B. Interpersonal emotions: the role of culture. In De Leersnyder, J. (in press). *Handbook for the social cultural shaping of emotion*. Cambridge: CUP.
2. This paragraph is based on a paragraph from Schouten A., Boiger, M., Kirchner-Häusler A., Mesquita, B. Interpersonal emotions: the role of culture. In De Leersnyder, J. (in press). *Handbook for the social cultural shaping of emotion*. Cambridge: CUP.

7

Appendix

A.1. Focus Group Interview: Guidelines

Introduction and Ground Rules (10 min)

I would like to thank you all for coming today. My name is —— from Kyoto/Leuven University and I am facilitating this discussion group as part of a research project on couple relationships. A research team at Kyoto University and Leuven University is conducting this research project in Japan and in Belgium. The aim is to better understand what people consider good relationships in different countries. We invited you today because we think that the best way to learn about couple relationships is to talk to men and women from each country about their own opinions and ideas.

Specifically, we are interested in how couples manage situations in which there is a disagreement between partners. Almost all couples experience disagreement from time to time. Sometimes, these are just about minor things, and at other times, these disagreements can be about larger issues. During this focus group, I will invite you to discuss your opinions about and experiences with handling these situations. I will first show you some videos from Japanese and Belgian couples who are discussing different kinds of disagreements. Then, I will ask you some discussion questions. The whole session will last 60-90 minutes.

Your participation in this discussion group is completely voluntary. If you prefer not to be a part of this discussion, you are free to leave. However, we value everyone's views on the topic and hope that you will stay and share your opinions. The information that we discuss today will remain confidential and will be used only for research purposes. It will be securely stored so that it is not accessible to anyone outside the research team. Your responses can also not be linked to your personal data such as your name or contact information.

I would like to say that there are no right or wrong answers in this discussion. We will simply be discussing your views and experiences on a range of topics, so please feel comfortable to say what you honestly feel. Because it is difficult to take notes during the discussion, we would like to record the discussion. Of course, the recording will remain completely confidential and will only be used for this research

project. Does everyone agree with having this discussion recorded? Please take a moment to read the sheet on the table in front of you and sign it if you agree. [Make sure to obtain consent from all participants].

Before we begin, we would like to ask everyone to fill in a short, anonymous questionnaire about your background. Feel free to not answer any questions that you are not comfortable answering.

Please also help yourselves to the refreshments we have provided. Are there any questions before we start? Did everyone receive a name tag? Let us begin...

I would like to start with a short introduction round. Please tell me and the group shortly:

- Where you are from
- Your age bracket (20s – 30s – 40s – 50s)
- If you are married
- Whether you have children

Thank you all for joining today's group!

Before we start with the actual discussion, I would like to explain a few ground rules. I also put them on the flip chart.

Ground Rules (put bold on flip chart)

- **Let everybody join in the discussion:** We want to hear as many different points of view as possible. There is no specific order to the discussion. It is fine to disagree with others, and to share how you really feel about the topics we discuss – even if it is different from what other people think. However, because we would like you all to have the chance to express your opinions, please let everyone have their say.
- **There are no right or wrong answers:** I would like to say that there are no right or wrong answers in this discussion. We will simply be discussing your views and experiences on a range of topics, so please feel free to say what you honestly feel.
- **Please turn your mobile phones off**

- Also, my role as the moderator is only to facilitate the discussion. I am not an expert on the topic myself. Therefore, please discuss the questions among each other.

Video (20 min)

To get the discussion started, I would like to show a few videos of couples who are talking about a disagreement in their relationship. These clips are from longer videos, so sometimes it may not be exactly clear to you what they are talking about. In this case, just watch and observe how they are interacting with each other.

These videos are meant to provide some inspiration for the discussion. It is not important that you remember them in detail – it is fine to just have a general impression of what disagreements may look like for different couples.

Questions (30-60 mins)

1. Opening Questions

What did you find thought-provoking about the videos you just saw?

Probing for cultural perceptions:

- *What do you think is the biggest difference between the Belgian and the Japanese couples? What makes them similar?*

2. Handling conflict in general

What do you think about the way the couples in the videos handled the disagreements?

Probing for cultural perceptions:

- *If you think about most couples around you, why do you think they get into fights?*
- *What is the best way for couples to handle disagreements? What is the worst way?*
- *Do you think there are differences between men and women in how they handle disagreements? Who typically brings up a disagreement, in your experience?*

- [Only if there is time:] *Can disagreements be avoided? Are certain disagreements unavoidable?]*

3. Emotions during conflict

What do you think about the emotions that came up in the videos? What emotions did you notice? Did you notice something that surprised you?

Probing for cultural perceptions:

- *If you think about most couples around you, what emotions do you think they typically experience during disagreements? Are there differences between men and women?*
- *Do you think these emotions are helpful for handling disagreements? If not, which emotions are helpful? Which emotions are harmful?*
- [Only if participants did not mention any specific emotions]*: What role do anger and empathy play during disagreements?*

4. Regulating partner's emotions

Please make sure that there remain at least 15 minutes for this part if nothing has come up yet in terms of regulation.

How did the partners in the videos respond to each other's emotions? Did they try to change how their partners felt?

Probing for cultural perceptions:

- *If you think about most couples around you, what can they do to move the partner away from difficult or harmful emotions like* [previously mentioned harmful emotion]*?*
- *What can they do to move their partner towards more helpful emotions, like* [previously mentioned helpful emotion]*?*
- [Only if there is time:] *In general, what can people do to (improve/worsen) their partner's mood during a disagreement? What strategies are most effective?*

General probes for all IER strategies that are mentioned:

- *How would I know if someone is doing X?*

- *If I was observing that person, how could I tell with certainty, yes, that person is doing X?*
- *Are there any behaviors that show that a person is doing X?*

5. Closing question

Imagine you would have to give one advice to couples on how to deal with disagreements – what would it be?

Thank you

Thank you for participating in todays' group discussion. We really appreciate your contribution and the time you took out of your busy schedule. If you are interested to participate in similar research in the future, feel free to leave your email address on this list. Also, please do not forget to take your remuneration as you leave.

A.2. Pre- and Post-Laboratory Questionnaires

Table A.1.1. Pre-Laboratory Questionnaires

Scale	Source
Sympathy Scale	Uchida & Kitayama, 2001
PANAS	Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988
Autonomy, Relatedness, Conformity Scale	
Autonomy was measured with the 7-item autonomy subscale of the Basic Needs Satisfaction in General Scale (BNSG-S)	Johnston & Finney, 2010
Relatedness was measured with 9 relatedness items of the Self Construal Scale (SCS) and 3 items of the Relational Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (RISC)	SCS: Kagitcibasi, 2007 RICS: Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000
Conformity was measured with 3 items from the SCS, 2 items from the Independent Self-Construal Scale (ISS) 1 additional item.	SCS: Kagitcibasi, 2007 ISS: Singelis, 1994 Additional Item: Güngör, Karasawa, Boiger, Dinçer, & Mesquita, 2014

Wellbeing	Diener, Emmons, & Griffin, 1985; Ryff & Keyes, 1995
Experiences in Close Relationships	Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000
Emotional Support	Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008

Table A.1.2. Post-Laboratory Questionnaires

Scale	**Source**
Personal Value Questionnaire	Schwartz, 2003
Emotional Beliefs	Unpublished scale
Self Construal Scale	Hashimoto & Yamagishi, 2016

A.3. Conflict Topics Chosen by Couples

Conflict Topic	Japan	Belgium
Money or possessions relevant to your relationship (e.g., house, mortgage, car)	20%(18.4%)	8.6%(8.8%)
Leisure time interests or activities	11.3%(11.8%)	6.9%(7.0%)
Children (e.g., whether or not to have children, how to raise children)	8.8%(9.2%)	10.3% (10.5%)
Health (e.g., alcohol, drugs)	12.5%(13.2%)	3.4%(3.5%)
Communication (e.g., not listening to each other)	6.3%(6.6%)	13.8%(12.3%)
Relations with in-laws, family, or neighbors	3.8%(3.9%)	15.5%(15.8%)
Personal habits, characteristics, or behavioural tendencies (e.g., looks, fashion sense, diet, always showing irritation)	12.%(10.5%)	5.2%(5.3%)
Work (e.g., time spent at work, career decisions)	5.0%(5.3%)	8.6%(8.8%)
Household-related issues (e.g., division of tasks, food)	7.5%(7.9%)	1.7%(1.8%)
Aims and goals	5.0 (5.3%)	1.7%(1.8%)
Convictions, beliefs (e.g., religion, politics), or other things believed important	0.0%	8.6%(8.8%)

Time spent together (e.g., amount of time, how the time is spent)	1.3%	5.2(5.3%)
Major decisions (e.g., what to decide, how to decide)	2.5%(2.6%)	1.7%(1.8%)
Sex	1.3%	3.4%(3.5%)
Relations with friends	1.3%	1.7%(1.8%)
Face (e.g., losing face)	1.3%	0.0%
Role division or gender expectations	0.0%	1.7%(1.8%)
Showing love and affection	0.0%	1.7%(1.8%)

Note. The percentages in brackets are those for the restricted sample (Japan, n=76; Belgium n=80) that was used in Chapter 3.

A.4. The SPAFF Codes

SPAFF Code	Function	Indicators	Physical Cues
Affection	Affection expresses genuine caring and concern and offers comfort. Its function is to facilitate closeness and bonding.	Reminiscing, Caring statements, Compliments, Empathy, The common cause, Flirting	There are no particular AUs that indicate affection, but Aus 6 + 12 will commonly be seen.
Anger	Anger functions to respond to perceived violations of the speaker's rights to autonomy and respect. It serves as a kind of "affective underlining" of displeasure and complaint, indicating that an interpersonal boundary has been transgressed.	Frustration, Angry "I statements", Angry questions, Commands	AUs 4, 5, 7, 4+5, 4+5+7, 23, 24. The lips will frequently thin, with the red of the upper lip disappearing or the lips pressed together; the teeth will clench; and the muscles of the jaw and neck will tighten. The voice may suddenly increase in pitch, amplitude, and tempo and may include a kind of "growl" as when yelling.
Belligerence	The function of Belligerence is to "get a rise" out of the receiver through provocation of anger. The belligerent speaker is, in a sense, looking for a fight.	Taunting questions, Unreciprocated humor, Interpersonal terrorism	AUs 1 or 2. Jaw thrust forward.
Contempt	The function of Contemptuous behavior is to belittle, hurt, or humiliate. Such behavior deliberately and forth-rightly communicates an icy lack of respect, often cruelty.	Sarcasm, Mockery, Insults, Hostile humor	AU 14 (uni- or bilateral). Note: Eye rolls are nearly always coded as contempt.
Criticism	Criticism functions as an attack on someone's character or personality in a way that is not obviously insulting, as in Contempt. It is a complaint that suggests that the partner's personality is defective. Criticisms are characterized by negative global assessments of a person's abilities or value as a person.	Blaming, Character attacks, Kitchen sinking, Betrayal statements, Negative mind reading	/
Defensiveness	Defensiveness functions to deflect responsibility or blame. It communicates a kind of innocent victimhood or righteous indignation (e.g., as a counterattack) on the part of the speaker, implying that whatever bad thing being discussed is not the speaker's fault.	Yes-buts, Cross-complaining, Minimization Excuses, Aggressive defenses	AUs 1, 2, 1 + 2, arms folded across chest. The voice will increase in pitch and amplitude.
Domineering	The function of Domineering behavior is to exert and demonstrate control over one's partner or a conversation. Domineering behaviors attempt to impose compliance on the receiver's responses or behaviors.	Invalidation, Lecturing and Patronizing, Low-balling questions, Incessant speech, Glowering	AU 2 ("the horns"), head forward, body forward, finger pointing, head cocked to one side.
Enthusiasm	The function of enthusiasm is to express a passionate interest in a person or activity, as well as a positive valence associated with that interest. Enthusiasm is infectious and often sudden, loud, boisterous, and energetic.	Anticipation, Positive surprise, Positive excitement, Joy, Expansiveness	AUs 1+2, 5, 6+12, 23, 24, 25–27 will commonly be seen. Individuals will sometimes sit up or forward in their chairs, and their voices will increase in pitch and volume.

SPAFF Code	Function	Indicators	Physical Cues
Fear/Tension	Fear/Tension communicates, usually involuntarily, fear, worry, anxiety, nervous anticipation, or dread.	Speech disturbances, Shifts in fundamental frequency, Fidgeting, Nervous laughter, Nervous gestures	AUs 1, 2, 4, 12, 20, 1+2+4, 1+2+4+5. Watch for frequent eye movements, frequent gulping, biting of lips and inside of mouth, and the "unfelt smile," a smile without AU6 that has been associated with neurophysiological patterns suggestive of behavioral withdrawal (Ekman & Davidson, 1993; Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990).
Humor	The function of humor is to share in mutual amusement and joy following a mutually recognized moment of absurdity or fun. Humor is relatively unique within the SPAFF in that it cannot be coded in isolation. The humor code requires a moment of shared amusement.	Good-natures teasing, Wit and silliness, Private jokes, Fun and exaggeration, Nervous giggling	AUs include 1, 2, 6, 12, 6 + 12, and 25–27.
Interest	The function of this behavior is to communicate genuine interest in one's partner through active elaboration or clarification seeking. Interest emphasizes information gathering about the partner as opposed to minor or trivial factual information.	Nonverbal attention with positive affect, Elaboration and clarification seeking, Open-ended questions	AUs 1+2, 6, 12, 6+12, leaning forward, positive valence.
Sadness	Sadness code refers to behaviors that communicate loss, resignation, helplessness, pessimism, hope- lessness, or a plaintive or poignant quiescence.	Sighing , Pouting/sulking, Resignation, Crying, Hurt feelings	AUs 1, 6, 15, 17, 1+6, 1+15, 1+6+15, 1+6+15+17. Shoulders may droop, and individuals may hang their heads or look down. The lips and the chin may tremble. The voice may quaver in terms of pitch and amplitude and may occasionally break..
Threats	Threats are a particularly hostile form of domineering behavior in that their function is to control the behavior of the receiver by setting explicit conditions under which the receiver will be punished for behaving in ways the speaker finds undesirable.	Bans, Ultimatums	AU 1, 2 ("the horns"), 1+2, 1+2+5, head forward, body forward, finger pointing, head cocked to one side.
Validation	The function of validation is to communicate sincere understanding and acceptance of one's partner or of one's partner's views and opinions.	Back channels, Direct expressions of understanding, Paraphrasing Apologies, Sentence finishing	AUs 1+2, 6, 12, 6+12. Head nod, eye contact, nonconfrontational voice tone.
Whining	Whining functions to make what might otherwise be an ordinary complaint into a plaintive or pleading form of emotional protest. Whining suggests an innocent victim stance, communicating something like "What are you picking on me for?" or "What about all the good I do?"	Whiny protest	AUs 1, 1 + 2, 1 + 2 + 15.
Stonewalling	Stonewalling functions to communicate an unwillingness to listen or respond to the receiver.	Active away behavior, No backchannels, Monitoring gaze	In Stonewalling, the face will typically appear stiff or frozen. The jaw may be clenched, and the muscles of the neck may be obviously flexed. Other times, the face will show no obvious signs of emotion at all, deliberately arranged to appear neutral.

A.5. Significance Interpersonal Emotional Sequences: Restricted vs. Full sample

A.5.1. Belgium

	Full Sample		Restricted Sample	
Link	Strength & Significance	Percentile	Strength, significance & percentile	
AngeM->CritF	-0.0186*.	(0.018)	-0.0413*** (0.0)	
FearM->CritF	-0.0066***	(0.0)	-0.0353*** (0.0)	
FearM->DefeF	-0.007***	(0.0)	-0.0238*** (0.0)	
ValiM->DefeF	-0.0228**.	(0.002)	-0.0326*** (0.0)	
FearM->DomiF	-0.008***	(0.0)	-0.0409*** (0.0)	
FearM->AngeF	-0.008***	(0.0)	-0.0359*** (0.0)	
CritM->FearF	-0.003***	(0.0)	-0.0122* . (0.008)	
FearM->FearF	-0.0028***	(0.0)	-0.0177*** (0.0)	
DomiM->HumoF	-0.0329***	(0.0)	-0.0417*** (0.0)	
HumoM->HumoF	0.1148***	(1.0)	0.1308*** (1.0)	
AngeM->ValiF	0.0276*.	(0.995)	0.0404*** (1.0)	
FearF->CritM	-0.003***	(0.0)	-0.0122* . (0.008)	
CritF->DefeM	0.1025***	(1.0)	0.1096*** (1.0)	
DefeF->AngeM	-0.0126*.	(0.024)	-0.0352*** (0.0)	
FearF->AngeM	-0.0038***	(0.0)	-0.0195*** (0.0)	
HumoF->AngeM	-0.0261**.	(0.001)	-0.0464*** (0.0)	
FearF->FearM	-0.0028***	(0.0)	-0.0177*** (0.0)	
ValiF->FearM	0.0181*.	(0.989)	0.0805*** (1.0)	
HumoF->HumoM	0.1047***	(1.0)	0.1183*** (1.0)	
ValiF->HumoM	-0.0158*.	(0.008)	-0.0229*** (0.0)	
AngeF->ValiM	0.0262**.	(0.999)	0.0361*** (1.0)	
FearF->ValiM	-0.0038***	(0.0)	-0.0181**. (0.001)	

Note: Significance is tested via a two-sided test, *:p<.05; **: p<.01; *** p< .001; percentiles are calculated via a permutation-based test on 10 000 values (with 100 simulated time series); in the restricted sample the dyads that do not show both behaviors are excluded. The analyses of the restricted sample are only conducted on the links that had previously proven significant.

A.5.2. Japan

	Full Sample		Restricted Sample
Link	Strength & Significance	Percentile	Strength, significance & percentile
CritM->CritF	0.0174*.	(0.982)	0.039*** (1.0)
DomiM->CritF	-0.0148**.	(0.003)	-0.0413*** (0.0)
ValiM->CritF	-0.0133*.	(0.021)	-0.0233*** (0.0)
CritM->DefeF	0.0784*.	(0.993)	0.1067*** (1.0)
AngeM->AngeF	0.0332*.	(0.993)	0.0919*** (1.0)
HumoM->HumoF	0.2035***	(1.0)	0.1956*** (1.0)
ValiM->HumoF	-0.0135*.	(0.012)	-0.0203*** (0.0)
HumoM->ValiF	-0.0349***	(0.0)	-0.0387*** (0.0)
ValiM->ValiF	-0.0133***	(0.0)	-0.0133*** (0.0)
CritF->DefeM	0.0735***	(1.0)	0.0774*** (1.0)
FearF->DefeM	-0.0214*.	(0.011)	-0.022* . (0.008)
DefeF->DomiM	0.0592*.	(0.991)	0.0641**. (0.996)
FearF->FearM	0.0357*.	(0.983)	0.0334 ns (0.974)
CritF->HumoM	0.0035*.	(0.985)	0.0322*** (1.0)
HumoF->HumoM	0.1862***	(1.0)	0.1779*** (1.0)
ValiF->HumoM	-0.0095*.	(0.023)	-0.0086 ns (0.034)
ValiF->ValiM	-0.0205***	(0.0)	-0.0205*** (0.0)

Note: Significance is tested via a two-sided test, *:p<.05; **: p<.01; *** p< .001; percentiles are calculated via a permutation-based test on 10 000 values (with 100 simulated time series); in the restricted sample the dyads that do not show both behaviors are excluded. The analyses of the restricted sample are only conducted on the links that had previously proven significant.

8

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