

7-1-1999

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## Recommended Citation

Walker, Polly (1999) "Concepts of the self: implications for cross-cultural conflict resolution," *ADR Bulletin*: Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 2.  
Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/adr/vol2/iss2/2>

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ADR and the concept of self

## Concepts of the self: implications for cross-cultural conflict resolution

*Polly Walker*

In cross-cultural conflict resolution, we may be faced with more than one conceptualisation of what it means to be human. Mainstream Western culture, which underlies most academic research and professional practice in Australia and the US, defines the individual as self-contained, a unit that can be legitimately analysed apart from other people. Many indigenous cultures define the individual as 'self-in-relation',<sup>1</sup> consisting of a network of relationships, including extended family, community and ancestors, set in a time framework that includes past, present and future, and able to be analysed appropriately only by considering this network of relationships. How do these differences in worldview impact upon conflict resolution?

When the individual is defined as being bounded by their own skin, then only the presence of those individuals directly involved in a dispute are considered essential, as is often the case in Western models of dispute resolution. However, if an individual is defined as part of a particular set of interconnections, then those relationships will need to be addressed or included in the proceedings. Individuals from Western cultures might express the core question for conflict resolution as 'How can I resolve this dispute in a way that meets my needs?', whereas individuals from many indigenous cultures might consider the primary question to be 'How can we resolve this dispute in a way that maintains or improves the inter-relationships that sustain us?'

An understanding of this difference in worldview can be developed through practice stories, which provide a holistic depiction of worldview. The concept of self is often tacitly expressed in the stories that people tell when describing their approach to conflict. The following practice story is from an indigenous woman experiencing

conflict over career decisions involving a non-indigenous government agency.

I went and talked to people,  
Some of the old people in that place  
Where I was living.  
And I said, 'What do I do?'  
Of what I might aim for  
For the group that I carry  
With me, inside me.<sup>2</sup>

Questions of identity not only shape the content and context of conflict dialogue, they also shape the location in which dispute resolution may take place. Whereas Western dispute resolution most often takes place in a room within a building, indigenous peoples often hold their conflict resolution proceedings in a natural setting to maintain connection and relationship with the land. Indigenous practitioners have explained to me that when it is not possible to hold the proceedings in a natural setting, they seek other ways of maintaining connection with land:

One of the things that I do  
Is always have a rock be brought in  
As an anchor  
To be placed in the middle of the circle.  
Just to remind us.<sup>3</sup>

Selection of a dispute resolution setting outdoors, on the ground, or under a particular tree, does not reflect simply a desire for a pleasant setting — rather, it is a response to the fundamental definition of identity:

Aboriginal people  
Are of that place  
And that place is of them, too.  
You can't separate the two.  
So the land, the place,  
The sea, water, air,  
Air flows, the wind  
And the creatures  
Are part of you  
And you are part of that whole.<sup>4</sup>

Although spirituality is addressed in Western conflict resolution literature,<sup>5</sup> it ➤

'Individuals from Western cultures might express the core question for conflict resolution as "How can I resolve this dispute in a way that meets my needs?", whereas individuals from many indigenous cultures might consider the primary question to be "How can we resolve this dispute in a way that maintains or improves the inter-relationships that sustain us?"'



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➤ is often considered as optional, or treated with scepticism. However, in many forms of indigenous dispute resolution, spirituality is an integral part of the proceedings. One Aboriginal person who is actively engaged in transforming conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians describes the spiritual component of his process:

I engage through prayer  
 With my ancestors and spirits of the land,  
 And I believe that those processes  
 Give me strength  
 In a way that I can't get in any other way.  
 It's an energising process.  
 It's a spiritual process.<sup>6</sup>

Many indigenous people practise ways of knowing that are in contrast to mainstream Western knowledge production. The concept of a self-contained individual supports ways of knowing that are individualised and which seek to develop the most accurate version of the truth. In contrast, the concept of self-relation supports ways of knowing in which knowledge is a shared resource, knowledge is partial and negotiable and different people have particular knowledge to share, with competing versions of the truth being accepted.<sup>7</sup> In many indigenous cultures, all individuals have their story and their truth, which is not negated by a group consensus. In indigenous conflict methodology, members of a dispute may be more interested in the way in which the dispute is handled so that harmony and stronger relationships can be restored, than they are in reaching an agreement.

In Murri worldview,  
 It is not important  
 To write the ultimate truth.  
 What is important  
 Is to keep telling the story  
 Over and over again.<sup>8</sup>

The implications of these differences in worldview are of significance for cross-cultural dispute resolution. A structured, clearly defined model of cross-cultural conflict resolution would not be flexible enough to respond to the complexity of inter-cultural differences, nor to intra-cultural differences related to gender, socio-economic status, religion, and education.

Cross-cultural issues are complex, multi-faceted and constantly changing, depending on the context and the individuals involved. However, awareness of the parameters of difference, the themes and areas that need to be addressed in developing culturally sensitive dispute resolution practices can be of assistance in planning the methodology of a particular cross-cultural dispute resolution.

The serious attempt to understand and respect the worldview of another culture results in a deeper understanding of our own culture and worldview. Greater understanding also frees us to consciously move in and out of our own worldview when we see approaches from cultures other than our own that will best facilitate cross-cultural dispute resolution. The process of sensitivity to cultural differences in worldview also sensitises us to the issues of power and privilege that shape indigenous and non-indigenous interaction, as we analyse the dominance of Western worldview in professional practice and the silencing of indigenous worldview.

In developing cross-cultural dispute resolution proceedings for conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous people, the following questions would elicit information needed to develop culturally sensitive procedures:

1. Who will be involved in the proceedings and what arrangements can be made for extended family or community?
2. What settings will respect the worldview of those involved?
3. What opportunities can be included for individuals to express their spirituality within the process (for example, prayer, calling on the ancestors, recognising land and traditional owners)?
4. What ways of knowing are people bringing to the process?

All too often, it is the Aboriginal researcher who is taught the scientific method and forced to adapt his or her cultural reality to that model. Western scientists need the same exposure to the knowledge system of the Aboriginal group they are working with.

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Only when both groups develop an appreciation of, and sensitivity to, the strengths and limitations of their respective knowledge systems can integration begin to occur.<sup>9</sup>

In conducting cross cultural conflict resolution, we must develop a deeper understanding of the worldview of the cultures involved. ●

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### Endnotes

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2. Walker P, *Mending the Web: Intercultural Conflict Transformation* PhD thesis, in progress.

3. Above note 2.

4. Above note 2.

5. Zumeta Z, 'Spirituality and Mediation' *Mediation Quarterly* 11(1) 1993.

6. Walker P, above note 2.

7. Christie M, 'Grounded and Excentric Knowledges: Exploring Aboriginal Alternatives to Western Thinking' Fifth International Conference on Thinking, Townsville 7 July 1992.

8. Walker P, above note 2.

9. Johnson M, 'Research on Traditional Environmental Knowledge: Its Development and Its Role' in *LORE: Capturing Traditional Environmental Knowledge* Dene Cultural Institute California 1992.

