

I, you, or we: Pronouns provide hints to romantic attachment styles

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Sometimes people wish they had greater insight into how their partner really feels. Recent work in social and personality psychology dives into the stories people tell about their romantic relationships, and finds that those prone to avoidant attachment, are less likely to use the word "we" when talking about these relationships.

The results appear in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

"The pronouns individuals use when narrating their previous experiences from within their romantic lives provide a clue as to their corresponding [attachment](#) styles," says Will Dunlop (University of California, Riverside), lead author of the research.

Typically, attachment styles are represented by two factors—anxiety (reflecting the degree to which an individual is preoccupied with, and fears losing, his or her [romantic partner](#)) and avoidance (reflecting the degree to which an individual feels uncomfortable getting close to, and depending upon, his or her partner).

Dunlop and colleagues reviewed over 1400 observations drawn from seven studies, and then explored relations between adult romantic attachment styles and pronoun use.

They found that both anxious and avoidant attachment styles correlated positively with I-talk and negatively with we-talk, but once they accounted for participants' demographics and [personality traits](#), the correlation for anxious attachment and pronoun use was no longer significant. But for avoidant attachment types, the lack of the use of "we" talk held strong.

Dunlop suggests that the way individuals describe their romantic experiences could offer insights into how that person might behave and interact in romantic relationships as well.

"Anxious and avoidant attachment styles capture individual differences in the ways people think, feel, and behave in [romantic relationships](#). Given that those with higher levels of avoidant attachment were found to demonstrate lower levels of we-talk when describing experiences from their romantic lives, considering the use of we words (e.g., us, ours) in the disclosure of previous romantic [experiences](#) may offer indication of one's avoidant tendencies. This is a relatively novel and indirect way of gauging avoidant attachment, as individuals are typically unaware of the pronouns they use."

For future research, Dunlop is curious as to the clues narratives from other domains (e.g., one's professional life) may offer for attachment and other markers of adjustment. He also wonders what link, if any, there may be between the pronoun use and people's overall love life satisfaction.

More information: William L. Dunlop et al, Love in the First Degree: Individual Differences in First-Person Pronoun Use and Adult Romantic Attachment Styles, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2019). [DOI:](#)

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