

# Tying Knots: Creating Metaphors for Interpersonal Relationships

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## Biography

Knut Omholt is an Associate Professor of teaching in higher education in the Department for Learning and Teacher Education at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. His background is in natural and social sciences, art education and art therapy. His research interests include embodied learning, practice-led research and the use of poetic and mythopoetic language in understanding one's emotional and social conditions.

## Abstract

**In interpersonal relationships, there is often tacit knowledge. The purpose of the work presented here is to make possible a verbalisation of one's experiences in relationships. To elicit metaphors based on tying knots, the author studies four fields: knots as physical objects, knots in topology, knots in poetry and knots in ornaments. The methodological design is a self-study of the practices. The author deduces properties of knots that can be transferred to relationships, for the parties to express how long, sincere and emotional they are meant to be. These procedures can then form the basis of teaching or therapy.**

## **Keywords**

**Metaphor, interpersonal relationships, knots, embodied meaning, from concrete to abstract.**

## **Introduction: Knots as physical and social phenomena**

The topic of this essay is the creation of a language for interpersonal relationships, especially relationships which include emotional bonds, such as those between friends, family members or lovers. How can we communicate our interpretation of the specific traits of a relationship and not confine ourselves to broad terms like ‘I love you’ or ‘we are friends’? For want of adequate language, it can be difficult both to acknowledge what is going on and to convert one’s experiences into words. The use of metaphors can make a verbalisation of what was otherwise tacit possible. By explicating the constitution of the relationship, it is possible to adjust it. In the work I present in this essay, I wanted to derive a vocabulary parties in a relationship can use to convey their understanding of specific properties of the connection, such as how honest, binding, intimate they would like to be.

Arts and crafts provide opportunities to open up new sources of metaphors by engaging the imagination. The idea of using knots as metaphors came from the meaning of the words tie and knot. They can generally be defined as tie, ‘to make a bond or connection’, and knot, ‘to unite closely or intricately’ (Merriam-Webster, 2007). Phrases derived from these words can refer not only to physical connections between objects but also to mental bonds between people. The question I sought to illuminate was: How can experiences of knots form a language for interpersonal relationships?

## Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have proposed the embodied meaning hypothesis to describe how abstract thought is to a large degree based on a conceptual metaphor. A conceptual metaphor is a mechanism for conceptualisation that allows us to use the physical logic of some bodily condition or action to understand a mental idea (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Metaphors are a basic means of extending our knowledge into new areas – in my case, to traits of interpersonal relationships.

The term embodied in phrases such as embodied meaning implies two things:

. . . first, that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context. (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991, pp. 172–173)

This definition of embodiment suggests that what we perceive is both subjectively experienced and brought about by our shared biological and cultural conditions. When an organism acts, there is an interplay between what it does and what it perceives; through its body and movements it “*chooses the stimuli in the physical world to which it will be sensitive*” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 13; cited in Varela et al., 1991, p. 174 [italics added by Varela et al.]). In my work with cords and knots, I will both initiate action upon the material and be shaped by its attributes. What I find will result partly from my way of handling the material and partly from my constitution as a human being enmeshed in the culture in which I live.

Metaphors come into being by cross-domain mappings; experiences from a source domain – the sensorimotor domain – are transferred to a target domain – the domain of subjective experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). As the transfer is from a bodily engagement with a

concrete part of the environment to an abstract subject, the mechanism suggests that one can strengthen one's abstract thinking by engaging bodily with concrete phenomena. This is an argument for the importance of arts and crafts in school. In my case, the specific source domain is the tying of knots, while the particular target domain is interpersonal relationships (see figure 1).

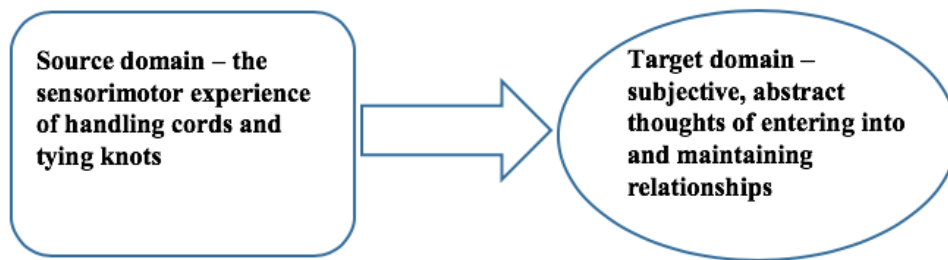


Figure 1. The constitution of a metaphor

In most of the examples in Lakoff and Johnson (1999), the source domain is known from conventional everyday experiences. In my project, this is not the case; I cannot take for granted that people in general are acquainted with cords and knots. My task was to get to know the source domain of tying knots and to deduce a procedure others can follow in order to derive attributes and structures that can be mapped onto the target domain of interpersonal relationships.

## **Methodological design**

Given the nature of the task I assigned myself, I had to choose some fields within which the tying of knots occurs. I wanted the areas to supply a span of activities that could provide a variety of experiences. I chose four fields. First, from my background as a therapist, I had a book of poetry, called *Knots* (Laing, 1971), which portrayed how people get intertwined in emotional patterns. I wanted to deepen my experience of the poems. Second, in an art study

I had undertaken, I became acquainted with ornaments that included knots, and I was curious to see what it would be like to draw them. Third, I wanted to experiment with tying physical knots. This was a matter of course, as most of my ideas of knots came from tying knots in practice. Finally, I would manipulate knots that were already tied, as one does in topology. I came across this field by reading about Carol Strohecker's (2007) Knot Laboratory, where she discovered how some of the participants took their struggle with knots as a point of departure for talking about relationships between members of their family.

As shown in figure 2, I envision my approach as a quadrangle, containing four triangles, each with its baseline along one of the quadrangle's sides and stretching towards its centre. The triangles represent the fields within which I worked. In the centre of the quadrangle was, in the beginning, a question mark, but gradually the sum of all four means of access appeared.

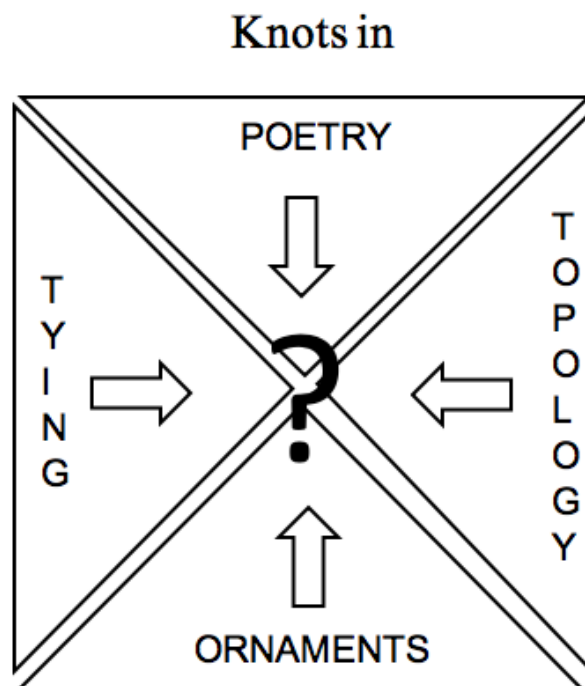


Figure 2. My fourfold approach to eliciting aspects of knots

My investigation falls within practice-led research, for, in that sort of exploration, “the new

can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice” (Bolt, 2007, p. 30). I did not intend to refine the practice itself, but to apply what I learned to another domain; namely, one of language, metaphors and socio-emotional issues. This approach also connects to Moustakas’s (1990) description of heuristic research: “It refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience. . . . The process of discovery leads investigators to new images and meanings regarding human phenomena” (p. 9). That formulation expresses what I did: in my work I looked for connections between what I drew from knotting and what I had experienced in relationships to be able to propose metaphors regarding relationships more generally.

I worked part-time in my studio for two months and spent on average one hour per day. I enmeshed myself in one field at the time. I kept a journal in which I wrote what I discovered, sometimes supplying the notes with visual illustrations.

## **How I proceeded**

### *Reading poetry*

Knots can be regarded as traces of gestures. Thinking of knots in that way makes it possible to imagine people moving emotionally about each other, becoming entangled. This became my approach to the poetry of Ronald Laing (1971). Laing was a Scottish psychiatrist who wrote on mental illness, also by way of poetry. I looked through his book and fixed my attention on poems where he used a layout with displaced lines. Occasionally, he also used arrows to indicate what was going on. These arrangements gave me the idea of copying pages from the book and drawing lines in different colours, making visible my intuitive reflections of what went back and forth between the two people. It came to look like figure 3.

### *Drawing ornaments*

The knot motif appears in ornaments from different cultures. I drew knots in two ways – I

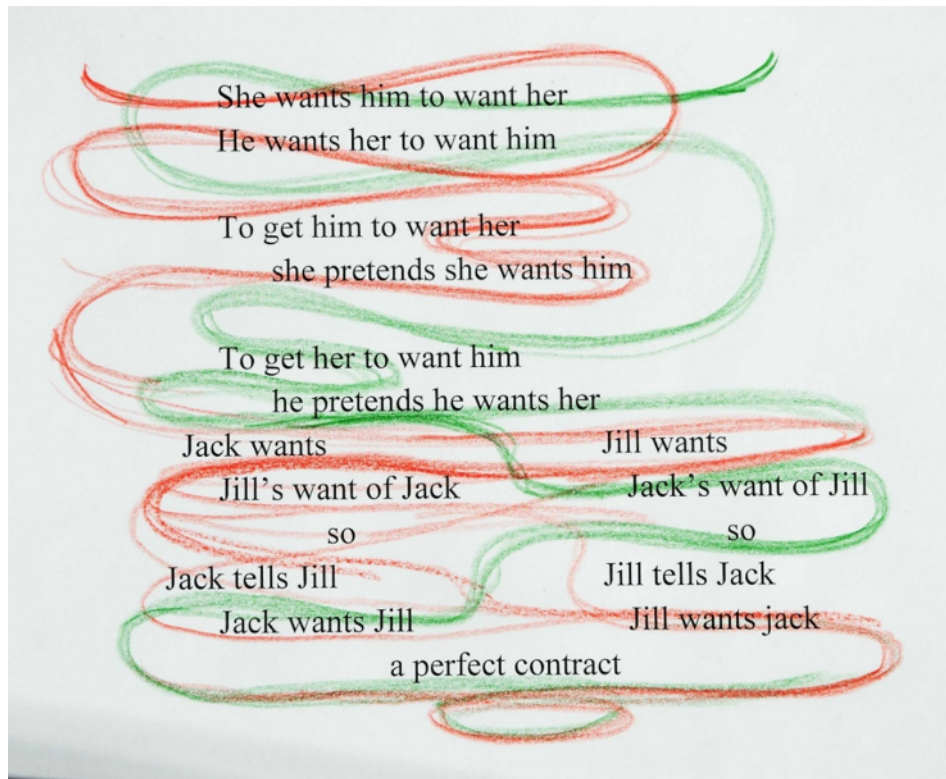


Figure 3. Trying to catch the emotional movements between the two people in the poem on p. 48 in Laing (1971)

wanted to know what it would take to construct knots, as opposed to drawing them freehand. First, I constructed grids and made knots based on points and lines in them. In this approach, I used the procedures in books by Bain (1951) and Meehan (1991). Both Bain and Meehan studied and wrote books on Celtic art, in which knots play a central role. Figure 4 shows an example of what I drew.

Second, I did freehand form drawing, inspired by books by Kutzli (1974, 1998). Kutzli studied Langobardic art and made books on creative form drawing. Figure 5 shows my work. Left: I started with a straight line, then made a curve turning backwards; I let it cross once and then again. The first crossing was easy. The second and third times were more difficult; I got to know what Kutzli (1974) meant when he said: “This only crossing can be easily untied.

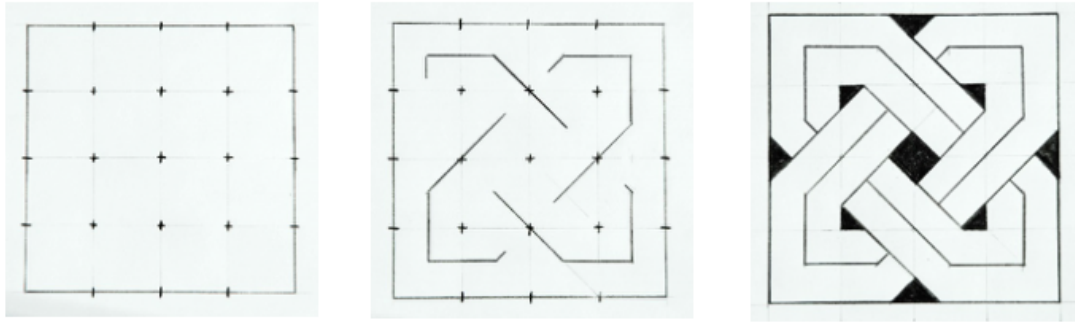


Figure 4. Steps in developing the grid and drawing King Solomon's Knot (based on Meehan, 1991, pp. 20–25)

It is only when I cross a second and third time again that the knot is finally determined” (p. 148). Centre: In my next drawing I made the round forms into pointed corners and repeated the pattern. Right: Finally, I started with a locked form and then broke loose and moved into a rhythm.

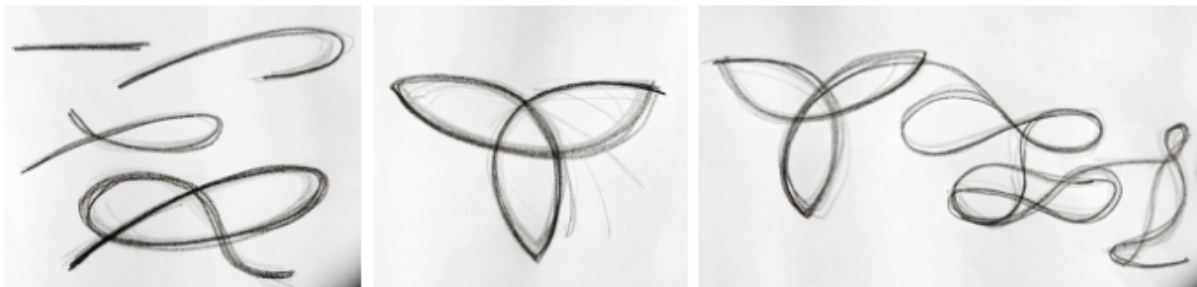


Figure 5. Drawing forms of knots (based on Kutzli, 1974, p. 148; 1998, Ch. 5)

### *Tying knots*

In tying knots, I made a distinction between conventional knots and creative knots (see Warner, 1996). I tied conventional knots by following detailed prescriptions and creative knots haphazardly by adding more units (see figure 6). In tying the conventional knots, I made use of instructions in Penn (2004), who holds a master's degree in physics and has travelled the U.S. and England, studying the use and history of knots, rope and ropemaking. I sometimes thought of each of the cords as a person, symbolising the emotional content of his or her part of the



relationship. In tying, I wanted to use a variety of cords and knots to provide ideas regarding the properties of the span of relationships. There are three examples in figure 6. Left: A red nylon rope connects a yarn of spun wool in mixed colour. The knot they make is a conventional one – a Fisherman’s Knot. Centre: Both ropes consist of hemp. They form a conventional knot – a Sheet Bend. It is a slipped version – the last tuck makes a bight instead of a single running end to enable a quick release. Right: A thick rope of hemp and a thin string of synthetic material connect each other – an unusual relation? The thick rope forms an Overhand Knot; the thin string forms a creative knot. The end of the thick rope untwists.



Figure 6. Tying bends to join two cords

### *Studying topology*

Topology is the study of mathematical knots. Such knots come from knots that occur in daily life but are different in that the ends are joined together so one cannot undo them. A fundamental question in topology is whether two appearances represent the same knot; manipulating knots is a means to discuss that question. I wanted to see what kinds of experiences I could derive from changing the form of a knot. As my point of departure, I chose a book by Francis (1987), a professor at the University of Illinois who made visualising mathematics his prime pursuit. I took a string of paper and made a Figure of Eight Knot (see figure 7 left). Then I glued the ends together (figure 7 centre), to see what forms could be obtained (figure 7 right). The reason I used paper for the knot was to make it flexible and at the same time have it maintain its different appearances.

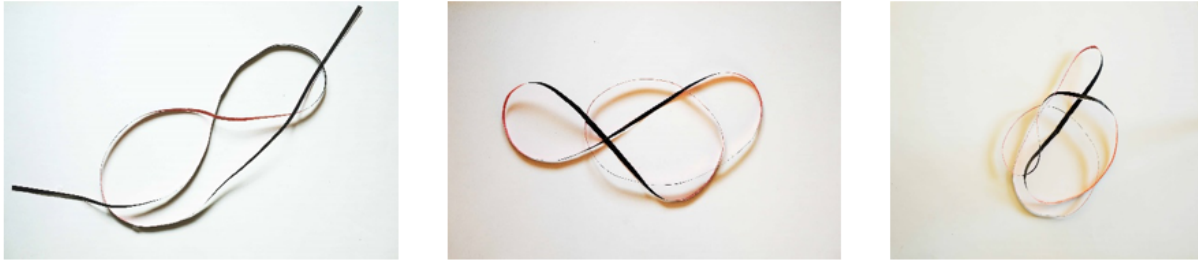


Figure 7. Working topologically with the Figure of Eight Knot (departing from Francis, 1987)

## **Findings: What came out of the four fields**

### *From poetry*

My work with the poems did not lead to particular insights regarding tying knots but assured me that it was adequate to use knots metaphorically for interpersonal relations. Laing (1971) does not mention tying and knotting, but figuratively such processes are going on: the two persons' thoughts, feelings, desires and resistances make twists, turns, tucks, loops and bends.

### *From drawing and tying knots*

When drawing from a grid, it was meticulous work to get the grid right and then draw the lines in the right places. But there was also the security of having the set points to relate to. As I drew freehand, I had to break free from a pattern, transcend it and move into a new one. It took courage to make forms without directions. I think similar emotions can occur when entering into a relationship, such as when deciding whether to keep to formalities or to create an unprecedented connection.

Practising tying offered me experiences of different aspects of knots and knotting and threads, lines and ropes. It turned out that tying physical knots provided most of the properties I found I could transfer from the source domain (knots) to the target domain (interpersonal relations).

### *From topology*

I was astonished to see that even though I glued the ends together and assumed that I had fixed the knot, a lot of improvisation was possible in making alternative forms. It became like a dance. The longer the dance lasted, the more intricate the forms became. Metaphorically it can mean that even if two people initially formed a certain type of relationship, many alternative ways of behaving are possible.

### **A language for interpersonal relationships**

Based on the findings, I will give some examples of how aspects of tying and knotting can be used metaphorically in a dialogue between two people in a relationship. The questions they ask each other are not meant as a continuous conversation.

- If our link is like two threads – one from me and one from you – knotted together, what do the strings look like to you? What kind of fibre – synthetic or natural? How thick is the thread? Does it have a Z-shape or an S-twist?
- Do you propose we use a conventional or a unique knot to tie us together?
- Do you think we have taken the appropriate steps in tying ourselves together? Did we forget any?
- Do we have the courage to make one more crossing?
- Have any of the ends begun to untwist? If so, should we prevent further unlaying?
- Did you pull the knot quite tight or did you let it remain loose?
- Did you make the last tuck with a bight to enable a quick release?
- Did you bother to keep the running ends from waving around?
- Does the thread between us have any stretch for sudden tension or severe shock loads?

- Should we adjust the knot?
- How much freedom do we have, given the way we are knotted together?

### **Use in teaching or therapy**

The way I proceeded in this study can form the basis of a method that can be applied in a class or therapy group about interpersonal relationships. One can proceed like this: the leader introduces the subject of interpersonal relationships and then gives the participants books on drawing and tying knots and hands out crayons, paper and different ropes. The participants draw knots using grids and freehand and tie conventional and creative knots. From their work, they deduce the properties of ropes and knots. They discuss how they can map these properties onto personal relationships. If desired, they can, in a sensitive manner, attempt to use some possible metaphors to communicate about their relationship.

### **Conclusion**

I set out to open up a new source of metaphors for interpersonal relationships based on an investigation into cords and knots. I worked with knots within poetry, ornaments, tying and topology. The results of the study are that it is possible to extract aspects of cords, knots and processes that can be mapped onto interpersonal relationships. The metaphoric language can help us to make sense of what it means to engage in relationships and maintain them. The procedures I followed can form the basis of teaching or therapy, providing people with a vocabulary to reflect on, express and communicate their experiences of relationships.

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