

Article begins on following page.

Please note:

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication and otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAL to ACER. For more information contact CAL on (02) 9394 7600 or info@copyright.com.au

Interpersonal Relationships As A Metaphor For Human-Nature Relationships

Peter Martin & Glyn Thomas

Abstract

This article draws on interpersonal relationships literature to enable discussion of human to nature relationships. A 'Constructs of Relationship' model is proposed. The model suggests five constructs of a relationship: concern, skills, interaction, trust, and knowing. These five constructs have been shown to be important in shaping interpersonal relationships and are used here to draw implications for the practice of outdoor education in developing human to nature relationships. In so doing the article suggests a language and framework for considering how human-nature relationships may be initiated and sustained.

Introduction

We believe that outdoor education has the potential to play a significant role in helping people develop more environmentally sympathetic attitudes and behaviours. Previously, Martin (1994, 1995, 1998) has argued that the distinctiveness of outdoor education lies in its ability to promote critical reflection and learning focused particularly on human-nature relationships.

An immediate challenge for outdoor education which seeks to develop an understanding of human-nature relationships is the difficulty of language. Western culture does not have a history and set of words which help us understand the ways in which humans relate to non-human nature; as a consequence, theorising about human-nature relationships within outdoor education is hindered. It is well researched and documented that language fundamentally shapes the way in

which we understand our world (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Feminist discourse, for example, has been helpful in illuminating the power of language in shaping behaviour and the way in which hidden assumptions are perpetuated or reproduced. Everyday communication takes place on the tacit belief that words mean similar things to different people. Finding ways to talk about human-nature relationships however, is not just about inventing words with shared meanings. A language of human-nature relationships suggests reconceptualising the way in which we work in the bush with our clients, the ways in which beliefs lead to behaviours, and ultimately the contribution of outdoor education to society.

Outdoor education discourse readily explores and acknowledges the power of metaphors. Priest and Gass (1997), for example, see the use of metaphors as a contemporary, specialised, and powerful form of transfer and learning from adventure experiences. In this paper we suggest that the metaphor of interpersonal relationships can be

applied to human-nature relationships. In so doing such a metaphor has potential to challenge conventional practices in the field.

The Constructs of Relationships

Many authors have written and researched the stages and constructs which have been mooted as descriptive of interpersonal relationships (see Devito 1995, Kiesler 1996). The model proposed within this paper is an 'eclectic synthesis' of the literature, in that we have used interpersonal relationship theory to provide clues as to how relationships between humans and nature may develop¹.

Most theory descriptive of interpersonal behaviour reflects that forming relationships is a blend of two basic motivations: the need for status (control, power, agency), and the need for love (affection, communion, affiliation) (Kiesler 1996). It seems that as humans we seek to be in control of our lives, not too subjected to uncontrollable external imperatives, but also seek attachments and solidarity with others. Against this backdrop of the need to balance control and affiliation, the literature of interpersonal relationship theory discusses a range of ways in which people form and then evolve relationships with others. In reviewing this literature, with the goal of drawing links to human-nature relationships, we have identified five broad constructs which seem illustrative of the way in which relationships develop. These five constructs we have labelled: skills, concern, interaction, trust and knowing.

As interpersonal relationships shift from acquaintanceships to intimate friendships the five constructs of skills, concern, interaction, trust and knowing, provide windows through which to view behaviour change. The intent of the paper is to consider these behaviour changes and draw tentative links and implications for human-nature relationships and outdoor education.

¹ The model suggested in this paper is in part derived from Martin's ongoing longitudinal research into the role of outdoor education in shaping human-nature relationships.

Acquaintanceships involve "people we know by name and talk with when the opportunity arises, but with whom our interactions are limited in quality and quantity" (Verderber & Verderber 1995, p143). *Intimate friendships*, by contrast, demonstrate high degrees of commitment, trust, warmth, affection, self-disclosure, and personal sharing (Josselson 1996, Verderber & Verderber 1995). Could similar language and concepts be applied to human-nature relationships?

The first and perhaps most pervasive implication from links between interpersonal relationship theory to human-nature relationships is recognition that interpersonal relationships exist between individuals, person to person. Interpersonal theory may only be descriptive of human-nature relationships if we are able to envisage non-human nature as a broad community of *more singular subjective entities*. The conception of 'nature' as a community of subjective entities is a fundamental assumption of this work². In much the same way as the word 'humans' includes an almost infinite diversity of individuals with whom we may develop a range of differing relationships, so too does 'nature' include a diversity of individual entities.

The Skills Construct

The *skills* construct of interpersonal relationships is easily recognised. For a relationship to commence people need a basic level of social skill and personal competence (Nelson-Jones 1986). By the time a relationship has grown to one of intimate friendship those involved demonstrate a high level of self-efficacy regarding their ability to act and respond appropriately to the demands associated with developing and maintaining such relationships.

² Of course this begs the question, what's an entity, a cliff, a hawk nesting on the ledge, the lichen beside the nest? We suspect the answer here is to be found in what each person can enable or encompass in a relationship, but that is an area currently undergoing further research.

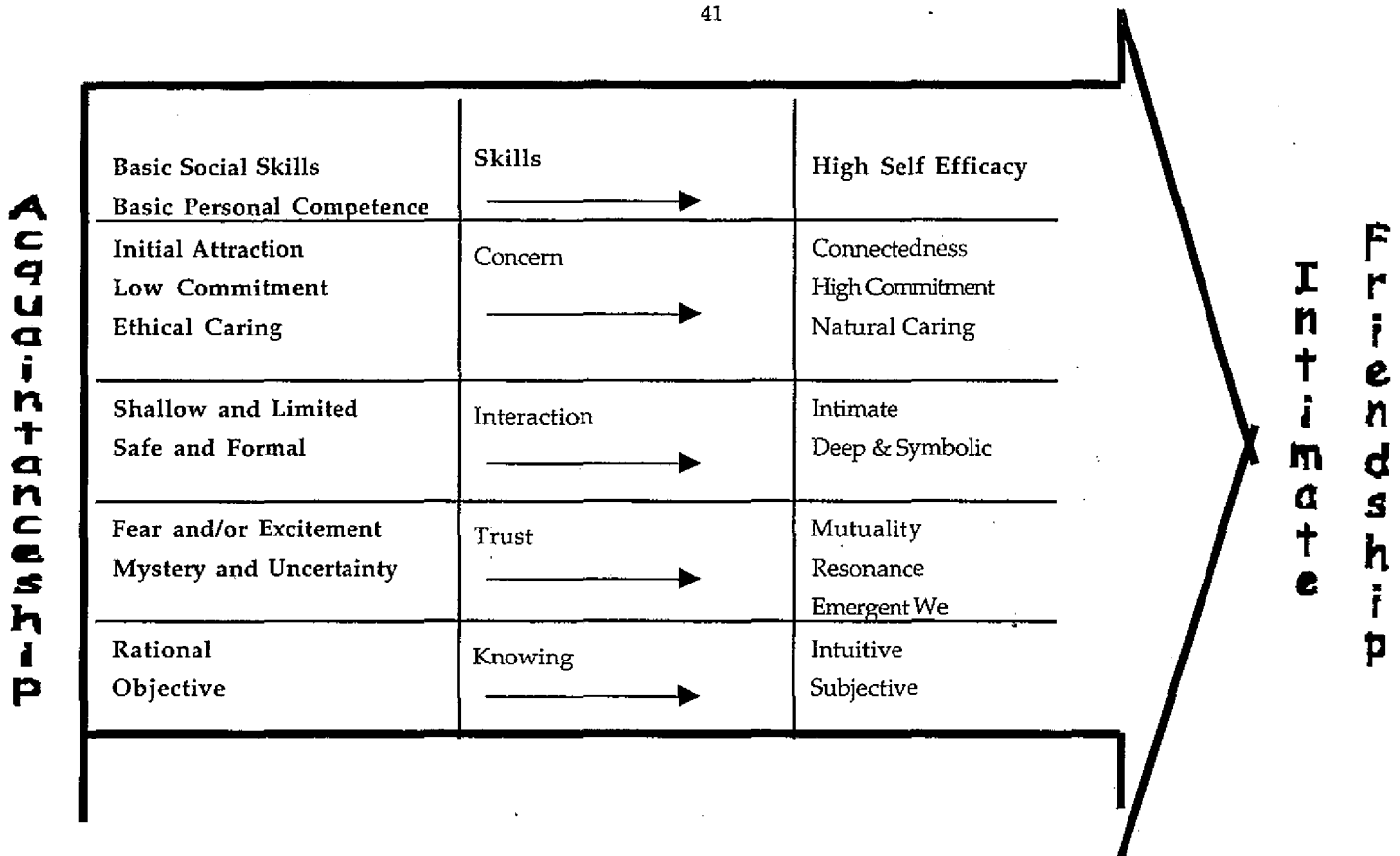


Figure 1: The Constructs of Relationships

Although most socially competent individuals would take such skills and attitudes for granted, they are essential prerequisites for establishing and moving beyond acquaintanceships. Similarly, it is unlikely that people can develop a positive relationship with nature without the basic skills required to visit natural places and spend time there. Media depiction and hearsay has been shown to significantly influence students' views of the natural environment prior to an excursion, often resulting in misconceived fears and discomforts (Bixler et al 1994). If a person feels their emotional or physical safety is threatened when they visit natural places, then fear and discomfort become real barriers to moving beyond acquaintanceship - as they do in interpersonal relationship development (Nelson-Jones 1986). The implications for outdoor education are clear. Basic outdoor living skills and realistic expectations become essential as ways for participants to feel more at ease in natural settings. As a consequence, for programs with a

clear intent of initiating human-nature relationships, the activities and places selected need to be those which enable participants to easily develop a sense of safety, comfort and well being - this may well contrast with the high adventure goals and practices of more traditional outdoor programs.

Communication competence, "the ability to communicate in an effective and socially appropriate manner" (Trenholm and Jensen 1988, p11) is another set of skills demanded within interpersonal relationships. We contend that developing more intimate friendships with nature also requires communication competence. In this sense, nature communication skills revolve around improved observation and interpretation. Understanding flora and fauna, noticing links and interconnections, and seeing details that untrained eyes miss, are all part of effective communication with nature. As examples, students of rockclimbing need to develop communication skills that enable

them to recognise cracks, holds, ledges, lines and features that make time with cliffs enjoyable and safe. To have an effective climbing communication with cliffs, participants need to understand the messages that the cliff passes on by way of its appearance, structure and feel.

In intimate friendships people are likely to have greater confidence in their ability to act and respond appropriately to the demands associated with developing and maintaining relationships. These efficacy expectations are usually grounded in: positive past experiences in previous intimate interpersonal friendships [prior performance accomplishments]; appropriate levels of motivation derived from high levels of commitment [emotional arousal]; and their observations of other successful intimate friendships [vicarious performance experiences] (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy in human-nature relationships seem similar. People who are familiar with natural settings are likely to have high levels of self-efficacy expectations regarding their ability to cope with the demands of developing and maintaining their human-nature relationships. In many respects this becomes a worthwhile goal for outdoor education programs. To develop intimate friendships with nature *beyond* an initial attraction places higher demands on outdoor living and travel skills. Research has shown that as people become more competent in the outdoors they tend to seek out experiences in more remote, natural settings (Ewert & Hollenhorst 1989) and motivations for participation shift from thrills and social outcomes to more intrinsic nature based motives (Ewert 1985). Visiting such places demands higher levels of skill and personal competence. Outdoor education can help people to deepen their relationships with natural environments by appropriately matching skill demands with the environmental demands of nature – building a sense of self efficacy *with* nature.

The Concern Construct

Within the model we have labelled the construct describing three elements: attraction, commitment and caring, as *concern*. From interpersonal relationship theory we learn that a degree of initial attraction within any relationship is

important and could include varying degrees of interpersonal attraction, proximity, and physical attractiveness (Brehm 1985). Individuals are attracted to others who they perceive have similar social interests, work interests, background commonalities, attitudes, values, and personalities, or, to others who in some way complement their own image (Verderber & Verderber 1995).

If the metaphor rings true for developing human-nature relationships, outdoor educators would need to be mindful of the degree of initial attraction participants experience when encountering nature. This would have significant implications for programming introductory outdoor experiences - the perceptions of the place presented, the physical images, factual data and personal stories we tell all have significant influence. The design and sequence of activities once participants arrive at a new place will similarly shape perceptions. Research on the impact of initial experiences upon human-nature relationships is lacking - but we doubt the tradition of stressing on-site dangers and hazards as students step off the bus makes a good first impression.

Understanding why some interpersonal relationships flourish yet others do not, is complicated. Some early theorists (Thibaut & Kelly 1959) argued that the decision to advance interpersonal relationships was a function of rational, cost-benefit, decision making processes. The use of such rationalistic, economical processes is today considered unrealistic (Verderber & Verderber 1995), and we similarly doubt their validity in informing human-nature relationships. More recently psycho-dynamic theorists argue that a lot of the processes that influence the degree of initial attraction within interpersonal relationships occur intuitively (Kihlstrom 1984, 1990) and outside our immediate level of awareness, and we suspect a similar dynamic is influential in human-nature relationships.

Commitment is the second element in the concern construct. Commitment that develops in an interpersonal relationship is influenced by the intention to persist, the degree of long term orientation, and the level of psychological attachment (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langsten 1998). Acquaintanceships are likely to illicit only low levels of these components,

however as an interpersonal relationship develops towards intimate friendships, the level of commitment increases proportionally. Intimate friendships also exhibit a corresponding increase in the level of attachment. Josselson (1996, p44) describes attachment as "an experience of emotional linkage - the sense that space can be overcome if necessary - that there is togetherness despite space". Intimate friendships provide opportunities for people to experience a sense of embeddedness which provides valuable feedback with which people evaluate their lives to determine if they are progressing as hoped. This level of connectedness contrasts strongly with the shallow contextually based interactions associated with interpersonal acquaintanceships (Josselson 1996).

We propose that similar levels of connectedness and embeddedness are possible with non-human nature given the investment of time and effort. Our early research indicates that the rich bank of memories and experiences outdoors which people gather over time creates an emotional linkage, so that their sense of self becomes intertwined with that place³. Clearly such linkages develop most with individual places which take on a sense of being 'special'⁴.

The final element in the concern construct is *caring*. According to Noddings (1984) the nature of caring changes significantly as interpersonal relationships deepen. In acquaintanceships, people make *conscious* decisions about how to act or respond to others. Because commitment and attachment levels are low, such caring is ethically determined. However, in intimate interpersonal friendships caring shifts towards a less considered, more natural response. Such natural caring flows from a compulsion to act based on higher levels of proximity (closeness) and reciprocity (feedback) in the relationship (Noddings 1984). Josselson (1996)

³ This has been referred to by Fox (1995) as personal identification (p.249) and although seen by him to be less powerful as a form of identification compared to cosmological or ontological identification, the differences remain theoretical.

⁴ In current ongoing research participants were easily able to describe in some considerable detail a special place in nature that they had viewed as significant and for which they held significant memory and fondness.

believes the capacity to offer care is essential to good health and reflects people's need to feel needed by others. Martin (1999) has previously argued that as human-nature relationships develop, natural caring for a place comes freely. Outdoor education experiences can provide opportunities for participants to care for nature, the subsequent sense of satisfaction is excellent reward for the time, energy, and resources expended and helps create a sense of reciprocity in nature.

The Interaction Construct

The *interaction* construct suggests that the level and type of interaction between people changes significantly as an interpersonal relationship develops from an acquaintanceship to an intimate friendship. Early theories of social penetration developed by Altman and Taylor (1973) argued that social interaction proceeds gradually and systematically from superficial (shallow, limited and formal) to intimate levels (deeper and more symbolic). The intimacy of interpersonal exchange can increase via breadth (covering more topics) or depth (more personally meaningful). If an interpersonal relationship is to move beyond acquaintanceship, people must be prepared to increase the *depth* of their interactions and risk more meaningful self-disclosures.

If, as outdoor educators, we seek to help participants develop more intimate human-nature relationships we need to thoughtfully consider how the depth or breadth of relationships with nature can change. Many programs visit different environments, often enabling new experiences (increased breadth). Alternatively how might students benefit from a richer and deeper experience at a familiar place? As relationships with nature develop, consider the possibility of allowing participants to risk greater self-disclosure and increased vulnerability with nature. Within acceptable safety margins allow participants to: choose which cliffs are climbed on, select the walking route and risk being navigationally embarrassed, choose the path down a rapid and see if it works, ski away from the marked trails and standard runs. While these strategies have greater risk, with appropriate management, the benefits in exploring the

relationships participants develop with nature can be rewarding.

Finally, within this construct, intimate human-nature relationships can be a store for us to record our identities, just like their interpersonal counterparts. Our interactions with nature can be like the "eye-to-eye validations" so important to interpersonal relationship development (Josselson 1996, p. 98) because they affirm who we are and act as a rich storehouse of memories that help us to understand our sense of self. In a similar sense human-nature relationships may have the ability to define who we are as powerfully as interpersonal relationships do.

The Trust Construct

The *trust* construct of the model summarizes research that suggests early stages of an interpersonal relationship contain uncertainty about the future of the relationship, creating emotional responses ranging from excitement to fear (see (Lydon, Jamieson & Holmes 1997, Kelly & Thibaut, 1978). This stress is heightened by the fact that social interactions are frequently imbued with surplus meaning, as people do not have access to knowledge and experience with the other person.

In the same way, anxiety is common when people encounter nature which is new to them. When working with newly formed groups of people, outdoor educators typically include 'get to know you' activities in the early stages of their programs to overcome the anxiety of meeting new people. Links to human-nature relationships suggest that care in the way we get to know nature could also be a prime consideration. Focussing upon the natural hazards of a place are unlikely to engender trust. A less conventional option may be worth consideration. For example, consider arriving at a new place in the dark (or have participants wear blindfolds) so that they can focus on the scents of the flora and fauna, climatic conditions, texture, and the sounds of the area. By limiting reliance on visual cues, the richness of our other senses are heightened and can help to introduce a place more slowly. Leave the higher risk thrill activities until students have had time

to assimilate their surroundings and got to feel a little more relaxed.

As interpersonal relationships develop the levels of ambiguity and uncertainty tend to fall and are replaced with better understanding, familiarity, and security. The mutuality that develops in intimate friendships has been described as "an intermingling of souls" (Josselson 1996, p149). Hinde (1995) explains that intimacy between people occurs when people feel understood, validated, and cared for. Resonance, the ultimate state of mutuality, is described as a pure form of communion where both people are participating in the experience of the other. Josselson (1996) uses the term "emergent we" to describe the level of togetherness and sharing possible in intimate friendships and she suggests "the deeper the resonance the more relaxed the boundary between self and other" (Josselson 1996, p149).

For human-nature relationships we wonder if deliberately tuning into the behaviours, moods, and nuances of nature may help build this mutuality. It seems to us that trust can only be built over extended time, with parties striving to learn and accept as much as they are able about the other. We have experimented with repeat visits to a specific place in different seasons, being active at night, pre-dawn or when it's raining. We have emphasised exploring, sleeping under the stars, on ledges, in the bush or under a tree. We have encouraged getting to understand a 'personal' history through researching a particular species of flora or fauna, European history or indigenous friendships. We have played with leaving the climbing/paddling/skiing gear at home.

It seems possible that after repeated visits or extended stays, the same sense of mutuality, as described by Josselson (1996) can develop with a place. It is not uncommon for people to experience an 'emergent we' or strong sense of identity with a place. Intimate interpersonal friendships take time to evolve, so too intimate human-nature relationships.⁵

⁵ The extensive literature on Bioregionalism and Place are of interest here for readers wishing to explore these ideas further.

The Knowing Construct

In the early stages of interpersonal relationships apprehension is created through: uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the compatibility of another person's views, fear of being misinterpreted, and meanings misconstrued (Lydon, Jamieson & Holmes 1997). Subsequently, the information that people share with each other tends to be rational, objective, and tangible data.

When interpersonal relationships increase in their depth there is a corresponding increase in the ways of 'knowing' each other. Increased familiarity allows knowledge to be gained about each other intuitively through subconscious processes. This corresponds with Josselson's (1996) conceptualisation of the 'emergent we' where the boundary between self and other becomes blurred. Intimate friendships have "rhythms beyond content ... these ways of being together are the hardest to verbalise because they involve emotional tone and mutual interpersonal adaptation" (Josselson, 1996, p26).

In terms of human-nature relationships, we suggest that increased exposure to, and experience with, subjective nature allows knowledge to become accessible intuitively through subconscious processes. Even when experiencing a particular climb for the first time, climbers with intimate friendships with cliffs, often intuitively know: how to execute a particular move, how to use a particular hold, and whether there will be a big hold hidden at the summit just when they need it! Such knowledge is often tacit and may be attributed to the "emergent we" phenomena. Intimate human-nature relationships can also have a depth similar to their interpersonal counterparts in that they have "rhythms beyond content" which language fails to capture and express (Josselson 1996, p26). This level of knowing prevalent in intimate human-nature relationships may be hard to cultivate with participants in short outdoor education programs, however, carefully crafted outdoor education experiences could start the process.

Conclusion

We have tried to conceptualise interpersonal relationships in such a manner that they serve as a useful metaphor for describing the elusive characteristics of human-nature relationships. Some may find this disturbingly anthropomorphic. However, interpersonal relationships have only been used because they provide a tangible reference point common to us all. Such a metaphor has proven to be a useful starting point for our own students to conceive of the possibility of close and personal relationships with nature. Hopefully, the parallels drawn in this paper will be a useful pedagogical tool for readers who face the same daunting challenge of fostering human-nature relationships with people for whom such a prospect seems initially so foreign.

References

- Agnew, C.R., Van Lange, P.A.M., Rusbult, C.E., & Langsten, C.A. (1998) Cognitive interdependence: Commitment and mental representation of close relationships, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, v.74, no.4, pp.939-954.
- Altman, I. & Taylor, D. (1973) *Social Penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Brehm, S.S. (1985) *Intimate Relationships*. New York: Random House.
- Bixler, R., Carlisle, C., Hammitt, W., Floyd, M. (1994) Observed Fears and Discomforts Among Urban Students on Field Trips to Wildland Areas. *The Journal of Environmental Education*. Vol. 26, No.1, pp. 24-33.
- Deutsch, H. (1944) *The Psychology of Women*. v. 1. Philadelphia: Grune & Stratton.
- Devito, J.O. (1995) *The Interpersonal Communication Book*. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers.
- Ewert, A., & Hollenhorst, S. (1989) Testing the adventure model: Empirical support for a model of risk recreation participation, *Journal of Leisure Research*, v.21, no.2, pp.124-139.
- Ewert, A. (1985) Why People Climb: The relationship of participant motives and experience level to mountaineering. *Journal of Leisure Research*, v.17, no. 3, pp.241-250.
- Fox, W. (1995) *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology*. State University of New York press: Albany.

- Hinde, R.A. (1995) A suggested structure for a science of relationships, *Personal Relationships*, v.2, pp1-15.
- Josselson, R. (1996) *The Space Between Us: Exploring the dimensions of human relations*. London: Sage Publications Inc.
- Kelly, H.H., & Thibaut, J.W. (1978) *Interpersonal Relations: A theory of interdependence*. New York: Wiley/Interscience.
- Kiesler, D. (1996) *Contemporary Interpersonal Theory and Research*. John Wiley and Sons: New York.
- Kihlstrom, J. (1984) Conscious, subconscious, unconscious. A cognitive perspective, in K.S. Bowers & D. Meichenbaum (Eds.) *The unconscious reconsidered*. New York: Wiley.
- Kihlstrom, J. (1990) The psychological unconscious, in L.A. Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality: theory and research*. New York: Guilford.
- Knapp, M.L. (1984) *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Krug, L. (1982) Alternative lifestyle dyads: An alternative relationship paradigm, *Alternative Communications*, v.4, pp.52-52.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Levinger, G. (1983) The embrace of lives: Changing and unchanging, in *Close Relationships: Perspectives on the meaning of intimacy*, eds G. Levinger & H.L. Raush. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Lydon, J.E., Jamieson, D.W., & Holmes, J.G. (1997) The meaning of social interactions in the transition from acquaintanceship to friendship, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, v.73, no.3, pp.536-548.
- Martin, P. (1994) Future directions for outdoor education, *Journal of Adventure Education*, v.10, no.3, pp.16-19.
- Martin, P. (1995) New perspectives of self, others and nature, *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, v.1, no.3, pp.3-9.
- Martin, P. (1998) Education ideology and outdoor leadership education, *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, v.3, no.1, pp.14-20.
- Martin, P. (1999) Daring to care? Humans, nature and outdoor education, *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, v4, no. 1, pp. 2-4.
- Nelson-Jones, R. (1986) *Human Relationship Skills: Training and self-help*. Sydney: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Noddings, N. (1984) *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Swensen, C.H. (1973) *Introduction to Interpersonal Relations*. Glenview Ill.: Scott, Foresman.
- Thibaut, J.W., & Kelly, H.H. (1959) *The Social Psychology of Groups*. New York: Wiley.
- Trenholm, S., & Jensen, A. (1988) *Interpersonal Communication*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Verderber, R.F., & Verderber, K.S. (1995) *Inter-Act: Using interpersonal communication skills*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Wood, J. (1982) *Communication and relational culture: Bases for the study of human relationships*.

Peter Martin lectures in outdoor education at Latrobe University Bendigo, and is currently chair of the Australian Outdoor Education Council. He is the past president of the Victorian based Climbing Instructors' Association inc. and was the climbing activity convenor for the NORLD process. He is active in outdoor education and outdoor recreation curriculum development at both State and National levels. Peter is a devoted rock climber. He is currently engaged in research concerning the role of outdoor education experiences in shaping human nature relationships.

Glyn lectures in the Department of Outdoor Education and Nature Tourism at La Trobe University, Bendigo. He is particularly interested in developing strategies to help facilitators of outdoor education experiences to develop the human-nature relationships of their participants. Email: g.thomas@latrobe.edu.au