

Framing love: When it hurts to think we were made for each other

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Abstract

Love can be metaphorically framed as perfect unity between two halves made for each other or as a journey with ups and downs. Given their differential interpretations of romantic relationship, these frames have the power to change the evaluative impact of relational conflicts. We find that thinking about conflicts with one's partner hurts more with the unity (vs. journey) frame in mind, whether the frames are activated within the relational context using linguistic expressions (Study 1) or in an unrelated context using physical cues (Studies 2a & 2b). The frames only influence relationship evaluation after thinking about conflicts (but not celebrations) and require applicability to the target. These patterns support the logic of metaphorical framing as distinct from metaphorical transfer. They shed new light on how to think about love, how it matters for relationship evaluation, and fundamentally, how frames influence judgments. (142 words)

Keywords: Framing; Metaphor; Judgment; Social Cognition; Love Relationship

Introduction

“Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.”

-- Aristotle

“I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward ‘till death do us part.’”

-- Traditional wedding vow

Love is a topic of celebration and interest across all societies (Hatfield & Rapson, 2002), from ancient poetry and philosophy to contemporary culture and psychology. While its complexity allows endless characterizations (e.g., www.1-love-quotes.com), underlying such diversity are common themes that reveal the use of conceptual metaphors in thinking about love (Gibbs & Nascimento, 1996; Kovecses, 1988; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In particular, two metaphorical frames—love as perfect unity and love as a journey—appear to highlight distinct aspects of a romantic relationship and ascribe different meanings to relational difficulties. Do these frames have the power to change people’s evaluation of their relationship?

The love-as-unity metaphor is exemplified by Aristotle’s poetic line and commonly invoked in daily discourse (e.g., *we were made for each other, my other half*). It characterizes love as “perfect harmony, an idyllic state” (Kovecses, 1988, p. 19), created and stabilized by “the bond or attachment between the two parts” (p. 20). In this frame, relational difficulties would signal the lack of perfect harmony and call into question whether she really is his *perfect match* and the two hearts really *beat as one*. In contrast, the love-as-journey metaphor, as in the wedding vow, emphasizes “the progress and the purpose of the love relationship and the difficulties involved” (p. 15). In this frame, relational difficulties are inherent to any relationship and are meaningful as lovers *sharing their ride* recount *how far they have come*. In love fiction,

“happily ever after” appears on the last page for a reason: After that, there is not much of a story to tell. It is the struggles and conflicts before they live happily ever after that tell a story with twists and turns, that give the relationship meaning and fulfillment.

Given their divergent interpretations of love, the unity and journey frames may differentially shape the way people evaluate their romantic relationship. Specifically, people may evaluate their relationship more negatively after thinking about relational conflicts in the unity frame (wherein conflicts signal disunity) than in the journey frame (wherein conflicts are part of progress). In contrast, the two frames may have no differential impact on relationship evaluation when thinking about relational celebrations because positive experiences, whether interpreted as harmony (in the unity frame) or growth (in the journey frame), are satisfying. Drawing on the principles of knowledge accessibility and applicability (Higgins, 1996; also Forster & Liberman, 2007), we predict that (i) these patterns should emerge even by making the metaphorical frames merely accessible in incidental ways and (ii) the frames should only influence judgment of targets to which they are applicable. As an initial test of these predictions, Study 1 manipulates exposure to linguistic expressions of the love frames and measures judgments of satisfaction with relationship (a target to which love frames are applicable) and with life (inapplicable).

Study 1: Can it hurt to think we were made for each other?

Material and methods

Seventy-three pedestrians in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan, who had been in a relationship for at least half a year, participated in a study on long-term romantic relationships. They were randomly assigned to 2 (exposure to unity vs. journey metaphor) x 2 (recall of conflicts vs. celebrations) between-subjects conditions.

They first completed a brief knowledge quiz by indicating whether they had ever heard of

five linguistic expressions; three expressions primed either unity (*we are one, my better half, made for each other*) or journey (*we've walked together, a long trail, look how far we've come*) and two were fillers (*cross your fingers, drink like a fish*). Then they recalled and wrote down “two things you and your partner *fought over*” or “*celebrated.*” Next, they rated “How satisfied are you with your romantic relationship?” and “How satisfied are you with your life in general?” ($1 = \text{very dissatisfied}, 11 = \text{very satisfied}$). Finally, they provided demographic information.

Eight participants failed to write down two fights or two celebrations; one used ratings beyond the scale range and joked about the questions. They were excluded from analysis. Table 1 shows the demographics of the analyzed sample ($N = 64$).

Results

As predicted (Figure 1), participants who had to recall conflicts reported lower relationship satisfaction after exposure to unity than journey expressions (planned-contrast $t(60) = 2.77, p = .007, d = 0.97$), whereas participants who had to recall celebrations were satisfied with their relationship regardless of metaphor exposure ($t(60) = 1.01, p = .29$; see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). In fact, after exposure to journey expressions participants who had to recall conflicts were as satisfied with their relationship as those who had to recall celebrations ($t(60) = 0.14, p = .89$), whereas after exposure to unity expressions participants who had to recall conflicts were much less satisfied with their relationship than those who had to recall celebrations ($t(60) = 3.82, p < .001$). These different patterns were reflected in the predicted metaphor x recall interaction ($F(1, 60) = 7.37, p = .009$).¹ In contrast, life satisfaction ratings were unaffected by metaphor exposure, recall valence, or their interaction ($F_s \leq 1.66, p_s \geq .20$), indicating that love frames influenced judgment of relationship, but not life in general.

¹ The remaining effects were of little theoretical interest. Specifically, relationship satisfaction was significantly lower after recalling conflicts than celebrations (main effect of recall, $F(1, 60) = 6.33, p = .02$) and nonsignificantly lower after exposure to unity than journey expressions (main effect of metaphor, $F(1, 60) = 1.45, p = .23$).

Discussion

Bringing the unity frame to mind hurts relationship satisfaction if conflicts are salient, not if celebrations are salient. This suggests that metaphorical *framing* effects are dependent on the content being framed, distinct from metaphorical *transfer* effects. Metaphorical transfer, constituting the lion's share of recent metaphor research (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010; Lee & Schwarz, 2014), involves the transfer of attributes from one domain to another (e.g., warmth to affection; Williams & Bargh, 2008). From this perspective, just as priming warmth promotes a sense of affection, priming unity should heighten a sense of perfect fit with one's partner and simply boost one's relationship satisfaction, regardless of whether positive or negative relational episodes are recalled. But as it turns out, in the face of conflicts, priming unity *undermines* relationship satisfaction, consistent with the logic of metaphorical framing that involves the application of a frame to a content domain. Such application also stipulates that love frames only influence judgment of targets to which they are applicable (e.g., relationship), but not targets to which they are inapplicable (e.g., life).

Note that Study 1 rendered the metaphors accessible within the relational context (e.g., "made for each other," "look how far we've come"). Would cueing the metaphors without the relational context still influence relationship judgment? Studies 2a and 2b invoke unity and journey in a nonsocial manner to test (i) whether they shift relationship evaluation following conflicts² and if so, (ii) whether their influence depends on one's awareness of their relevance to relationship.

² We focus on conflicts (not celebrations) because the frames influence relationship evaluation differently only after conflicts.

Study 2: Does it hurt to see nonsocial cues of unity?

Study 2a material and methods

One hundred seventy-two students at the University of Toronto participated in a study on relationship evaluation. They were randomly assigned to 2 (physical cues of unity vs. journey metaphor) x 2 (relevance vs. irrelevance of metaphor to relationship) between-subjects conditions. In the relevance condition, the experimenter began by saying, “I’m pilot testing a study for my class project. This study looks at people’s mindsets, especially how their mindsets get applied to relationships. It’s very short, just about 5 minutes.” In the irrelevance condition, the experimenter said, “I’m pilot testing a couple of studies for my two class projects. One class is on basic perception, and the other class is on social relationship. They’re very short, just about 5 minutes in total.” Upon consent, participants either identified pairs of matched shapes that form a unified whole (unity cues; Appendix A) or chose between pairs of routes to reach an exotic, unfamiliar destination (journey cues; Appendix B).

Afterwards all participants read about and imagined being in a generally positive relationship (Appendix C) with a minor conflict: “One day, the two of you got into an argument over what you are going to do next long weekend. Your partner is very adventurous and wants to try new things and explore new places. You, on the other hand, argue that your long weekend can be ruined if the new activities turn out to be horrible. You would rather do the activities you both know you would enjoy.” Based on the scenario, participants answered five questions about the relationship and the conflict, which were factor-analyzed with varimax rotation to yield two factors (see Table 3 for questions and factor loadings). The first factor, labeled “conflict intensity,” concerned the extent to which the relational conflict was severe, problematic, and hard to resolve; the second factor, labeled “relationship experience,” concerned satisfaction and feeling. The factor scores served as dependent measures.

To check if participants across conditions identified with the character in the scenario, they also rated “How similar in values and personality are you to the character described in the scenario?” ($1 = \text{Not At All Similar}$, $7 = \text{Very Similar}$). Finally, they provided demographic information and were probed for suspicion, thanked, and debriefed.

Three participants knew the experiment’s purpose; one was unable to imagine the scenario; one was new to Canada and unable to understand the English materials. They were excluded from analysis. Table 1 shows the demographics of the analyzed sample ($N = 167$).

Study 2a results and discussion

As predicted, participants judged the conflicted relationship experience more negatively after matching shapes than choosing routes (planned-contrast $t(163) = 2.59$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.40$; see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). This effect emerged regardless of whether the physical cues of metaphor were presented as relevant or irrelevant to relationship (metaphor x relevance, $F(1, 163) = 0.03$, $p = .86$).³ The effect did not depend on perceived similarity with the scenario character, which was unaffected by metaphor cue, relevance to relationship, or their interaction ($F_s \leq 1.10$, $p_s \geq .30$). Judgment of conflict intensity was also unaffected by metaphor cue, relevance to relationship, or their interaction ($F_s \leq 2.46$, $p_s \geq .12$). In short, cues of unity and journey can alter the relational implications of a conflict without changing perception of the conflict itself.

Unity and journey frames can be activated by linguistic expressions within a relational context (Study 1) or by nonsocial cues without a relational context (Study 2a). But the route-choosing task that cued journey in Study 2a was more verbal than the shape-matching task that cued unity. Moreover, the routes involved a sense of difficulty that the shapes did not. To

³ The main effect of relevance to relationship on judgment of relationship experience was of little theoretical interest and was not significant ($F(1, 163) = 2.29$, $p = .13$).

address these concerns, Study 2b uses similarly pictorial and neutral tasks to activate both frames.

Study 2b material and methods

Ninety-two students at the University of Toronto with dating experience participated in a study on relationship evaluation. They either identified pairs of matched shapes that form a unified whole (unity cues; Appendix A) or toured mazes from point A to point B (journey cues; Appendix D).⁴ Then they completed the same relationship evaluation task as in Study 2a (Appendix C). The same two scores, yielded from a factor analysis fixing a two-factor structure with varimax rotation (see Table 3), served as the dependent measures. Participants also rated how easy ($0 = \text{very difficult}$, $10 = \text{very easy}$) and fun ($0 = \text{very boring}$, $10 = \text{very fun}$) the matching or maze task was. Finally, they provided demographic information and were probed for suspicion, thanked, and debriefed.

Three participants did not complete all the matches or mazes; three guessed the experiment's purpose; one did not answer the questions seriously. They were excluded from analysis. Table 1 shows the demographics of the analyzed sample ($N = 85$).

Study 2b results

Replicating Study 2a, participants judged the conflicted relationship experience more negatively after matching shapes than touring mazes ($t(83) = 2.16$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.47$). Again, judgment of conflict intensity was not significantly influenced by metaphor cue ($t(83) = 1.19$, $p = .24$, $d = 0.26$). These results were not due to differential ease or valence of the metaphor-cueing tasks, as both tasks were rated as similarly easy ($t(83) = 0.43$, $p = .67$) and fun ($t(83) = 0.16$, $p =$

⁴ Study 2b presented the metaphor-cueing tasks as irrelevant to relationship because relevance did not matter for the metaphorical framing effect in Study 2a. We also dropped the measure of perceived similarity to the character in the scenario because Study 2a showed that participants across conditions identified with the character to the same extent.

.87). In sum, merely pictorial cues of unity and journey are sufficient to influence relationship evaluation, even in the absence of any semantic material that links the frames to relationship issues.

General discussion

Thinking about relational conflicts hurts more with the unity than journey frame in mind. The frames can be invoked within a relational context (Study 1) or in a manner that is unrelated to relationships (Studies 2a & 2b). They can be activated through linguistic expressions (Study 1), as in prior work on metaphorical framing (e.g., Landau, Sullivan, & Greenberg, 2009; Morris, Sheldon, Ames, & Young, 2007), or through nonsocial and pictorial cues, as in the present research (Studies 2a & 2b). They influence judgment when they are accessible and applicable to the target (e.g., relationship) but not otherwise (e.g., life in general). These patterns shed new light on how to think about love, how it matters for relationship evaluation, and how frames shape judgments.

Framing love

It may be romantic for lovers to think they were made for each other, but it backfires when conflicts arise and reality pokes the bubble of perfect unity. Instead, thinking about love as a journey, often involving twists and turns but ultimately moving toward a destination, takes away some of the repercussions of relational conflicts.

This protective effect of the journey frame may bear on a peculiar pattern in relationship research: The presence of conflicts is not always negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. The two can be negligibly or even positively associated under some conditions (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Clark & Grote, 1998). This can happen when partners have conflicting priorities but recognize such differences, forego their own desires, and behave communally to

meet each other's wants and needs (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993). The present findings suggest that it may also happen when conflicts are interpreted as steps of progress in a meaningful journey. Given "the inevitability of conflict and the negative sentiments that accompany it" (Berscheid, 2010, p. 5), a journey frame may prevent the "erosion of love" (Weiss, 1975, p. 36) down the road.

Compatible with this reasoning, correlational data show that people who chronically endorse work-it-out or growth theories of relationship—implicit theories that draw on the journey frame—are more resilient to conflicts and fare better on numerous relationship outcomes (e.g., Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003; Ruvolo & Rotonto, 1998). Likewise, people who are given a persuasive article about the work-it-out (vs. soulmate) theory are less bothered by having a less-than-ideal partner (Franiuk, Pomerantz, & Cohen, 2004). Consistent with conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), we assume that content-specific implicit theories, such as implicit theories of relationships, make use of more basic conceptual metaphors that are applicable across multiple content domains. Accordingly, exposure to nonsocial tasks (as in Studies 2a & 2b) can affect relationship judgment in ways that parallel direct exposure to implicit relationship theories (e.g., Franiuk et al., 2004) because both share the basic frames of unity and journey as the key ingredient.

How then does the interplay between temporary accessibility of metaphorical frames and chronic accessibility of implicit relationship theories shape relational thinking? Does endorsing a compatible (vs. incompatible) implicit theory enhance (vs. impair) the impact of a temporary frame, or do they exert independent, additive influences (cf. Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986)? Teasing these intricacies apart will forge theoretical connections between the rich literature on relationships and the emerging literature on metaphors. It will also have applied implications for when and how to use the love frames as relationship counseling devices.

Metaphorical framing

The unity frame only hurts relationship judgment if conflicts are salient, not if celebrations are salient. This interaction effect highlights the content-dependent nature of metaphorical framing, which is distinct from metaphorical transfer. If metaphorical transfer were at work (Landau et al., 2010; Lee & Schwarz, 2014), priming unity should have heightened a sense of perfect fit and simply boosted relationship satisfaction, resulting in a main effect. But we found a negative simple effect of priming unity, and only in the case of conflicts (an interaction effect), consistent with the notion that the frames are being applied to accessible content.

How many content domains can a frame be applied to? Take the journey frame as an example. It underlies several implicit theories of relationship such as growth (vs. destiny; Knee et al., 2003) and work-it-out (vs. soulmate; Franiuk et al., 2002) as well as incremental (vs. entity) lay theories of learning and development (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Given that one frame can scaffold multiple belief systems, metaphorical frames may operate at a relatively deep level and exert pervasive influence on judgment across domains. Accordingly, priming journey may generally frame one's experiences (e.g., marriage, career, life) and attributes (e.g., intelligence, personality, morality) as processes that unfold and grow over time. There may be a caveat though. We suspect that the frames have to be invoked in a content-neutral manner. If a frame is invoked in a way that is already imbued with, say, relational content, its impact may be limited to relationship judgment, as observed in Study 1. In contrast, if a frame is invoked without being limited to any particular domain, as in Studies 2a and 2b, its impact may be considerably broader (beyond our present focus on the relationship domain). Future research may fruitfully explore the extent to which metaphorical framing effects vary from being domain-specific to domain-general, depending on how frames are invoked.

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Table 1. Demographics of study samples

Study	Gender		Age (in years)		Currently in a relationship?		Duration (in years) of current relationship, if applicable	
	Men	Women	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Yes	No	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
1	22	42	20-69	42.4 (13.3)	64 (16 long-term / committed, 2 engaged, 46 married)	0	0.5-44.7	15.4 (12.6)
2a	75	92	18-30	20.9 (2.2)	70	97	0.1-7.0	2.2 (1.8)
2b	35	50	18-27	20.6 (2.1)	40	45	0.2-6.5	1.9 (1.7)

Table 2. Cell sizes and means (standard deviations) of dependent variables (key ones in bold) by metaphor prime and condition in each study

Study	Condition	Cell Size (<i>n</i>) and Dependent Variable	Metaphor Prime	
			Unity	Journey
1	Recall conflicts	<i>n</i>	17	15
		Relationship satisfaction Life satisfaction	8.41 (1.28) 8.82 (1.02)	9.73 (1.45) 9.73 (1.16)
	Recall celebrations	<i>n</i>	17	15
		Relationship satisfaction Life satisfaction	10.18 (0.95) 9.59 (2.21)	9.67 (1.68) 9.67 (1.40)
2a	Metaphor relevant to relationship	<i>n</i>	42	44
		Relationship experience Conflict intensity Similarity with scenario character	-0.07 (1.23) 0.22 (1.27) 3.31 (1.76)	0.29 (0.74) 0.02 (0.93) 3.64 (1.64)
	Metaphor irrelevant to relationship	<i>n</i>	40	41
		Relationship experience Conflict intensity Similarity with scenario character	-0.33 (0.90) -0.22 (0.92) 3.45 (1.57)	0.86 (1.01) -0.03 (0.81) 3.27 (1.25)
2b	(Metaphor irrelevant to relationship)	<i>n</i>	43	42
		Relationship experience Conflict intensity How easy the priming task was How fun the priming task was	-0.23 (1.07) 0.13 (1.16) 8.02 (1.77) 6.19 (2.36)	0.23 (0.88) -0.13 (0.80) 8.21 (2.31) 6.10 (2.84)

Table 3. Questions and factor loadings in Studies 2a and 2b

Item, in order of presentation on questionnaire	Study 2a		Study 2b	
	Factor 1 ("conflict intensity")	Factor 2 ("relationship experience")	Factor 1 ("conflict intensity")	Factor 2 ("relationship experience")
How satisfied would you be in this relationship? <i>(1 = Not Satisfied At All, 7 = Very Satisfied)</i>	-.04	.87	-.22	.87
Having imagined yourself in this scenario, how do you feel right now? <i>(1 = Very Unpleasant, 7 = Very Pleasant)</i>	-.25	.76	-.38	.77
How problematic do you think this conflict is? <i>(1 = Not Problematic At All, 7 = Very Problematic)</i>	.87	-.06	.71	-.50
How severely do you think this conflict will affect their relationship? <i>(1 = Barely Any Effect, 7 = Very Severe Effects)</i>	.88	-.14	.79	-.34
How long do you think it will take to resolve this problem? <i>(1 day, 1 week, 1 month, A few months, Never)</i>	.73	-.20	.82	-.18

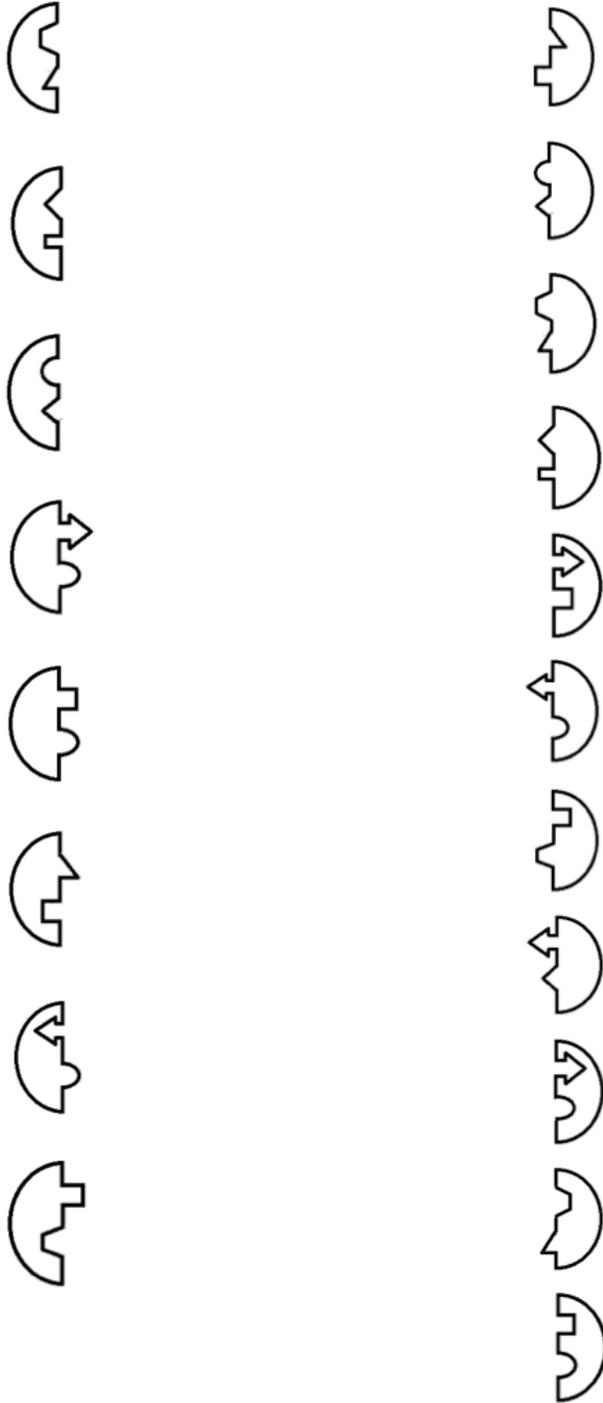
Figure 1. Mean relationship satisfaction by metaphor exposure and recall valence in Study 1

Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Appendix A: Nonsocial cues of unity (Studies 2a & 2b)

We are looking at basic perceptual processing among students.

Each shape on the left has a corresponding shape on the right that will fit it perfectly. Match the shapes by drawing a line connecting the two shapes.



Appendix B: Nonsocial cues of journey (Study 2a)

Please read the following questions and choose from the options presented.

1. Suppose there are 2 routes to take for a business trip from Juiz de Fora, Brazil to Cotoca, Bolivia. Which route is more preferable to go from Juiz de Fora, Brazil to Cotoca, Bolivia?

a)



Climb over a mountain, swim through a lake, then drive all the way to Cotoca, Bolivia.

b)



Fight through a blizzard, walk along a beach then, ride on a motorcycle to Cotoca, Bolivia.

2. Suppose there are 2 routes to take for a vacation to Erbenet, Mongolia, leaving from Nicosia, Cyprus. Which route is preferable to go from Nicosia, Cyprus to Erbenet, Mongolia?

a)



Start from Nicosia, Cyprus by walking along to the next stop, then go through a beautiful forest. After, suffer through a hot desert to Erbenet, Mongolia.

b)



Start from Nicosia, Cyprus by singing along the way to the next stop, then go through a sunny day. After, rush through a gloomy forest to Erbenet, Mongolia.

3. Suppose there are 2 routes to visit Mhluzi, South Africa during a break, leaving from Tabligbo, Togo. Which route is more preferable to go from Tabligbo, Togo to Mhluzi, South Africa?

a)



Get a lift up the mountain to go over but crawl down the mountain. Then, walk along a beach on the way to Mhluzi, South Africa.

b)



Ride on a motorboat through a lake but edge the way through a cornfield, then walk all the way to Mhluzi, South Africa.

**Appendix C: Description of a generally positive relationship with a minor conflict
(Studies 2a & 2b)**

Imagine you and a romantic partner have been dating for 6 months. Both of you are busy with work but enjoy spending time together whenever you can. During this time, the two of you start to know each other better and find things you both enjoy. Your favorite restaurant is right down the block, you both love music from the 70s, and you become very competitive when playing tennis.

One day, the two of you got into an argument over what you are going to do next long weekend. Your partner is very adventurous and wants to try new things and explore new places. You, on the other hand, argue that your long weekend can be ruined if the new activities turn out to be horrible. You would rather do the activities you both know you would enjoy.

