

Te Ao Po - Te Ao Marama

New Zealand Character: The Light Side and the Dark

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As an applied social psychologist, with ethnological interests, my whole career has been concerned with questions of values, character and culture in a bicultural setting. I could be presenting you with simple descriptions of such matters as I did in the early chapters of *Becoming Bicultural* (1992). Rather, to set my frame here, I have chosen to examine two questions that have been parallel pursuits through my long career: How can the knowledge in my field be used to effect changes in social policy and public practice? Secondly what is the role of cultural character in social change; or, rather, what should that role be?

In this paper, it is my contention, that there are two matters of considerable relevance to future perspectives in building a restorative society, namely, national character and culture lag. Putting these two together in this way may seem challenging or just plain odd, depending on one's attitude. Furthermore, neither concept is particularly new nor under much current research focus or popularity. National character studies flourished 50 years ago but then just dropped out of fashion. The notion seemed too close to, and sometimes ran foul of, accusations of merely reinforcing stereotypes, which some thought just plain naughty.

Yet the alternative view was that since concepts of national style were in common discourse they were worthy of study. They still are. The emperor subsequently just simply changed his clothes and national character was transformed into short

commentaries purporting to reveal the naked nature of our national identity through the popularist marginal media of journalism. A few social scientists stayed in the game but, for the most part the search for our elusive dreams was left to those in the humanities, and to the novelists, poets, playwrights, moviemakers, late night talkback hosts, columnists and media pundits, charlatans and soothsayers. That is how it was and how it is. Serious examination of national character remains challenging because it is part of the cultural climate in which policy is formulated and in which it must work. I shall return to this topic shortly.

Serious academic study of the notion of national character dropped out of consideration somewhere in the 1970s. As anthropology switched its pre-occupation towards the analysis of how cultures changed, in examination of how changes were induced and how they were accepted and resisted. Investigation of such matters as the effects of technological change, of the stability of world views and values inched close to the notions of national character and identity at that time, but avoided the target. But I believe that this matter still lies close to the heart and soul of policy making.

One further factor, seriously thought to be involved, is the notion of cultural lag. The security of people is often, and largely, tied to inherited but acquired culture, comprising conservative investments in basic attitudes, unquestioned assumptions, habits of thought and action, roles and statuses, resource allocations, job-specifications, expectations, hardware even, which resist change because those are ways of identifying one's self in settings of stability, of family, group or kind, the daily round, the familiar world. The paradigm can be stated as "We are the people

who” do this or that, always have and always will. The unexamined life is never not worth living; it is just simply taken for granted, warts and all.

Here is one example: Over the last thirty years Jane and I have sought to understand why New Zealand parents resist the fact that parental punishment of children constitutes a dark stain in the fabric not just of family life as an identifiable institution, and as a reflection of the patterning of violence in our society. (Ritchie and Ritchie 1997). National character and culture lag play a possible descriptive role in such understanding. Change in this matter has been slow to come, and even now is far from being accomplished. The underlying supports for all kinds of violence in our society are part of the dark side of our culture and character.

In this paper I want to apply these ideas to the topic of this conference, namely how can we build a restorative society? We have models; we have projects; we have bits and pieces of policy. We seek, avidly, reports from other countries and of research elsewhere, but local research within our cultural backgrounds is still scarce, poorly funded, and tends to be locked within the silos that box in traditional professionalism. Praise be to the web which bursts the boundaries of our boxes.

Psychologists, working in various aspects of the justice area, have indeed developed considerable understanding of how to make changes in individual behaviour. Systems theorists and applied sociologists, have quite clear ideas about how to revise social processes and formulate alternative institutions even though culture lag often defeats their best efforts. The cultural perspective is less obviously apparent even though we have made world acclaimed progress in the resolution of historical indigenous

grievances. We have protected that area by generally isolating it from other reforms related to needs and rights which may be of more general utility. We may indeed be seeing a backlash reversal of progress we have made in wider application of the principles of minority rights.

The application of rational ideas to an out-front, clear and public policy and programme for restorative justice is making slow and difficult progress. Indeed we can get through an entire round of pre-election policy discussion without restorative justice receiving even passing mention in political debate.

It is not just a failure of electoral nerve that holds us back from progress. That is more an excuse than an explanation and, anyway, just begs the question why does our leadership cringe before the assumed electoral ignorance and prejudice? Why do New Zealanders fear such progress? The costs of restorative programmes are at least not more than punitive incarceration and restrictive containment of one kind or another. We may try to use the media, to reduce public opposition to specific projects. They may or may not listen. But, frankly, restorative justice is regarded by many as political stinking fish and its protagonists reviled (by some) as warm fuzzy, loose-brained do-gooders. What sustains this opposition? Why, in this green and pleasant land do we not dismiss the cries in the night of talk-back hosts and callers, as irrelevant, at best ignored, or beyond our capacity to counteract or control? Or if we do listen, how are we to interpret what we are hearing? These are not the cries of the hurt or the harmed, or the merely conservative. They are illuminating opportunities to understand the darker side of our national character. And what is that?

Fifty years ago two accounts of the same Mexican village, Tepoztlan, were published. So at variance were they that it seemed that they could hardly have been about the same people. The first described the villagers as content with their lot, cheerful, accepting of fate and a variety of traits which Robert Redfield, the researcher using the standard methods of participant observation, finally summed up in his term “folk society”. (Redfield 1960). He sent his student Oscar Lewis, with an ethno-psychological approach, and using projective test techniques, back to the same village to seek a characterological picture. Lewis saw a community of grumpy, resentful people rife with inner tensions and anxieties, their uncertainty and conflicts verging on the pathological. (Lewis 1951). Even allowing for differences arising from the use of different techniques, how could this be? Is one researcher right and the other wrong?

The usual explanations of the effects of minority status, rural poverty, low educational and literacy standards, of exclusion from the benefits of mainstream life, jobs and wealth, were advanced, but Lewis simply said, that is the way they are, have been and always will be, culture *sui generis*. This is what poverty does to people; this is how they cope. It is their cultural mud in which they are stuck and they are welcome to it. Redfield pondered the matter. Which way were they, really?

Redfield, a pre-post-modernist if ever there was one, resolved the situation in his delightful little classic “The Little Community” (Redfield 1956). His assertion was a simple one: Both accounts are “true” and the psychological tensions Lewis found were the “cost” of sustaining social relations in so public and intimate a setting as the folk community of Tepoztlan. Later he expanded this thesis as he generalized from field studies of discrete and isolated communities, to the concept of folk communities

generally, with similar characteristics wherever they occur. This strangely de-cultured concept gained considerable popularity especially with Lewis's later work on what he called the culture of poverty, and about which he wrote extensively.

But the most valuable notion in this matter faded, namely the idea that one needs, at least, a double-aspect theory to deal with the complexity of cultural character. We lost sight of this insight. I want to suggest that this was a pity as it helps us to appreciate some of the reasons why progress in restorative justice is so slow, so often attacked or dismissed or retarded, so under-funded. Innovations, seemingly of obvious advantage and which appeal to prevailing ideologies suddenly grind to a shuddering halt when those who would do good, run smack into opposition and their good intentions generate, not the support they hoped for, but covert and sometimes overt hostility and obstruction.

Let me divert for a moment and consider the fate of a long standing issue, almost a personal (and collegial) obsession, which is much to the point. For forty years Jane and I have been repeating the same small sample survey of New Zealand child-rearing. Throughout this long period the intentions of parents seem to remain much the same. They want to be as dutiful and protective of their children, indeed as loving and caring as they can be, and are expected to be. In the majority of cases these attitudes co-exist with the continued use of physical punishment and other correctional techniques that are, frankly, just plain punitive. This is the 'this' and the 'that' of this matter. Maybe it explains why we rate so poorly in international comparisons of child maltreatment. Certainly, it sheds some light on the lack of response in efforts to correct the situation. Surely we all want to seem to be good,

loving, worthy parents who can demonstrate that “this” by displaying this “that” – the harshness, the duty-driven, over-corrective, over-controlling behaviour. At its most blatant it is demonstrated by the justification that “I am only doing this because I love you” which, though it seems aberrant, even absurd, is quite widespread, is often religiously supported and regarded as ethically virtuous.

A similar situation exists in the area of public attitudes towards justice. I do not want to over-simplify, but character traits of generosity, openness, friendliness, warmth, tolerance, of acceptance of some kinds of differences in social behaviour, all the nice things we like to see in our national character constitute an attractive and acceptable “this”. The “that” is seen in a variety of vicious, punitive, rejective and nasty responses that complicate the adoption of a public policy of restorative justice. We all know the very phenomena well but do not know so well how to deal with them.

In some way or another this contrast has existed in the psychology of every culture, as Redfield pointed out. Certainly it is there in religious concepts on which Western civilizations are based. Our sins are original even though they are far from creatively so. Freud just could not get along without his Id ; Jung his Shadow. Indeed, Joseph Campbell, in his lifework on myth, tracks such notions in every faith and culture around the world and clearly believes it rests basically in human design. If that is so, there may not be much hope of change and that view is essentially ultra-conservative, retro-active even. Psychologists, bless them, currently still reject explanations in terms of inherent design and emphasise the human capacity to learn because they have a professional stake in unlearning and relearning.

Culturally speaking, an *either/or* epistemology is basic to all the Western thought systems which derive from Aristotle or even before. The alternative cognitive style, *both/and* ways of thinking, are much more basic in many folk societies. In our society policy does rely on binary thinking; this is no more evident than when we are caught in election mode, or in other aspects of our social machinery that pits “this” against “that”, good against evil, right against wrong, we against them, truth against falsity, litigation rather than mediation, and justice as a one track train to truth, equity and fairness or maybe to nowhere other than where we are!

Now, it would be ludicrous to be advocating total abandonment of 3000 years of Western culture history and wholesale change of everything in our society; but I seriously want to explore how we might live with the “this” and the “that” when engaged in the curious activity of policy making in a society which would rather not have interference with personal freedom of action by individuals who say they are prepared to accept personal responsibility but do not exercise it. Try telling your local Rotary Club that crime is a product of the society to which they belong (what else could it be a product of?) and that they should accept responsibility for it, and you won’t be asked back again. The politics of even small innovation or reform in the criminal area runs right into this tangle.

Some 40 years ago the Detroit Area Study at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan set out to test the hypothesis that you can build community responsibility for the product we call crime. They divided a high crime sector of the city into two halves. In one they just let the usual things happen, but over the river they swamped the community with every available media and means of

communicating the facts. These were not just reports of the proceeding of the justice/welfare system, court decisions, sentences and so on, but comprised a detailed case background of every offender with the emphasis on where interventions might have been done and weren't. Radio, TV, newspapers and local handouts, talks on offer to churches, schools and any other groups who would have them were prepared and promoted. The emphasis was powerfully positive, but deeply disturbing, and was intended to be so.

The results were spectacular even though the process was, to say the least, rather unpopular. Give the community the opportunity and the resources to work out its own problems and lag is overcome and positive forces are given the chance to operate. Or, to put it another way, let the enlightened side deal with the dark side. The process was rough, somewhat brutal even (and did not continue for long), but the lesson was strong. To focus on the individual offender is convenient and traditional but a restorative society needs to utilize social forces of which we are usually not even aware, but which have powerful control effects on offenders, for better or for worse. Social engineering? You bet your life!

The other concept I have been toying with is that of culture lag. William James referred to habit as the great fly wheel of society. He clearly saw personal habit and social stability as depending on similar if not identical processes. We like to think change should be smooth and gradual and accept it only when it appeals to personal motives which seem advantageous. That way one avoids electoral or other backlash.

Anthropologists saw custom in much the same way. “What is the way we as people do this or that? This is our way – the only way”. In jurisprudence, custom law has the same anchoring role. Character structure is the ethical system which justifies custom or is justified by it! Together character and custom validate each other and produce what Gregory Bateson called the ethos of a culture. This ethos, in every case, has its dark side and its light side. Let me now see if I can relate all this to the topic of building a restorative society.

### *Exploring the dark side.*

The phenomena of this are familiar to everyone. They are exhibited in rank upon rank of negative statistics, of offences against person and/or property, of child abuse and neglect, of spouse battering, of elder abuse; the list is a familiar one. Equally familiar is the dark cry for more confinement, punishment, longer sentences, and much more of the same, even though we know these to be ineffective and may indeed produce such resentment that further violence is inevitable. We are also well aware that prisons are toxic institutions for many, increasing the likelihood that they will induce recidivism rather than reduce it and are so peculiar an environment that rehabilitation within them is difficult to say the least.

Repeatedly, attempts to reveal what is really going on within the crime producing structures of society are ignored, ridiculed, treated with derision or attacked. We even have a violent term for this – backlash! We have gone a considerable distance to deal with this by instituting independent agencies such as the Law Commission, the research undertaken by universities on contract, objective project evaluations, and well may these continue. But research on the dark side is unpopular, and will always

be difficult to fund and still more difficult to sustain and transform into action research. I do not mean research on crime and its antecedents alone but on what New Zealanders are doing when they are not being nice! Do we really understand the infrastructure of criminal offending in this country? Can we really develop restorative policy if we do not?

We need to defend our researchers better when they apply for funding, to publish their findings in challenging ways, not just in the hidden comfort of journals. We need to see new faces on screen, new voices on air and promote our younger research personnel. Most of all we need to take into account the existence of the dark side in every proposed policy or project and boldly step where we have not been venturing. Maori culture and Pakeha culture both have similar but different historical roots in payback morality and the belief in punitive control of violence with violence, in incarceration, deprivation of freedom, and other expressions of the dark side. We have come to accept that personal space, property and privacy are inviolable values; and maybe they are not! We have still a long way to go in sorting out the balance between personal and public rights and obligations.

***Retributive justice in both New Zealand traditions.***

Replacing retributive justice with restorative justice may seem a mammoth task so deeply does the former seem to be entrenched in our inherited ideologies and institutional practices. Both sets of cultural norms, Maori and Pakeha have their dark side and these interlock when they converge. Why did haka become associated with sport? Why are so many sports so violent? However one looks at it, the traditions which we have inherited have favoured retribution and have been maintained over

generations. At its original composition the *kamate* haka was essentially a song of gratitude for female intervention and protection, of rebirth and survival which was somewhat better than the disgustingly vicious substitute our All Blacks now have. When the new haka was unveiled, where were the voices condemning it as culturally recursive? Would such voices have been heard amidst the roar of appreciation that greets any new adornment to our national sport?

If we really want to build a restorative society then we need to understand the retributive traditions which we have inherited, have working plans to contain them and disempower their supports and supporters. Otherwise, we may continue just to attempt to build golden ghettos outside the walls of the concentration camps.

***Who is on the light side? What cultural backing is there for restorative justice?***

For culture lag to be overcome there needs to be movement, and that relies on motivation. The literature of radical change shows very clearly that personal passion and commitment to reform dies when prophecy fails, or when rewards are too few, too unreliable, or attainable. Sustainability is not just a current catch-word but a serious support for institutional social development. What we are doing in traditional “corrections” is not economically sustainable, nor are these methods socially and psychologically just. Too often we are further damaging the already damaged and then releasing them into what may seem to be a retributive jungle out there.

We do have our own history of how to empower the light side and prevail. Our reform in settling historic Maori grievances has been quietly successful and outstanding in world terms to a degree which we simply do not appreciate. But these only took off

when the Project Waitangi movement assembled an extraordinary cross-section of our society in an organized campaign to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Treaty. Earlier the CABTA campaign in the late 1950s bonded an unprecedented unity between communists, Roman Catholics, Maori and Pakeha in a common purpose, namely, to stop all racist rugby tours. The 1981 Springbok tour movement opened for all to see the potential for violence that lies, still, at the heart of our society. For a short while it seemed as though rugby might have suffered a mortal wound, but, of course, the “game” is more than a game and its resurgence came soon because there was nothing to sustain its rejection.

Tainui preceeded the settlement of their land claim with over 120 direct meetings with public groups to prepare for the local acceptance of an agreed outcome when this came. The second wave of feminism has a proud record of direct action achieving lasting effects. If you want movement then you have to push.

Should restorative justice seek to become a movement? Is it already one? New Zealanders do not care much for Movements: Charisma was a race horse. Tall poppies themselves may be in need of nurturing restoration. But we need to do much, much more than a few projects here, a pilot programme there, to support ourselves with small successes and many hopes. The leadership needs to be widespread, the programmes quiet but iterated so that their success is maximized and refined. We can evolve a new order provided that we simply withdraw support for the old.

I have neither the space nor the experience to state what role the voluntary sector should play but my guess is that even now there are substantial training needs in every organization that is or will be involved in restorative justice programmes.

***The mad, the bad and the sad.***

Let me deal with one specific. As a psychologist there is one issue which has priority for me and that is the interface between mental health and prison reform.

Imprisonment is a clear expression of the dark side, both of those who are inmates and the institutions themselves. We have known for a long time that a high percentage of those who are imprisoned have serious personality disorders, character disorders, substance abuse problems, deep socio-pathologies and most will never get correction of these disturbances given the culture-lag state of prisons. Indeed, those who become inmates often finish up more mad, sad, bad, or angry than when they entered.

There just are not enough skilled people who know what to do with whom. Worse still, some offenders, entering with whatever propensities for mental illness they may have, become progressively more mad the longer they are incarcerated, the stupid more stupid, the paranoid more so, the angry more angry, the withdrawn more depressed. We have begun to appreciate that prison is not the best place to learn new behaviour patterns; that gang and other anti-social affiliations make of prisons “crime colleges” for many and that a restorative ethic will require solid effort than we currently provide. This matter is more than just more funding and skilled personnel. It requires that we need to address the culture of the institutions and changes to traditional procedures.

Forensic psychology is now a recognized and indeed growing profession yet it still employs diagnostic tools of universalistic pretention, ignoring the literature of cultural relativism, culture “free” testing and the like. The DSM edn.V may be a comfort or a mill-stone, depending on your faith in it. Getting along without such supports requires a professional sophistication few can boast. Should all forensic psychologists be trained in cross-cultural and social clinical psychology as a starter?

What is the current level of understanding of ethnic factors in both crime and correction? What are the prospects for correctional facilities which are more than just a euphemistic change of name? What would a thoroughgoing training of all prison staff in restorative principles and practices be like? Have we really thought through what these are? And if we have, are we ready for the kind of political reaction which has followed modern clear public proclamation of the Principles of the Treaty? How could we plan for such change? Who would do it? Who would, or could, protect it from the Dark Side? But we have made considerable progress and I remain prevailingly optimistic.

***Yeah! Right.***

It is perilously easy to be wise in these matters, to pontificate and patronise and I am sorry if I seem to have done either. But I venture out of my backwoods retirement because I really do appreciate the difficulties of working towards any social change which seems worthwhile. The Maori world in which I have worked for many decades has undergone astonishing progress.

What my experience tells me is that you need to put as much thought and work into attending to the dark side if you are to make progress with the light side, however slow.

Finally I want us all to ponder, and become very clear about, the concept of restoration. What is it that we are seeking to restore by the policies and projects in which we are engaged? And I do not merely seek a definition, but rather a kaupapa, a firm basis on which to rest our efforts. While each person may come to their own answer to this challenge, my own would be to reach into Maori ethics and answer with the term *ritenga*. *Utu*, the restoration of balance is not mere pay-back but the process whereby *ritenga* is achieved. The best translation I can offer for this is that *rite*, the root word, stands for a deep seated cultural sense of correctness or rectitude. And how is that achieved? By seeking balance. And this is done in many many ways. Deeply intended apology, publicly expressed is one. Promises to redress the harm to victims and to work personally and even intimately is another. Sometimes there is a sense of servitude involved. Mutual support in making lifechanges is often part.

So the restoration of balance, personal or public, in policies, in institutional charters, in practices and projects in people, is a profound aim. Much that has occurred in the lives of those we serve cannot be altered. But some sort of re-balancing is always possible

Ours is a society which has made many radical changes in its relatively short history, not through idealism or dreaming but by doing, in our own way, in the spirit of pragmatism which is certainly strong in our culture and character. Dream, by all means, but then wake up.

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