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Couple disagreement: Inevitable and healthy? Belgian and Japanese conceptions

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Abstract

"Couples who argue together, stay together" is a popular English saying suggesting the necessity of disagreement for a healthy and stable romantic relationship. The present study explores whether Belgian and Japanese participants similarly view couple disagreement as a necessity, and whether conceptions of disagreement have implications for partners' ideas of how to deal with disagreement. We conducted four focus groups in each culture and analyzed them using thematic analysis. The findings suggested that Belgian participants thought that partners' needs unavoidably clash. They thus saw disagreement as inevitable. In contrast, Japanese participants thought of disagreement as avoidable. To avoid disagreement, they reported that they adjusted to and accepted the differences of their partner. Consistent with these respective conceptions of disagreement, Belgian participants highlighted the importance of addressing disagreement through open communication, while Japanese participants reported to frequently engage in indirect forms of communication such as mindreading. The differences

Statement of Relevance: This study is one of the first to offer a cross-cultural perspective on the meaning of couple disagreement. It explores whether 'Western' assumptions of couple disagreement, such as disagreement being inevitable and requiring verbal problem-solving, also hold in non-Western cultural contexts. Findings from focus groups suggest that Belgian conceptions were similar to, yet Japanese conceptions were different from popular assumptions in (Western) relationship literature. Implications for cross-cultural couple research and therapy are discussed.

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in Belgian and Japanese conceptions of disagreement reflect different cultural notions of a healthy relationship, with Belgian partners valuing independence and Japanese emphasizing interdependence in the relationship. We discuss the implications of existing research on couple disagreement, which often starts from assumptions closer to the English saying and the Belgian conceptions of disagreement.

KEYWORDS
couple conflict, culture, focus groups, romantic relationships

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): Couples who deal poorly with disagreement are more likely to encounter relationship problems, engage in maladaptive parenting, have ill-adjusted children, and suffer from bad health (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Kiecolt-glaser et al., 2018; Slatcher, 2010; Warmuth et al., 2018, 2020). Hence, many couple studies aim to identify which disagreement behaviors or strategies are particularly good or bad for the relationship (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002), and quite a few psychological interventions are designed to target and improve a couple's disagreement management and resolution skills (Baucom et al., 1998).

This extensive body of relationship research has been guided by two central assumptions on couple disagreement. The first is that differences in perspective need to be addressed, talked about, and solved (Beach, 2016); as a matter of course, differences between partners are followed by, and can only be settled through, *expressed* struggle or disagreement (Ting-Toomey, 1994). Hence, writings on couple disagreement often conflate a "difference in perspective" with the "act of disagreement."[1] For example, it has been suggested that partners should voice their unmet needs and express the vulnerabilities underlying these needs, if they want to resolve conflict (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson & Greenberg, 1987). In a similar vein, disagreements have been seen as an opportunity for partners to come to a mutual understanding of their conflicting views, which in turn is thought to strengthen the bond (Canary et al., 2001; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). By the same token, stifling disagreements, or avoiding them altogether, has been considered unhealthy for a romantic relationship, as it is a missed chance to gain true insight into the differences that exist between partners (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014).[2] The second assumption is that disagreements (i.e., discussions or arguments), which naturally arise from a difference in perspective between two partners, are inevitable and necessary for the relationship (Beach, 2016; Ostenson & Zhang, 2014). Accordingly, 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 et al., 2018).

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The two assumptions—that differences in perspective ought to be articulated and that disagreement is an inevitable consequence of such differences in perspective—have guided the majority of couple studies (Beach, 2016; Bradbury, 2016; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). For example, the focus of many studies has been on the open expression of differences in perspective; 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 their difference in perspective in a disagreement discussion. As another example, many studies have been designed to examine *how* couples engage in disagreement by observing couples' behaviors and investigating the consequences for the relationship. Yet, these studies continue to support the assumption *that* couples have disagreement (Gottman & Levenson, 2000, 2002; Leuchtmann et al., 2019; Markman et al., 2010). In this research, inevitability of disagreement is presumed, rather than made the object of study. Extant research designs adopted to study couple disagreement 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" (Gergen, 2015, p. 99). However, would these assumptions about couple disagreement hold in other cultural contexts? And would current approaches to studying couple disagreement capture the prevalent practices there?

1.1 | 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 might 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 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 disagreement vary from one cultural context to the other. While the Western Europeans among us thought of disagreement as two partners confronting each other or arguing, the Japanese authors' conception of disagreement included instances where partners were troubled by something in the relationship without ever broaching the topic. Similarly, the Western assumption that differences in perspective should be articulated and that disagreement is inevitable, might not be shared in other cultural contexts. In the current study, we set out to explore whether Western

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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.

1.2 | What is a healthy relationship?

Implicit in the assumptions of 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 et al., 2002); for example, Rothbaum et al. (2000) and Markus and Kitayama (1991) provide first observations of differences between U.S. and Japanese samples, which served as a jumping board for our study on couple disagreement 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). Partners focus primarily on 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 autonomy and closeness 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 to and constitutes a partner's identity. 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 et al., 2002). Partners are expected to anticipate and adjust to the needs and expectations of their counterpart, and avoid self-disclosure and self-assertion (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 might not be shared across cultures either. For instance, disagreements between partners in romantic relationships might only be viewed as inevitable in Western cultural contexts because partners strive to meet their respective (independent) needs—as to maintain autonomy. Also, disagreement might be necessary only because there is the expectation that partners violate these needs. In contrast, in East-Asian cultural contexts, couple disagreement might in fact be avoidable to the extent that partners succeed in mutually adjusting to each other. Disagreement might 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 might 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 stimulate each partner to focus on personal needs, thereby hampering interdependence and relatedness. Taken together, it is very possible that the assumptions about couple disagreement differ between cultures because notions of a healthy relationship differ across cultures as well.

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1.3 | 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., 2022; Kirchner-Häusler et al., 2022), no study has directly investigated partners' assumptions and beliefs about couple disagreement. In the present study, we examine how partners from different cultural contexts talk about couple disagreement, and by doing so, we aim to gain more insight into their assumptions and beliefs. We examine folk understanding, or culturally construed meanings, of couple disagreement 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 we can 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 participants' own descriptions and experiences (Halcomb et al., 2007). Given the different cultural notions of healthy relationships, we were interested in the ways participants 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 | METHOD

2.1 | 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. 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 sample consisted of eight men and nine women, and the Japanese participant sample consisted of ten men and nine women. 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 1 for an overview of the demographics).

2.2 | 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 Faculty of Psychology at the KU Leuven, from the 4th until the 18th of April 2019; 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

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TABLE 1 Demographics of Belgian and Japanese participants.

	Gender	Age (mean)	Relationship duration (mean)
Belgium			
Focus group 1	4 females	46.75	23.50
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	14.40

rooms of the Kokoro Research Center at Kyoto University on the 15th and 16th of March 2019. 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 to the interviews being audio-recorded. The focus group interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and participants received a monetary compensation of 20 euros/2500 yen. The study was approved by the Ethical Commission of the KU Leuven (G-2017 11 981).

2.3 | Procedure

After participants had filled in a demographic questionnaire, the focus group interview started with a short introduction round. Using a PowerPoint slide that was projected for the duration of the focus groups, the facilitator outlined three ground rules: (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., 2022), translated to Dutch or Japanese, and subtitled. The video served as a cue to provoke conversation and reflection, a method adopted from Tobin and Hsueh (2007).[3] 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; on average, this represented 51.31% of the characters for the Japanese and 56.68% of the characters for the Belgian transcripts. We disregarded parts of the transcript that represented reactions to the video participants had watched (on average 17.88% of the characters for the Japanese and 13.95% of the characters for the Belgian transcripts), as these reactions did not yield new understandings and were thus redundant with participants' answers to the questions. The remaining parts of the transcripts (on average

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30.81% of the characters for the Japanese and 29.37% of the characters for the Belgian transcripts), were not coded because they were irrelevant (i.e., when the facilitator was speaking).

The focus group interview consisted of four sections: (1) opening questions, (2) handling disagreement in general, (3) emotions during disagreement 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 were about observations of the couples in the videos (i.e., 'What do you think about the way the couples in the videos handled disagreement?'), 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, 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., 2022; Tsai et al., 2006). The facilitator ended the focus group interview with a closing question, asking participants what final advice they would give to couples dealing with a disagreement. The interview guidelines can be found in the Online Supplementary Material.

2.4 | 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 one Turkish and one Chinese master student). 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 disagreement. For example, across focus groups, participants repeatedly mentioned that they listened to their partner during a disagreement, so 'listening' became a code. Essentially, 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 one's partner, which in turn was considered instrumental for mutual adjustment, at least in the case of the Japanese focus groups. Engaging with one's partner thus became a subtheme and adjusting to one's partner a theme. The 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

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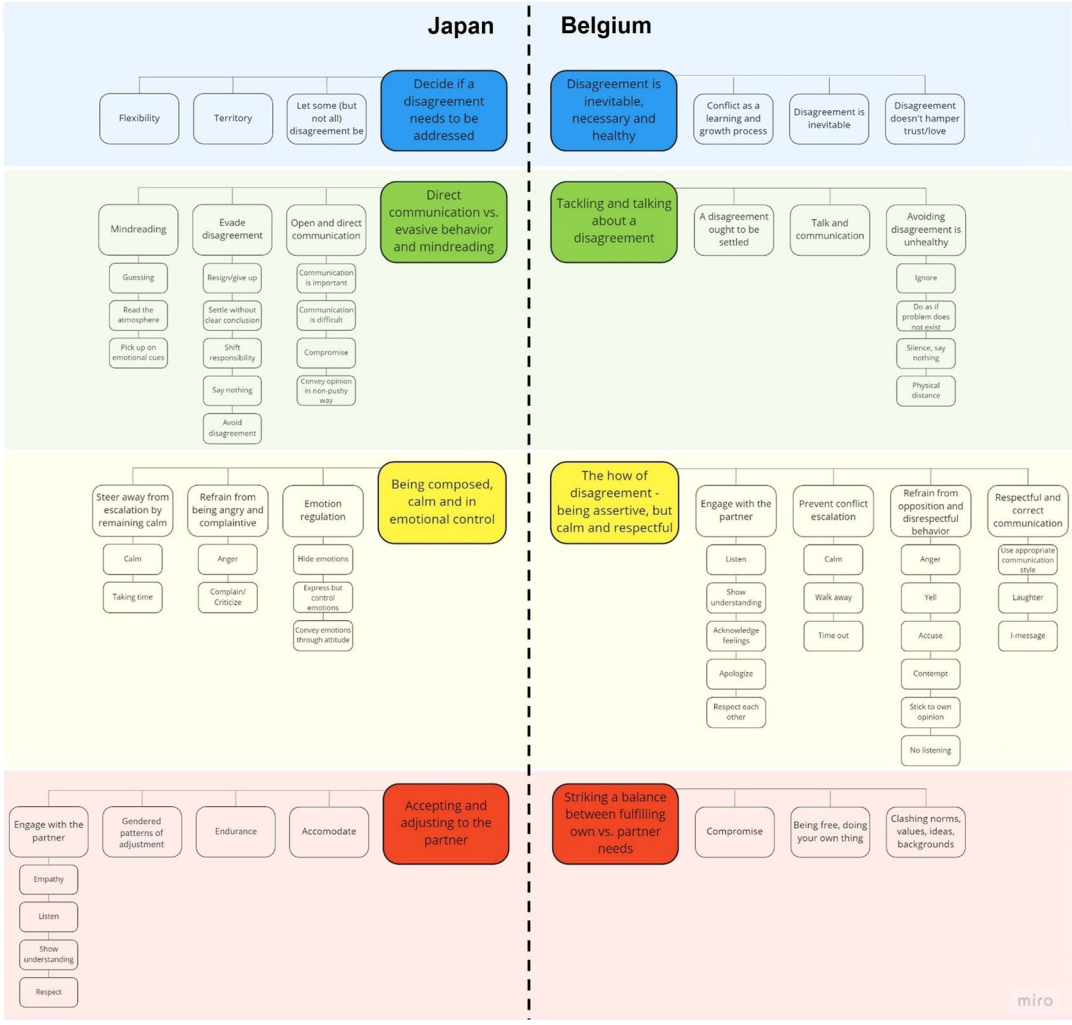

FIGURE 1 Overview of themes and codes in Belgium and Japan. The largest and second-to-largest boxes represent global themes and subthemes respectively, the smallest boxes represent codes.

et al., 2000), and by frequent peer-debriefings. An overview of the codes and themes in each culture can be found in Figure 1.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Belgian conceptions of couple disagreement

3.1.1 | Disagreement is inevitable, necessary, and healthy

Belgian participants indicated 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 their own and differing opinions, meaning that, inescapably, there will be

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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 said[4]: I was like leave out the 'almost', I mean (says Facilitator's name), in every couple, or problems or I do not know how you said it exactly but leave out the 'almost'. There is no couple that does not go through arguments, it cannot be.
>
> Belgian focus group 2, female 2: But if you feel safe in your relationship, and I do at this point, then you look forward to new phases, such as getting children, and I know that disagreements are part of it, that's okay.
>
> An exchange between the facilitator, male 1 and male 2 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 1: But that is not bad.
>
> Belgian focus group 4, male 1: When you hear that a couple is fighting, and that they might break up, well, chances are 9 out of 10 that you will also fight with your next partner.

Belgian participants even considered disagreements as necessary for a healthy relationship. First, partners learn from and about each other through their disagreements (i.e., they come to understand each other's sensitivities and ways of responding during disagreement). Consequently, partners adopt better strategies such that disagreements are less turbulent in later stages of the relationship as compared to the start.

> 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 are like, we are 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.

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> Belgian focus group 3, male 1: You know very well, especially when you are together for a long time, what each other's pain points or triggers are.
>
> Belgian focus group 3, male 3: But in the meantime, she kind of learned that [withdrawal and silence is not negative] too. Because as I said, with me, that's also just a way to come to yourself, put it [the disagreement] 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.
>
> Belgian focus group 4, male 2: In the first years, the discussions are more heated than after 20 years, because you know when to tighten the reins, or when you have crossed a line as a couple.
>
> 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 arguments are necessary steps in the long process of mutual attunement. How well the couple deals with a difference in perspective (i.e., how they engage in disagreement) is considered a benchmark of where the couple is in this learning process (i.e., "it determines where you stand").

Second, disagreements give partners insight into their differences, which participants consider positively challenging and interesting for the relationship:

> Belgian focus group 2, female 2: Yes, I want that [disagreements] in my relationship. I need that challenge. I could not be with someone who always agrees with me.
>
> Belgian focus group 2, female 4: I find it interesting how different topics keep arising. You think that you have had it all, and then you realize, oh, this is a different topic of disagreement.

Moreover, going through the process of attunement and growth by engaging in disagreements might strengthen the relationship:

> Belgian focus group 1, female 4: It's a growth process [...] that is the beauty of a lasting relationship, that you travel a road together as a couple, and that you reach a certain understanding, or deal with each other in a way, that gives you peace.
>
> Belgian focus group 2, female 3: No matter the topic, say finances or something different, you should show the other that the discussion is in the best interest of your relationship, because you want your relationship to be stronger. That it serves the relationship, not that you fight for the sake of fighting.

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Finally, Belgian participants indicated that disagreements do not and should not eat away at the fundamental trust or love partners 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 cannot agree on.

3.1.2 | Tackling and talking about disagreement

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

> Belgian focus group 1, female 3: Yeah, sure, as long as you settle the difference in perspective. 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.

> Belgian focus group 2, female 1: Sometimes it's good to finally put everything on the table. It's a relief. Like, glad we got that out. Now we can talk about it and finish it [the disagreement]. If not, you are stuck with it and there's no progress.

> 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 are arguing about or.... Then it's at night in bed and until, until it's cleared up.

A prerequisite for settling and solving a difference in perspective 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 difference in perspective and solve it.

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> 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 cannot see what is going on in your mind, and you cannot 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 will not 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 will not understand each other very well at all.

The importance of addressing the difference in perspective and talking about it is further illustrated by participants' disapproval of partners who avoid confrontation, pretend the problem does not exist or remain 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 difference in perspective head on; they are determined to settle it by openly discussing their differences with each other, rather than avoiding confrontation.

3.1.3 | The how of disagreement: Being assertive but respectful

Belgian participants underlined that how partners engage in the disagreement matters. For example, Belgian participants emphasized that disclosing how one feels and asserting one's needs during a disagreement should be done in a respectful way. This means that one uses the correct tone of voice and chooses the right words—partners should not shout, yell, or insult each other, for instance. If one partner shows disrespectful behavior, then the other is 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 do not want to be talked to like that, it's perhaps more likely to happen at work rather

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than at home. But also at home I do not hesitate to call it out, like: "a moment ago in the kitchen when we were sitting at the table, the 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 will not 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 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 remain calm and stay away from oppositional behaviors, such as anger and accusations.

Belgian focus group 1, female 1: You need to learn that [to stay away from anger], I had to learn it, and my husband should learn this too, because he also gets angry quickly, although he calms down quickly too.

Belgian focus group 2, female 2: I think that you destroy any progress by acting that way [belittling] toward your partner. Yes, for sure. It also directly impacts your self-esteem, especially if it comes from someone you love.

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 2: That [direct accusations] is not what will solve the discussion, it will only make it worse. It will only upset the other person, so no solution will come from that.

Although anger is generally considered to be maladaptive, the participants in Belgian focus group 3 do at one point in the conversation converge on the idea that anger can sometimes be useful.

An exchange between male 3 and male 4 from Belgian focus group 3:

Male 3: It [anger] is also a signal. When you notice, oh, that makes me quite angry, it makes you think. That's the case for us. She addresses something, and she has had time to think about it of course. She has a very clear opinion. She says this and that, and I do the same, but then you realize, oh, I do not feel good about this, I want to sort some things out. Because you feel some emotions, you are surprised or angry or whatever. But where it comes from...

Male 4: I think that anger can lead to self-reflection. You go back and start to think: am I rightfully angry?

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Belgian participants also emphasized the importance of engaging with and being open to the other's point of view by listening to each other and showing understanding.

> 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 are open to what the other person thinks and the other person's vision.

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

If it is not possible to be respectful, calm, and engaging, Belgian participants wanted 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 emphasized the importance of resuming the discussion at a later stage, implying that a time-out is not the same as avoiding confrontation. Instead, a time-out ensures partners can return to the disagreement 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 cannot 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 do not 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 valued talking about the problem and disclosing their opinions, but this ought to be done in a respectful, calm, and considerate way.

3.1.4 | Striking a balance between fulfilling one's own and their partner's needs

The Belgian narratives revealed that partners sought to find a compromise during a disagreement. If partners are not at all willing to give in here and there, and only stick to their own

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point of view, it is difficult to solve the difference in perspective. 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 does not last, I think, that does not last.
>
> Female 3: Someone needs to give in a little because otherwise....
>
> Female 2: Finding the middle ground to a certain extent, because if everyone sticks to their own ideal then you will not get very far.
>
> Belgian focus group 3, male 2: Yes, we are pretty much on the same page, so we do not 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 will not last, you cannot agree on everything.

When it comes to compromising, the narratives also revealed a tension between fulfilling one's own needs and focusing on those of the partner. As important as it is to compromise, participants agreed that partners should never completely sacrifice their own needs. Some participants accepted that their needs, values, and norms were not fully compatible with their partner's, even though this was difficult or disappointing at times. Others accepted the friction that was the result of standing up for their own needs.

> 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 whereas the other has 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 does not at all, that should still be possible within a relationship."
>
> Belgian focus group 3, male 1: What I just said about norms and values. You're already in a relationship and you think you know the other person, but then it turns out that the other person has a different opinion, and you do not think alike. Then you have to make a click. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but you have to adjust. If it's not in line with your own values, it can be problematic, or disappointing.
>
> 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 cannot always stick to your own

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> 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.[5] I also think that should be possible within a relationship.

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

> Belgian focus group 1, female 4: Yes, that's also a very important feeling, that you do not 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. 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 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 could not see that we had different opinions about what it means to spend time on your own.

The quotations 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 might have on each partner's personal needs and desires.

In sum, Belgian participants indicated that they viewed arguments as inevitable, necessary, and healthy for relationships. They considered open communication as important and instrumental to dealing with a difference in perspective and emphasized that partners should express their needs in a respectful and calm way. Finally, Belgian participants compromised with their partner only as long as their own needs were considered and met as well.

3.2 | Japanese conceptions of couple disagreement

3.2.1 | Decide if a disagreement needs to be addressed

The Japanese focus groups revealed that Japanese partners are, unlike the Belgians, hesitant to address a difference in perspective head on. Instead, partners gauge *if* the difference in perspective needs to be addressed at all; while some differences in perspective might inevitably require a certain degree of confrontation and disagreement, this is not true for all differences in perspective. Unimportant or non-crucial topics of disagreement can be left unspoken, while important topics do need to be addressed.

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> 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 do not 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 would not work, so you can just leave it be.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 5: When you talk about a small issue, you both look for sympathy, like 'it's okay like this, isn't it?', and you give thoughtless answers. It does not really matter if it's about a small issue, but if it is about education or another serious topic, it can become rather critical. If you continue to not talk about it seriously and let it be, it will worsen like a progressive illness.

Moreover, Japanese participants warned against negotiating something partners know is non-negotiable, as this might 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 might 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.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 1: If you ask someone to do a task, whether it is small or big, then you have to let them handle that territory, like at work. It's good that they [a Japanese couple the participant knows] divided the territory for small stuff, that they took those responsibilities. But it's clear that if you interfere with the other's tasks, it will only end in a fight.

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

Knowing when to accept difference and adjust to the other requires flexibility—partners should be sensitive to the specific requirements of the situation at hand:

> 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.

There were, however, also some Japanese participants who believed it was important to tackle even a small difference in perspective.

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> Japanese focus group 3, male 4: I believe it happens that it [many small issues together] piles up and becomes a big fight with an unclear cause. [...] It will not go well if you let small issues be.

3.2.2 | Evasive behavior and mindreading versus open and direct communication

In the case that Japanese couples do address a difference in perspective, they might not engage in open discussions as Belgian partners said they did. Instead, Japanese partners reported to frequently engage in indirect forms of communication, such as evasive behaviors and mindreading. Examples of evasive behaviors are avoiding the argument, 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 1, female 1: Personally speaking, I do not want to fight. But I will say my opinion, and so will my husband. So far, we have not actually had many constructive conversations in which we reached a solution.

> Japanese focus group 1, female 5: Men too, but I think women, as they grow older, are more likely to feel resignation and think 'ah, this is just the way married couples are, we cannot really resolve the differences between men and women'.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: If I rant, my partner does the same. Like a girl. I do not 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 avoid such a situation. I feel like I have not been able to say what I really think.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 4: One time I said something, and I was told no, so it became more difficult to say something after that. I did not want to fight either... Like a tendency to avoid? I could not say anything anymore.

> 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 showing one's partner that they care about them and take them into consideration. Partners try to anticipate what their counterpart needs and feels by being sensitive to emotional cues, without putting thoughts or feeling into words. Once partners have "checked upon each other's mood" or "gauged each other's feelings", they can decide on their strategies for dealing with the argument. Thus, one's partner's feelings serve as an important basis for own behavior.

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> Japanese focus group 4, male 4: I think that if your wife, well, your partner, does not 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, 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 signal 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.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 3: Because you are a married couple, and a relationship of trust is built, you do not need to verbalize everything anymore.

Although participants engaged in indirect forms of communication, they also conveyed that they do, at times, use open communication. Some participants highlighted the importance of open communication during 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.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 3: By talking about it, I believe the bad feelings may dissipate. Whether they actually disappear is another thing, though. But reducing these feelings might be right way to go about it, the way to success.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 1: I feel like if you do not put your thoughts into words, then they cannot be conveyed, and as a result it [the disagreement] will not be resolved.

Other participants expressed their wish to communicate more openly, but indicated that their partner or they themselves find it difficult to do so.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: Well, he does not 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 do not really assert my opinion. Often, I just listen, I go 'that's true'.

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Yet other participants used open communication because the better alternative, mindreading, was not *yet* available to them. These participants indicated that they would like a reach a point where they can reach their partner's mind.

> 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.

> Japanese focus group 1, female 4: In my case, I speak up immediately. 'I am going to bed because I am irritated by this,' for example. I am not relying on his ability to guess, but in that sense, his ability to guess might never grow.

In sum, Japanese participants appeared to be ambivalent about what is best for their relationship when it comes to communication; they value communicating indirectly on the one hand (i.e., through evasive behaviors and mindreading) but they also engaged in open communication on the other hand, either because they value doing so, or because they have no other means of engaging in 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 became clear from the transcripts that Japanese partners did not assign irrevocable importance to open communication like Belgians did.

3.2.3 | Composed, calm, and emotional moderation

Whereas Belgian partners often disclose thoughts and feelings during a disagreement, Japanese partners do not. Quite to the contrary, Japanese participants say they 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 do not 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 are getting along well. We cannot see where she keeps her frustrations. [Facilitator: She does not show it]. She does not.

Some participants indicated that they are not very likely to get angry at all in their relationships.

> Japanese focus group 1, female 3: I think it also depends on your personality, but in our case, we do not shout or raise our voices. We do not really fight.

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> Japanese focus group 3, male 2: With us, there's an age difference, so I do not really get angry with my partner. I do not really get angry, so if she does something, I'm just like 'ah, well, it can't be helped'.

Rather than voicing concerns or articulating emotions, partners convey indirectly how they feel. Their 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.

> 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, 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 did disclose their emotions during a disagreement, they preferred 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 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.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 5: When we argue, we show our emotions, they get out. When I speak my mind, and he does not 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 do not 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 do not 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.

As can be gathered from the quotations, the Japanese participants devalued emotional discussions; partners ought to control their emotions. The reference to "business-like emotions" and "presentation documents" in the first quotation shows that differences in perspective are at times discussed in a professional and pragmatic way, with the level of emotionality that would fit a work situation. The second quotation further exemplifies that emotional moderation is considered 'mature', as it allows for a calm and 'light' discussion.

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In line with these ideas, Japanese participants believed that couples should refrain from being angry and expressing complaints toward their partner, as these behaviors will only escalate the discussion.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 5: When you really cannot compromise or when it comes to a point where you start attacking each other, you will definitely bring up past issues. These issues are already over and should not be brought up again, so when you do bring these up, the conversation heats up. Bringing up past issues is a no-go.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 4: If you just complain about your partner or talk about his/her shortcomings, it will hurt them and backfire. Maybe you want to speak up because you just noticed it, but if it is not the main point then you should not discuss it. If you do, it becomes an escalating emotional argument.

Moreover, and like Belgian participants, Japanese participants valued a time-out to minimize unpleasant feelings and (re)gain control.

> 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 do not let the argument rest, you will not 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 quotations above show that when partners take a time-out and revisit the discussion, they will have some more distance from their emotions. In sum, for a good relationship, Japanese participants found it important to steer away from escalation during a discussion by hiding and controlling their emotions, and by remaining calm.

3.2.4 | Accepting and adjusting to one's partner

Japanese participants, unlike the Belgians, focused 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 life together. 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 do not 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

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> ground or not, depending on the topic I just compromise, probably. I let it go. Objectively speaking, it might sound like I'm irresponsible, () I do not want to rock the boat. 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 trouble for 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 do not 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 I often 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 used the metaphor of LEGO blocks 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 do not know the reality). In some cases, resigning or letting go seems to be a way of accommodating the partner and accepting the circumstances as they are, as to avoid friction in the relationship and even in the larger family. Both participants focused on acceptance of the partner, while setting aside personal desires.

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

> Japanese focus group 1, female 2: I would suggest just taking everything in once and then discussing. However, you should also try to understand your partner, and not merely listen to him/her. Put yourself in the other's shoes and then talk about it.

> Japanese focus group 4, male 2: So, I believe that it's really very important to show that you are 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'.

The central role of accepting and accommodating each other during disagreement is further exemplified by the idea of endurance. Although it is not always clear from the transcripts what it is that partners endure, it seems to be about going along with what the other partner wants, sometimes unwillingly, and even if unpleasant.

> Japanese focus group 2, female 1: I feel like he has frustrations, but he does not talk about them, so I do not know. I have to take care of the family finances, and it gives me stress, but... You know, it just doesn't seem like he would be able to do it well, so I do it. He sometimes says that he wants to have (this or that), but when the price is too high, I say something like 'Yeah, I don't know about that...' and it ends there. I do not know to what extent he is restraining himself, though.

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

In many instances, acceptance and accommodation appear to take on a gendered pattern, where women endure or indulge the behavior of the man. However, participants also agreed that this gender dynamic is gradually changing, in keeping with women's advancements in society.

An exchange between female 3, female 5 and the facilitator in Japanese focus group 2:

Female 5: In the end, they [men] do not say much whereas the women talk about small issues quite a bit. But eventually, the husband just does whatever he wants to do.

Facilitator: You mean the women give in often?

Female 5: A common pattern is that the husband's ideas ultimately prevail.

Female 3: Based on what I see around me, when people want to buy a car or a house, I feel like the men decide while the women are more reserved and have more of a 'wait-and-see' approach.

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 do not think men and women were on equal footing. We still have that way of thinking. It is changing, but many women still feel like they have to resign or treat their husband with due respect.

Japanese focus group 3, male 3: Somebody just said that 'for Japanese, because the woman endures, the marriage keeps going'. I think I agree with 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 having to endure.

Japanese focus group 3, male 1: You know the patriarchal society, I do not know if I can still call it that, but that's what it was like in the past, and it's still dragged out in Japan. After all, women abroad are more independent and have equal rights, so they are socially more [independent] than in Japan, I guess. In that sense, I guess couples can argue fairly. In Japan, if it is a bit expensive, the wife would still ask her husband for permission to buy it, for example. They ask with the presumption that we'll say 'sure', it is not actually our responsibility. [...]. It might change with women's increasing advancement in society, but I kind of feel the Japanese culture is like that a bit.

Interestingly, an exchange between male 2 and male 4 from Japanese focus group 3 suggested that it might not always be wise to adjust to the partner, thereby opposing the dominant narrative.

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> Japanese focus group 3, male 2: If I abase myself, it does not solve the issue at all. Instead, the stress piles up and explodes one day. When you act as if you sympathize with your partner, but you are not sincere, they will misunderstand and think that you accepted it [the partner's needs].

> Japanese focus group 3, male 4: If we were to accept everything of each other, I would not think of that as human either.

Even more, male 4 from Japanese focus group 3 continued saying that disagreement might be necessary.

> Japanese focus group 3, male 4: If you keep compromising even if you disagree, you lose yourself and your identity. So, some conflict is necessary, I think.

To conclude, Japanese participants indicated they did not address a difference in perspective immediately, but instead gauged if the situation calls for discussing the disagreement at all. They conveyed ambivalence about open communication; they said that open communication is necessary at times, yet they found it difficult to endorse open communication and did not consider it the ultimate way of solving a difference in perspective. Instead, Japanese participants appeared to prefer engaging in behaviors that preserved relational harmony, such as evasive behaviors, mindreading, and emotional moderation (i.e., suppression, controlling emotions, and remaining calm). Finally, they focused on adjusting to the needs of their partner, through accommodating and adopting endurance.

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 analysis to uncover themes in the data. We found that Belgian and Japanese participants—who were in a romantic relationship for at least 2 years and lived together with their partner—had different conceptions of couple disagreement. In line with the central assumptions about couple disagreement in Western cultural contexts (Theiss & Leustek, 2016; Witthon et al., 2018), Belgian participants viewed disagreement as both a given and a necessity in the relationship. They believed that disagreements contributed to a couple's understanding of their differences and helped them figure out how to deal with these differences. Belgian participants valued confrontation and open discussion, as these reveal the partners' needs and desires. They believed it would be unhealthy for the relationship if couples avoid disagreement or refrain from speaking out, as this does not allow to solve problems. Finally, the Belgian participants thought that couples should never lose sight of their own needs and desires, even if they occasionally yield toward their partner's desires and engage with each other (i.e., listen, show understanding, compromise).

In contrast, participants of the Japanese focus groups did not readily accept nor engage in the act of disagreement and felt that couples should avoid open disagreement. They reported much more reluctance to address a difference in perspective head on and emphasized that such differences might resolve over time. Japanese participants indicated that if a difference in perspective persists and requires a disagreement, they tend to engage in indirect forms of

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communication, such as mindreading, giving up, and moderating their emotions (i.e., hiding feelings). Japanese participants described that these 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 differences, varied 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 each culture. In Western cultural contexts like Belgium, a close and healthy relationship is one in which partners are independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and can each fulfill their own 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 not only thought to help partners articulate their perspective, but also to 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 and closeness.

In contrast, in Japanese contexts the emphasis is on interdependence and relatedness in relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). This means that partners constantly aim to adjust the self in ways that fit the expectations and needs of their partner, which in turn allows for harmonious and easy interactions (Morling et al., 2002; Rothbaum et al., 2000). The approach to disagreement, as verbalized by the Japanese focus group participants, fits with the relationship goal of interdependence: Couples gauge if a difference in perspective really needs to be addressed and try to be aware of non-negotiables. In doing so, disagreement can in fact be avoided and smooth interactions are guaranteed. If it is not possible to avoid disagreement, partners engage in mindreading, and adjust to each other where possible, by enduring and indulging each other's behavior. The idea of enduring resembles what Heine et al. (1999) described as endurance or 我慢 (*gaman*) in Japanese, which is a way of adjusting whereby people bear with hardships, restrain the self, and supersede one's private needs to maintain relational harmony (Heine et al., 1999). Translated to romantic relationships, partners might bear with an unpleasant aspect of their counterpart's personality, or with an uncomfortable situation they cannot change, for the sake of protecting the relationship. Notably, the Japanese focus groups reveal that women are more likely to endure and indulge the men's behavior than vice versa, which, according to Japanese participants, might be related to the unequal status of men and women in Japanese society. This resonates with findings from Behrens et al., (2004), which suggest that in Japanese couple relationships, men are more likely than women to assume that the spouse will comply with what they want. In turn, and in the context of Japan's status sensitive society, some women feel they have no choice but accept the men's behavior.

Also consistent with the relationship goal of interdependence is Japanese participants' ambivalence toward the usefulness of verbal communication and self-disclosure (i.e., Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kito, 2005). On the one hand, Japanese participants considered these behaviors as signs that the relationship is not close. Only if the partners are unable to engage in successful mindreading—that is, if they cannot sense the atmosphere and infer each other's feelings—did they need to be explicit about their feeling and thoughts, and did Japanese participants mark open communication as instrumental during a disagreement. On the other hand, some Japanese participants valued verbalizing their opinion openly because this allowed for conflict resolution. The ambivalence towards open communication and self-disclosure reflects Japanese

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participants' reluctance to draw attention to personal needs, as it may hamper interdependence and adjustment. In sum, the differences in Belgian and Japanese conceptions of couple disagreement 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 the differences between Belgian and Japanese participants' conceptions of couple disagreement, there were also similarities. Yet, the similarities were limited if considered in the larger context of behaviors and conflict strategies, such that similar codes were often categorized under different meaningful themes. For example, while calmness was discussed and valued in both Japanese and Belgian focus groups, Japanese participants talked about being calm as a way of emotional moderation, whereas Belgian participants referred to calmness as a way to refrain from behaviors that were too coercive to the partner. Furthermore, open communication had a place in disagreement for both the Belgian and the Japanese focus group participants. However, 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, as indirect communication was luring in the background as the 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.

As a final example, when Belgian focus group participants mentioned "engaging with their partner", they referred to being polite and respectful towards their partner, and showing understanding, but this did not entail giving in at the expense of your own opinions. In contrast, for Japanese focus group participants, engaging with their partner meant accepting differences and adjusting to their partner. Thus, although some disagreement strategies discussed in the Belgian and Japanese focus groups could be coded similarly, these strategies tended to have different meanings, and served different relational purposes.

4.1 | 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 suggest that most relationship research is grounded in 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 disagreement 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, might not be effective for couples with a different cultural background. For example, interventions often target emotional expression (Johnson & Greenberg, 1987; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016) and communications skills (Baucom et al., 1998; Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Snyder et al., 2006; Witthon et al., 2018), by encouraging partners

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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). In addition, 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) (Baucom et al., 1998; Snyder et al., 2006; Witthon et al., 2018). This might 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 (cultural) relationship goals of the couple into account. Couples seeking fulfillment of the individual needs of the partners might take a different type of intervention than couples seeking relational harmony.

4.2 | Limitations and future directions

The present study comes with several limitations. For one, 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. The transcripts of the Japanese focus groups were carefully translated—a method also used in other cross-cultural focus group research (Hennink, 2007). In addition, we had Japanese research assistants read through all original Japanese transcripts, and check whether the initial coding (which was based on the English transcripts) described the Japanese conversations as well; this was found to be the case. Therefore, we deem it unlikely that different codes and themes had emerged, had we initially based our coding on the Japanese transcripts.

Second, the use of a video-cued method at the start of the focus groups might have influenced the later discussion. We started the focus groups off by having participants watch several videos of Belgian and Japanese couples who engaged in a disagreement (these were selected in previous research). The videos were instrumental in exposing participants to a wider range of practices during a disagreement. However, they might also have primed cultural differences. We cannot be sure that the focus group discussions had evolved differently, had we not shown the participants these videos.

Third, we cannot be certain that focus groups were experienced and utilized in the same way across cultures. Given that open communication, especially about intimate topics, is valued less in Japanese cultural contexts, it is possible that Japanese participants were less inclined to share their opinions. This might have led to lower validity of the focus groups in the Japanese context. Indeed, the moderator of the Japanese focus groups (the third author) sensed some hesitancy in participants to share opinions at the start of the conversation. However, despite this slow start, each of the Japanese focus groups ended up engaging in a rich exchange of opinions and beliefs. Several factors might have helped. First, a multi-cultural team, including several Japanese researchers, designed the study. In addition, the questions and prompts were created to elicit optimal response in both groups. Second, a pilot study in both cultures ensured that both Japanese and Belgian participants understood the questions and felt compelled to answer them. Finally, Japanese focus groups were moderated by a Japanese moderator (the third author), whose native tongue is Japanese and who is familiar with cultural practices. He was able to prompt appropriately, thus facilitating the discussion in various ways. The themes brought up in the focus groups resonated with the Japanese members of our team, and also reached convergence across the different Japanese groups, adding to our impression that the focus groups went well. In all, we do not have reason to believe that the focus groups were less valid in Japan.

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Fourth, participants volunteered to participate in the study which might have led us to select a group of romantic partners who are in relatively happy and stable relationships; their conceptions of disagreement might be different from partners who are in unhappy or unstable relationships. In addition, only one partner from each couple participated in the focus group study. We might have obtained slightly different as well as complementary perspectives had we recruited both partners, and this would have furthered our understanding of disagreement conceptions in each culture.

Finally, we focused only on 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.

5 | 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, whereas 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.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] From here on, we use the word 'disagreement' (and the word 'conflict', only if used in the original source) to refer to the act of disagreeing (i.e., engaging in discussions or arguments). We use the concept 'difference in perspective' to refer to a conflict of interest, in which two partners have differing and incompatible needs.

[2] For diverging views on couple conflict, also see Beach (2016) and Bradbury (2016).

[3] The videoclips of the couples in each culture were selected to have high, medium, and low relationship satisfaction as measured by the Couple Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). 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.).

[4] We could not add participants' age and relationship duration to the excerpts because participants filled out the demographics questionnaire anonymously.

[5] '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.

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