cultural science

CULTURAL SCIENCE JOURNAL 14
DOI: 10.2478/csj-2022-0009

sciendo

Roundtable:

The future of culture in more-than-human worlds of being

# How nonhumans are included in relationships

RONALD L. TROSPER

University of Arizona, United States of America, e-mail: rltrosper@arizona.edu, 0000-0001-8457-6266

**Keywords:** Indigenous peoples, nonhuman consciousness, principled engagement, reciprocity, reflexivity, relationality

Although the cultures of Indigenous peoples vary greatly, most emphasize two features in their world views. They believe relationships are fundamental and that relationships exist when all conscious entities interact. To establish good relationships, the participants treat each other well and try to understand each other. Because consciousness extends to nonhumans, good relationships require including them. The essay describes six rules that are followed by those who wish to create and maintain good strong relationships, with examples of applying the rules both among humans and among humans and nonhumans. It concludes by briefly describing qualities of good relationships and why these qualities, such as trust and equity, matter. Good relationships support biodiversity and ecosystem productivity.

## Introduction

The cultures of most Indigenous peoples include two key features in their world views. The people believe that relationships compose everything, and everything includes conscious nonhumans. Good relationships come into existence and persist when all members treat each other well. Bad



*Cultural Science Journal* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Tallinn University, Erfurt University and Sciendo.

relationships also exist; this essay is about good relationships. What does it mean to treat other conscious beings well? When some members have ways of being that differ substantially from that of humans, how can entities which see the world in different ways be included in relationships?

Much advice is available about how to generate good relationships among humans and nonhumans. Several sources are particularly helpful: the advice of the Haudenosaunee in creating peace, equity, and power, the advice of the Kluane and other Indigenous peoples in northern Canada explaining how to respect animals, and the advice of Fisher and Brown in preventing nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. Other researchers have described the rules used by people in successful relationships to manage common property or in the establishment of groups that can survive in competition with others. The following is a list of such rules, which are also called principled engagement (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015, 58-60) or reflexivity (Donati and Archer 2015). The subheadings for each of the rules are taken from the very useful book by Roger Fisher and Scott Brown, Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate. (Fisher and Brown 1988), while the descriptions utilize many sources (Nadasdy 2007; 2003; Fenton 1998; Williams 1997; Ostrom 1990; Atkins, Wilson, and Hayes 2019). Here is a list of the rules:

- Learn how others see things.
- Always consult before deciding – and listen.
- Balance emotion with reason.
- Use persuasion, not coercion.
- Accept others by dealing seriously with them.
- Act reliably by being wholly trustworthy, but not wholly trusting.

## Learn how others see things.

To have a good relationship, each participant needs to understand how other participants view the relationship and what they want to obtain from it. Although discussion is the primary means for development of mutual understanding among humans, observation and other methods need to be used with nonhumans.

Some of the Haudenosaunee steps in creating agreement particularly address each side learning what the other side thinks. After a negotiating team from one village arrives at another, Haudenosaunee hosts provide a meal and give the visitors a place to have a good night's sleep. This is a time to informally learn what the other side is thinking about. The hosts need to inquire as to the presence of a loss in order to know the other side's viewpoint. As part of negotiations, the Haudenosaunee would expect parties to 'meet in the woods' outside of formal proceedings. These meetings address the need to see things from the other person's viewpoint, or at least to understand their concerns. The meetings in the woods are not formally part of the proceedings and therefore don't have to be constrained by the formalities of making proposals.

Part of understanding is to seek to know the interests of the other party or other members of a relationship. People vary in their reasons for joining a group; they all may share the attainment of the same goals, but for their own reasons. Their abilities in different activities will lead to different roles. This differentiation is especially evident when nonhumans are members of a relationship.

The advice for a hunter is to patiently watch what animals do. Nadasdy observes that 'over time, hunters build up a vast store of experiential knowledge; they have seen the land in thousands of subtly different climatic and seasonal conditions.' Based on that experience, they develop an intuitive understanding and can 'feel' what animals may do. (Nadasdy 2003, 98) He reports on a very experienced hunter, Moose Jackson, who could tell where a moose was by looking at recent tracks.

How does he do that? Nadasdy reports, 'he stressed, he can only do this because he knows what moose do and "how they think."' He reported as well that 'his father and others had taught him some things, but mostly he had learned by hunting and by being open to what the animals had to teach him. … One must be willing to invest the time and effort needed in order to understand the essential nature of the moose and to deal with it on its own terms.' (Nadasdy 2003, 108)

Jorge Ishizawa (2006, 211-212), in describing the conservation of cultivated plants in Peru, reports a woman who treats her potatoes as members of the family; she speaks with all the plants in her garden, and she sleeps with the seeds. Kimmerer (2013, 22 tells how as a child she would help wild strawberries by clearing paths for the runners. Throughout her book, she stresses careful observation of plants, answering the question, 'how do we consume in a way that gives justice to the lives that we take?' (177)

## Always consult before deciding – and listen.

One of the classic contrasts in treaty making between Indians and colonists is that the colonists believed in written agreements which were assumed to then govern future relationships without modification. But the Indians were insistent that frequent meetings were needed to maintain the relationship. Such frequent meetings would allow consultation on issues that arose. 'Always consult before deciding – and listen' is an example of the Haudenosaunee concept of 'polish the chain.' The chain is the relationship; meetings allow people involved in a relationship to polish it. Once people 'link arms together' they are in a chain and become of 'one mind.'

Fisher and Brown recommend that mutual trust is enhanced when either party can assume that the other party will not act unilaterally. Consultation means more than simply informing about a decision that has been made before implementation; it means discussing the decision and modifying it if the other party has objections. The proposer needs to listen well enough to understand potential objections as well as making clear statements and seeking feedback to be sure that one has been understood.

Following Moose Jackson's observation, a hunter or a plant gatherer needs to listen to the land to get advice about what to do. Sometimes signs from the plant will indicate that harvesting at a particular time is not a good idea. Robin Kimmerer (2013, 177-178) reports that she consulted with leeks one spring, by observing them. The leeks were small and dried out; it was too early to harvest; they needed time to absorb water and become tasty: 'If you ask permission, you have to listen to the answer.' She carries this point to its conclusion: to reciprocate with nature, one needs to listen and follow the resulting messages. Another woman reports that she kept slipping as she tried to harvest some rushes; she took the advice and stopped, discovering later that the water was rising.

Indigenous groups insist that decisions be made by consensus. In the process of reaching consensus, every member of the group is encouraged to speak and give their opinion. Such a process can be described as fair and inclusive decision-making. The process of discussion involves listening to all opinions, airing differences, and seeking means by which a final decision satisfies everyone.

Many argue that because full consensus can rarely be attained, consensus decision-making is a recipe for inaction. Full discussion will lead to better decisions, but the veto of one person will prevent action. In the context of relationality, however, rules exist to restrain the dissenters from preventing action. Those who do not fully agree with the decision can explain why they do not as well as why they no longer object, seeing that they have not been able to convince the others. Respecting their views is a way to demonstrate care, as is deferring to the main view. The dissenter may participate in the activity they dislike, complaining all the way, conceding their error if it all works

out (Umeek (E. Richard Atleo) 2004, 90). The difference between such actions and the blockading practiced by Republicans using the filibuster in the U. S. Senate is that the Senate operates on competitive principles, not cooperative ones. Each side seeks victory, not joint success. Moving from majority rule in a competitive polity to consensus in a cooperative one would be difficult. See also *The Consensus-Building Handbook* (Susskind, Lawrence; McKearnan, Sarah; Thomas-Larmer, Jennifer 1999), which advocates consensus processes rather than Roberts Rules of Order, based on the rules Congress uses.

## Balance emotion with reason.

A part of public discussion of issues is the need to deal with conflict within relationships. Conflicts generally cause emotional responses of anger, fear, or disgust. These emotions interfere with maintaining a relationship; but the causes of the emotion may be misunderstanding of the motives of another, an error in communication. Dealing with conflict requires that some persons in a relationship can assist others in separating out the emotional issues from the rational ones.

Fisher and Brown begin their listing of the ways to create good relationships by considering the tension between emotion and reason. Emotion cannot be eliminated; but it needs to be dealt with when it affects a relationship. The Haudenosaunee negotiation ideal begins with steps in which the parties address their emotional issues. If one side has suffered a loss, the other side will insist on a condolence ceremony to comfort those who have lost a member of their side. When a delegation reaches a village to prepare for negotiation, the hosts are obligated to provide a speech at the wood's edge consisting of the 'three rare words': clear the travelers' eyes, ears, and throat of the thoughts and issues that they may have brought with them to the negotiation. The speech reminds all parties that clear thinking is needed, which means forgetting the emotions of the trip.

Killing an animal creates several different emotions. One is joy at success. Another is sadness over the loss of life. The need to have a level-headed approach is evident. Nadasdy reports that the Kluane do many things to temper or reduce such emotions. When he was sad about the death of a rabbit, his host told him it was disrespectful; the rabbit had given itself and a gift should not be rejected. If a hunter is proud of his kill, the community will reduce his pride so that he will not become too assertive in other contexts. Often a young hunter feels both pride and sadness as a result of his or her first kill. The Kluane state that both emotions are disrespectful of the gift of an animal's life; respect must tame emotions. (Nadasdy 2003, 88)

## Use persuasion, not coercion.

A consensus-based decision-making process involves persuasion rather than coercion. Trying to coerce other members of a relationship has a bad effect on emotions, as no one likes being forced to do things. It is better to persuade, and persuasion is helped by the other rules, such as communication or balancing emotion with reason. If another party is not persuaded, perhaps one's own position isn't correct; listening carefully will improve the assessment of who is correct.

Numerous coercive tactics exist: taking a position rather than addressing issues, narrowing the options to exclude ones the other side may like; threatening to cease negotiating, and so forth. To counter these tactics, Haudenosaunee insisted that a respondent be able to wait at least a day before responding. The heat and emotion created by coercion could be resisted with a period of cooling off. Time is needed for a good decision or response even in a noncoercive negotiation.

The idea that a hunter should kill only those animals who have offered themselves is an example of working by means of persuasion. In this case, the animal is persuading the hunter to kill it. Many Indigenous people object to research methods which rely on coercing animals in some way rather than patiently watching what they do and learning from them on their own terms. Monitoring movements by use of radio collars, for instance, insults wandering ungulates or predators ranging within their ranges, an invasion of autonomy. Aerial surveys by plane or helicopter scare the animals. Because animals think and feel, humans must ask themselves if they would like to be treated in that manner. (Nadasdy 2003, 110) From the Kluane viewpoint, one should not coerce animals because of their power; the consequences can be severe, such as the disappearance of a source of food. The relationship might come to an end.

Ostrom noted that in successful common pool management, members used graduated sanctions. If a rule was not being followed, a first choice for obtaining compliance would be to tease other people. There might be a small fine to give notice that a rule is not being followed. Larger sanctions would be held back and possibly never used. This is a form of using persuasion rather than coercion. If rules are enforced by coercion, over time mutual trust and the desire to rely on each other would erode. (Ostrom 1990, 98)

## Accept others by dealing seriously with them.

'Dealing seriously with others' describes the formal part of the Haudenosaunee diplomatic system. Each step shows serious intent, led by the need to present each proposal with wampum – which indicates a serious proposal. Insisting on condolence of the other side's losses is another way to deal seriously. Meeting at the woods edge to respect the three rare words and clear the mind for negotiation means serious intent.

The point of accepting another person in a negotiation is to accept them as equals, and to agree to talk. The opposite of acceptance is rejection, a refusal even to negotiate, which in an extreme case would be elimination of the other party. The idea that all animals and plants have a role to play, even if people do not understand it, is acceptance. The assumption that animals are conscious persons is acceptance, a willingness to deal seriously with all animals, especially those who are hunted.

Accepting the other party as worthy of interaction applies differently at different levels. At the level of humans and the land, acceptance means respecting the right of animals and plants to see the world in their own manner. At the higher level of a nation, each of separate relationships accept others within a nation, such as for instance, the Seneca and the Mohawk peoples in the Haudenosaunee League. Acceptance of the other nations and respecting their autonomy facilitates the creation of a confederation.

Perhaps an extreme example of acceptance of the view of other beings is the attitude of Tlingit and other peoples in very cold climates to accept glaciers as beings to be treated with respect. Julie Cruikshank (2005) explains their attitude in the slightly misnamed book, *Do Glaciers Listen?* She answers the question on her first page: yes, they do listen, and people need to be quiet when approaching them, in respect for their power to surge suddenly over villages, to block the flow of rivers, and to do other dangerous things. John Muir's recklessness frightened his Tlingit guides, although he did listen to them. (Cruikshank 2005, 163-172)

Other powerful beings such as bears and moose also need to be treated well. That they think differently is beside the point; they need to be accepted for what they are and included in relationships on their terms. Since humans are also powerful, good advice to bears or lions would be to treat humans with respect. The result is that they reach accommodation and don't interfere with

each other, as has been reported in Africa. In discussing relationships between predators and humans, Ray Pierotti (2010, 222) reports cooperative hunting with humans and animals such as whales, wolves and lions. He cites Marshall-Thomas (1994) that in Africa, lions and humans respected and avoided each other. Only after colonial powers disrupted relationships by excluding humans from parks did lions become dangerous for people. That animals have culture and can learn proper manners has been confirmed recently by mainstream scientists (Whiten 2021; Brakes et al. 2019). This confirms the views of Tsilhqot'in people, who describe the culture of the horses on their lands (Bhattacharyya and Slocombe 2017).

## Act reliably by being wholly trustworthy, but not wholly trusting

Mutual trust is a valued quality of good relationships. Mutual trust depends upon group members acting in a trustworthy manner. Each must evaluate his own behavior, to be sure he or she is acting in a consistent manner. A short list of ways to be reliable is the following:

- Be predictable.
- Be clear.
- Take promises seriously and follow through.
- Be honest, accept responsibility for errors in communication.
- Don't exaggerate the errors of others.

Each member of a relationship must deal with weaknesses in trust and reliable behavior on the part of other members. Trusting too much early on in a relationship may reduce the growth of trust over time. For this reason, the hosts of a visiting Haudenosaunee delegation meet them at the wood's edge, before admitting them to the village for further consultation. That meeting also has the speech with the three bare words, which meant removing emotions from the encounter. The meeting is based upon an agreed upon agenda; topics outside the agenda need to be postponed for another meeting because surprises undermine trust.

Not being fully trusting means monitoring the behavior of all participants in a relationship. Monitoring includes actions by nonhumans, who monitor human behavior to assure that they are being treated respectfully. Monitors are members of a relationship, and they monitor both other members and leaders who are supposed to assure that decisions are carried out as agreed. Although persons in a relationship are advised to act in a trustworthy manner, others still need to be sure that proper behavior is occurring. Failure to monitor allows a con man to fool everyone else.

The rules for dealing with animals can be seen as ways to establish the trustworthiness of the hunter. Meat should not be wasted; remains should be disposed of properly. Animals should not be played with. These are all trustworthy behaviors; following them would convince an animal that a person could be trusted to treat it properly. But the hunter must be careful, especially with large animals such moose or bear.

## Qualities of Relationships

When a relationship is strong, it develops qualities that make those in the relationship want to continue it. Qualities such as trust, loyalty, solidarity, and power have emotional and objective content. The subjective components are often called spiritual to capture their importance. Māori descriptions of *mana* depict it as a form of power that manifests in different ways that are enhanced by cooperation. While real, the subjective component of mana makes it difficult to describe clearly to those who have not experienced it (Dell, Staniland, and Nicholson 2018). The caretaking of mana,

*manaakitanga*, is taught in in New Zealand's schools, emphasizing the importance of honoring the mana of others. Milner and Ngata (2021) attribute New Zealand's successful implementation of social distancing measures in fighting the Covid19 epidemic to the public's widespread understanding of mana and willingness to sacrifice their own freedom for the general good of keeping the community safe.

Deganawida, the Peacemaker who shared in founding the Haudenosaunee League, expressed the consequences of good relationship in three double terms, each of which combines subjective and objective elements. Peace, an objective condition, is linked with health, which has many subjective components. Equity or justice is also described as righteousness in thought and conduct. These two concepts, one mostly objective and the other mostly spiritual or subjective, is also named the good message. Power means both the spiritual power of the people and their rituals and the physical strength of military force and civil authority. Buck (2016, 95-97) describes how authors trying to describe the six paired principles have created confusion by varying the terms used for each as well as listing them in different orders. Placing them in similar parallel terms, one triad is 'Health, Righteousness, and Power.' Another is 'Peace, the Good Message, and Power'. A third is 'Peace, Equity, and Power.' Only Power does not change form. Like mana, power is both spiritual and material.

These qualities explain the distinctiveness of Indigenous cultures and economies as well as their success in maintaining biodiversity in their territories. Trust allows individual entities to restrict selfish behavior with confidence that others will not take advantage of them. Mutual monitoring of unhelpful behaviors supports solidarity which, in turn supports community power. Mutual care supports biodiversity, equity, and ecosystem productivity.

## Acknowledgements

The text is a rewritten version of parts of chapter 3 of (Trosper 2022)

## References

**Atkins, Paul W. B., David Sloan Wilson,** and **Steven C. Hayes**. 2019. Prosocial: Using Evolutionary Science to Build Productive, Equitable, and Collaborative Groups. Oakland, CA: Context Press.

**Bhattacharyya, Jonaki**, and **Scott Slocombe**. 2017. *Animal Agency: Wildlife Management from a Kincentric Perspective.* Ecosphere 8 (10): 1–17.

**Brakes, Philippa, Sasha RX Dall, Lucy M. Aplin, Stuart Bearhop, Emma L. Carroll, Paolo Ciucci, Vicki Fishlock, John KB Ford, Ellen C. Garland** and **Sally A. Keith.** 2019. *Animal Cultures Matter for Conservation*. Science 363 (6431): 1032–34.

**Buck, Christopher.** 2016. *Deganawida, The Peacemaker.* In American Writers Supplement XXVI, edited by Jay Parani, 81–100. Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons.

**Cruikshank, Julie.** 2005. Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, & Social Imagination. Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press.

**Dell, Kiri, Nimbus Staniland** and **Amber Nicholson.** 2018. *Economy of Mana: Where to Next?* MAI Journal 7 (1): 51–65.

**Donati, Pierpaolo, and Margaret S. Archer**. 2015. The Relational Subject. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

**Emerson, Kirk, and Tina Nabatchi**. 2015. Collaborative Governance Regimes. Washington, DC: George Washington University Press.

**Fenton, William N.** 1998. The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

**Ishizawa, Jorge**. 2006. *Cosmovisions and Environmental Governance: The Case of In Situ Conservation of Native Cultivated Plants and Their Wild Relatives in Peru.* In Bridging Scales and Knowledge Systems: Concepts and Applications in Ecosystem Assessment, edited by Walter V. Reid, Fikret Berkes, Thomas Wilbanks, and Doris Capistrano, 207–24. Washington: Island Press.

**Kimmerer, Robin Wall**. 2013. Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants. Minneapolis: Milkweed.

**Marshall-Thomas, E**. 1994. The Tribe of Tiger: Cats and Their Culture. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

**Milner, Matthew** and **Richard Ngata**. 2021. *The Indigenous Custom behind New Zealand's Strong Covid-19 Response.* Washington Post, March 11, 2021.

**Nadasdy, Paul**. 2003. Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Southwest Yukon. Vancouver: UBC Press.

**Nadasdy, Paul**. 2007. *The Gift in the Animal: The Ontology of Hunting and Human-Animal Sociality.* American Ethnologist 34 (1): 25.

**Ostrom, Elinor**. 1990. Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Pierotti, Raymond**. 2010. Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. London: Routledge.

**Susskind, Lawrence; McKearnan, Sarah; Thomas-Larmer, Jennifer,** ed. 1999. The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.

**Trosper, Ronald L**. 2022. Indigenous Economics: Sustaining Peoples and Their Lands. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

**Umeek** (**E. Richard Atleo**). 2004. Tsawalk: A Nuu-Chah-Nulth Worldview. Vancouver: UBC Press.

**Whiten, Andrew**. 2021. *The Burgeoning Reach of Animal Culture.* Science 372 (6537).

**Williams, Robert A. Jr**. 1997. Linking Arms Together: American Indian Treaty Visions of Law and Peace, 1600-1800. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Author information

Ronald L. Trosper is Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona. He is a member of the Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana, USA.