

Originally published as:

Otis, L. (2018, May 27). Are we too attached to the attachment metaphor? Words for relationships exclude too much of human experience [Blog post]. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved May 23, 2019, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/rethinking-thought/201805/are-we-too-attached-the-attachment-metaphor>



[Laura Otis Ph.D.](#)

[Rethinking Thought](#)

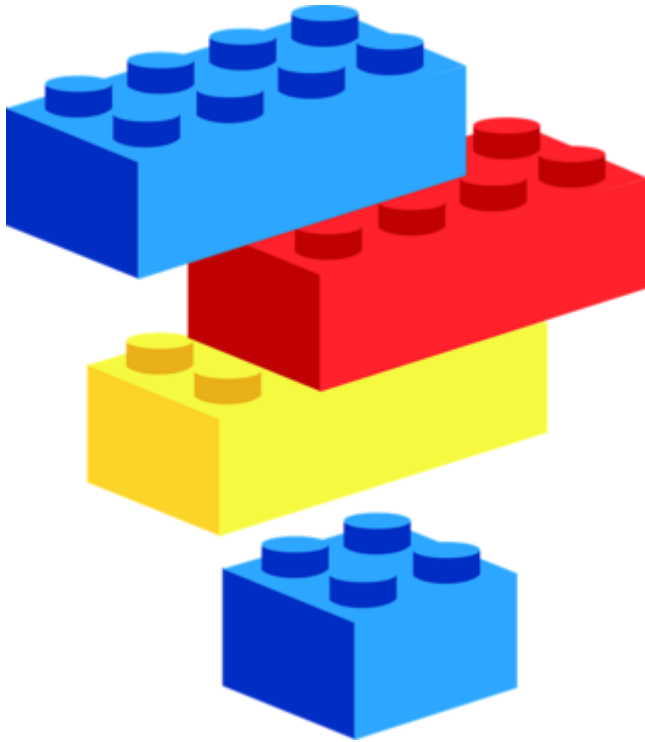
Are We Too Attached to the Attachment Metaphor?

Words for Relationships Exclude Too Much of Human Experience

Posted May 27, 2018

We have become so used to talking about human relationships in terms of [attachment](#) that it's easy to forget attachment is a metaphor. Discussing emotional connections in terms of spatial ones may seem like the most natural thing in the world. As linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson have shown, metaphor is integral to thought, and the metaphors people use to navigate the world often describe abstract concepts in terms of their bodies moving through space (Lakoff and Johnson 3). How else *could* you describe human bonding (another metaphor) if not through closeness and distance?

Attachment, however, imposes ways of thinking about relationships of which we are hardly aware, and which we may not want. In his classic study of metaphors, philosopher Max Black pointed out that metaphors rarely just substitute one concept for another. Instead, they create meanings by aligning concepts so as to highlight common features and occlude contrasting ones. Black's research showed him that a metaphor, "selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principal subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject" (Black 291). With a metaphor, it is as though one were viewing a complex object through smoked glass on which a few lines have been scratched (Black 288). One sees what the smoked-glass screen allows, not the entire object.



Source: Blocks Building Brick. Pixabay. Public Domain.

Attachment carries mechanical connotations even though it is a general term. It brings to mind the assembly of a machine, or the satisfying snap of two joined Lego pieces. One can attach almost any object to any other, but the word works best for hard plastic or metal parts. Attachment suggests the addition of a new component that may not always be wanted and that can be detached again without damaging either part. As a metaphor for relationships, attachment conveys people's tendencies to bond and split, but it makes it hard to describe the devastation many people feel when two emotionally connected people pull apart. Attached Lego blocks come away intact. Human beings don't detach so easily.

When psychologist John Bowlby conducted his path-breaking studies of attachment, he showed sensitivity when he chose his terms. Bowlby noticed that some small children tolerate brief absences of their [parents](#), whereas others protest loudly, and he wanted to know why. Bowlby avoided using terms such as "clinging," "because it carries with it an adverse value judgment that is held to be inappropriate and unhelpful" (Bowlby 211). Instead, he wrote about "[anxious attachment](#)," which "respects the person's natural desire for a close relationship" (Bowlby 213). Bowlby found that anxious attachment could result from unexpected absences or threats of abandonment, and that it could continue into adulthood. Psychologists Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver applied Bowlby's theory to adult [romantic relationships](#) and found that their participants behaved in secure (56%), avoidant (24%), or

anxious/ambivalent (20%) ways that closely parallel children's stances toward their parents (Hazan and Shaver 521). In the 1970s, Bowlby used the term attachment to protect people's dignity because it seemed to describe their need to bond in a neutral way. After four decades of relationship studies enabled by Bowlby's research, we need some new terms.

How greatly language influences thinking--if at all--remains a matter of debate. Probably the terms with which we describe relationships mold our ideas to some degree, but never entirely. As psychologist Dedre Gentner puts it, language offers a "set of tools with which to construct and manipulate representations" (Gentner 223). Attachment offers a useful tool by allowing us to imagine emotional connections in terms of physical ones. But attachment suppresses the intermeshing, intermingling, entangling aspects of human bonding that other metaphors might provide. A couple who have been married for decades are less like two Lego pieces stuck together than like two compounds that have formed a solution, or two plants whose roots are entangled. Rather than two conjoined objects, they have merged to form one object, and they occupy the same space. Attachment fails to capture the soft, organic messiness of human bonds.



Source: Entangled and Twisted Tree Branches. PublicDomanPictures.

It is easy to criticize, but harder to create, and it would be irresponsible to dismiss a working metaphor without suggesting others in its place. I would propose metaphors that emphasize the growing, organic aspects of relationships, such as entanglement, intermeshing, interweaving, and symbiosis. Attachment suggests a connection inessential to one's being, and it provides a convenient metaphor for anyone who wants to end a relationship. Attachment doesn't convey the perspective of someone who feels as though being separated from her partner is shredding her tissues. Feeling devastated when an attachment ends suggests weakness, maybe even mental illness. Feeling torn apart when separated from someone with whom one has grown together sounds a lot more understandable.

In the same decade in which Bowlby published his attachment studies, psychologist Jean Baker Miller wrote that, "for many women the threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not as just a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (Miller 83). Miller argued that because women have been socialized to build their identities through relationships, the end of a relationship can feel annihilating. The attachment metaphor doesn't capture this realm of human experience, so that in the language with which we analyze relationships, we are excluding many people's emotional lives. Bowlby meant well,

and I hope that we can honor his spirit by seeking more inclusive terms to describe relationships.

References

Black, Max. 1955. "Metaphor." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55: 273-94.

Bowlby, John. 1973. *Attachment and Loss*. 3 vols. Volume II: *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*. Basic Books.

Gentner, Dedre. 2003. "Why We're So Smart." In *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*. Edited by Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow, 195-235. MIT Press.

Hazan, Cindy, and Phillip Shaver. 1987. "Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52.3: 511-24.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press.

Miller, Jean Baker. 1986. *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Beacon Press.