Not The Worst Journey in the World: A Commentary on A. J. W. Taylor's *2002 Hunter Award* Paper

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In his 2002 Hunter Award paper, Professor A. J. W. Taylor takes us on a journey stretching from the Antarctic to the tropical islands of the South Pacific. New Zealand lies roughly in the middle of these two extremes—although sometimes closely resembling both. From an academic perspective, this feature of geography has placed us centre stage for the more geophysical research excursions to Antarctica and the more anthropological excursions to the nations and archipelagos of central Polynesia. The intellectual voyage Taylor (2003) describes thus follows the path of various pioneers of New Zealand psychology, yet in an expansive and ebullient way that is uniquely his. It is enormously valuable for the New Zealand Journal of Psychology to publish and document the professional travel diaries of one of the nation's longest-serving and most prominent psychologists. We need more oral history.

Although topics such as cultural competence and ethnographic methodologies are often presented as rather new features in the landscape of New Zealand psychology, it is actually due to the important work of the second generation of psychological scholars that cultural knowledge is ingrained in our discipline, locally. While Thomas Hunter and Ernest Beaglehole certainly pointed the way, it was the practical work of their students and successors, such as James and Jane (nee Beaglehole) Ritchie, that established New Zealand as an intellectual leader in cultural understanding. Taylor is a member of this forceful but now almost retired generation. It is therefore not surprising that his approach to analysing and ameliorating disastrous events on Manihiki atoll, Tuvalu, and Fij would show how post-traumatic stress must be interpreted in spiritual, familial, and cultural contexts.

In light of this synthesis with te whare tapa wha (Durie, 1994) and other indigenous models, what is somewhat surprising are Taylor's comments that he relied on "robust clinical scales" to assess the consequences of disaster. Best practice in his familiar clinical and correctional settings—actuarial, as we well know—may not fit as well when mapping unknown emotional response to disaster. The principles of (positivist) behavioural assessment could have been useful, since the emphasis is on phenomena as they are in context and not the degree to which they match predetermined, norm-based categories or syndromes (e.g., Evans & Litz, 1987). Standardised measures may, however, be useful for assessing individual differences in response to disasters.

In 1981, in Binghamton, New York, where I was at the time directing a clinical programme, a fire broke out at night in a large state office building and burning transformer oil spread deadly dioxin- and PCB-laden soot and smoke throughout the building. The clean up took over six years and cost more than twice the original cost of the building. My doctoral student, Francis Abueg (1986) and I studied the office workers who would have to work in the building once it had been declared safe for reoccupation. Worrying, feeling helpless, checking on the progress of the clean-up, and searching for information on toxins were highest among those individuals who, although not directly exposed, had previously worked in the building—a saliency variable. The cognitive variable of judgment of risk that the building was still contaminated did not predict worry to the same extent.

Personally, I am in great awe of those whose optimism allows them to prepare the rest of us for hazards and natural disasters. As I even forget to "fix and fasten," I am pessimistically convinced that I will never remember to don my own oxygen mask before assisting the child next to me, nor will I gently touch the hotel door to see if it is hot before opening it. Most preparation for emergency situations appear to underestimate the lack of congruence between saying and doing—being a large-scale extension of the admonition "walk, don't run..." Helping people cope with disaster, on the other hand, seems a promising extension of psychological understanding, for which we have modest empirical support. Taylor's analysis of the role of religious belief adds a significant dimension to this literature, especially the tendency to interpret disasters as punishment, or evidence of God's wrath.

I do not think, however, that attributing disaster to a vengeful God is necessarily less socially desirable than attributing all blame to an external force. In the former case there may at least be a search for causal factors that can be changed: maybe you have done something wrong that needs addressing. In contrast, America's unwillingness to recognise that, however heinous the crime of September 11, its own foreign policies and exploitative lifestyle may have contributed, in some measure, to the bitterness, hatred, and resentment of others. Of course, people who have been traumatised can hardly be expected to understand root causes, which is a complication for our discipline.

The psychology of disasters is greatly confounded by the inexorable intrusion of politics and spin. The cost of cleaning the Binghamton state office building was so great there was intense political pressure to declare the building safe and to get the staff back into it. While Taylor was studying the anxieties of parliamentarians held hostage in Fiji,

George Speight was talking nightly to New Zealand television audiences: treason, racism, or patriotism? It was hard to tell. While many psychologists descended on traumatised New Yorkers after September 11, there has been no formal enquiry into the children of Iraq terrorised by night after night of the most fearsome aerial bombardment. I am not as convinced as Taylor appears to be that the actual experience of traumatic events is in any way different across cultures, and the gods, ghosts, neighbours, friends, and family on whom societies call in times of desperation may differ in name but not in function.

Human coping with adversity and extreme experiences is remarkable, and important to study. Thus Taylor's early forays into the Antarctic provided a more controlled environment for studying intense experience than the unforeseeable catastrophes he has documented in the South Pacific. Presumably this is one of the critical variables: natural disasters occur to people without their control or expectation, whereas Antarctic explorers and other sensation seekers go willingly to extreme conditions. If uncertainty is the origin of anxiety, surely the unknown is the origin of excitement.

Taylor bemoans the tendency for research on stressful environments to focus on the physical consequences rather than the emotional. True, but what constitutes a psychologically challenging environment cannot always be predicted. Psychologists at McGill (including T. H. Scott, whom Taylor mentions) pioneered much research into the now well understood but at the time unpredicted negative effects of sensory deprivation (Hebb, 1958). This work, too, was driven by politics, as the effects of solitary confinement on Korean prisoners of war, flying long range bombers, and living in Arctic military bases, to name a few examples, began to be recognised. Closely related was the problem for children, not of short intense trauma but of prolonged deprivation; the concern was prominent in the 60s, so much so I even did my honours thesis on the negative effects of severely deprived rearing conditions (Evans, 1966).

When I was growing up, totally non-deprived, my father had a book called *The Glories of Britain*, one chapter of which was on Scott's expedition to the South Pole. One might think it an interesting reflection on British culture that such an absolute failure could be included under this title, but clearly it was the way Scott's party died that was so glorious. Perhaps because the first to die was my namesake, seaman Evans, I found the story fascinating. And who could not marvel at the self-sacrifice of Titus Oates—"a very gallant English gentleman"— whose feet were so severely frost bitten he could barely walk and who knew that he was slowing the party down. With the wind intense and the temperature at – 43 degrees F, Scott described Oates's actions thus: "He said, 'I am just going outside and may be some time.' He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since." (Scott's diary, March 17, 1912, quoted in Campbell, 1919, p. 590). Edgar Evans had died a month earlier. Snow-blind, with his nose rotten from frost-bite, his fingernails and toes gone, he helped pull a sledge until his boots came off; he briefly continued on his hands and knees, eventually losing all use of his legs, became comatose, and died.

At no time did Evans complain—he was clearly no relative of mine. But there is speculation (Cherry-Garrard, 1922) that he was the first to die because he was the most depressed by the knowledge that Amundsen had reached the Pole before them. Taylor is surely right that the contrived stress of the IBEA experimental procedures he has reported created psychological reactance not experienced by those voluntarily subjecting themselves to hazards, or fighting for survival. It seems clear, once again, that studies of stress and adversity must start with sophisticated psychological theory integrated with biology, not overpowered by it—as Taylor argues from General Systems Theory. However I do not agree with him that recognising spiritual needs represents an epistemological challenge. Surely it is only if you seek spiritual explanations for behaviour that your science becomes suspect? If by spirituality we do not mean religiosity so much as transcendence—belief in something better or more important than oneself—the stoicism of Scott's party, the candlelight vigils at Ground Zero, and the settling of the ghosts to permit return to the secondary school, are all exemplars of the same basic human need.

In his detailed account of the British expedition to the South Pole, Cherrry-Garrard (1922) described it as "the worst journey in the world." When he and the other survivors returned, their first landing in civilisation was at Oamaru; New Zealand has indeed had an intimate connection with Antarctic exploration. Taylor has played a part in this connection. He has travelled a long way from early clinical and correctional psychology in New Zealand but has used that professional experience effectively. He has found naturalistic opportunities for administering questionnaires and gathering new data. He has used the vicissitudes of humans and nature as his independent variables, recognising the psychological needs of emergency workers before "debriefing" was in the lexicon. His journey has been a lively, scholarly, and successful one.

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A commentary on A.J.W. Taylor's "The Spread of Antarctic and South Pacific Research Behind the *2002 Hunter Award*"

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When describing almost half a century of scholarly endeavour, Taylor reflects on the possibility that he might have spread this effort over too wide an area. On the contrary, Taylor's work provides the academic community with rich insights into the range of phenomena that comprise the human response to adversity. His work has encompassed volitional (e.g., Antarctic expeditioners living and working under extreme and dangerous conditions) and non-volitional (e.g., the consequences of being held hostage) aspects of adversity. He has explored multi-cultural influences on traumatic reactivity, recovery and intervention, and on the conceptual, practical and ethical issues that arise when diagnostic criteria and intervention are critically examined within cultural and spiritual contexts. As a consequence of the progressively more multi-cultural nature of contemporary societies and the growing call for Western mental health professionals to render their services overseas, Taylor's cross-cultural work is becoming increasingly important. In conducting this work, he has argued that the key to constructing a comprehensive understanding of adversity can only be accomplished through multi-disciplinary research.

Collectively, this work represents a substantive and important contribution to the field of traumatic stress studies and disaster psychology. While not discussed within his paper, Taylor's review of his work provides a foundation for formulating holistic and ecologically valid theories of the human response to adversity. Several aspects of this extensive body of work can be described in terms of their enduring legacy for those embarking on psychological careers and his pre-emption of several ideas currently enjoying some prominence within the field of traumatic and disaster stress.

A strong ecological focus can be discerned within Taylor's work. This was evident in his developing a classification scheme for disaster survivors. This scheme has played a fundamental role in stimulating research into the nature and diverse needs of these groups. It was also evident in his appreciation of the interplay between cultural and spiritual beliefs, the institutions that bind them together, recovery processes and the intervention provided for Pacific Island communities affected by traumatic events.

Taylor's ability to synthesise individual and collective perspectives in this work stimulated recognition that natural recovery processes may reduce the validity and applicability of formal diagnostic criteria. An acute interest in the nature of the human response to adversity led Taylor to explore these issues with a mix of scientific curiosity and clinical predisposition; a mix that signals that observation, curiosity and critical appraisal remain important tools for psychologists. Furthermore, the approach to intervention that emerged from this process provided a tangible example of the kind of intervention that the positive psychology movement has called for within clinical psychology (Seligman & Peterson, 2003).

The insights that Taylor brought to bear on his analyses of the experience of Antarctic populations were precursors to what is now being called resilience, the study of the intrinsic resources that people and groups draw upon to facilitate their ability to adapt to adverse circumstances. Careful observation revealed the importance of the techniques that individuals developed to assist their adaptation to the horror of body recovery duties. An interest in resilience is also evident in his work with Pacific Island communities. In regard to the latter, this interest was manifest in the recognition of the importance of environmental resources within the recovery process.

Taylor's arguments for the adoption of a general systems theory approach to understanding the diverse and complex issue that comprise adaptation to extreme and adverse environments raised two issues: the importance of inter-disciplinary research and the conceptual and political issues that arise in attempting to realise its potential. The problems he encountered with multi-disciplinary research, particularly when attempting to expand the presence of psychology

within areas dominated by bio-medical and engineering professions, are all too frequently reflected in contemporary attempts to do likewise. Similar problems exist today in contemporary research into the comprehensive and integrated emergency management principles intended to assist people to manage adversity. In this context, attempts to inculcate the importance of the human dimension in natural hazards research into a field dominated by engineering and physical sciences disciplines have yet to bear fruit. While significant developments have been made in regard to forging productive collaborative research with members of the earth scientist community, these relationships are typically between individuals rather than being entrenched within the respective disciplines.

While the benefits that can accrue from the kind of inter-disciplinary approach advocated by Taylor are generally accepted, the political and conceptual problems he described continue to plague research attempting to construct a comprehensive understanding of adversity. However, contemporary work on managing the inter-disciplinary politics and conceptual diversity that are fundamental to effective collaboration has the benefit of a clearer understanding of the social psychological factors (e.g., in regard to managing diversity and team work) that are essential to forge effective functional links between disciplines (Paton, 2003; Paton et al., 1999). This latter work suggests that, not only should we be expanding and consolidating links with other disciplines, we should also be seeking greater collaboration from within our own discipline. Notwithstanding, Taylor's comments regarding how far we can travel down this road given the competitive world of contemporary science emphasise a need for more critical debate on the strategic role of psychology within the scientific community.

Taylor's work with Pacific Island groups provided another example of the benefits and importance of applying a systems model. Here, critical analysis of how cultural institutions interact with Western clinical practice led Taylor to adopt an approach that was both culturally appropriate and that added to our understanding of the role of environmental factors in the management of the human response to adversity. The latter also illustrates how Taylor has never shied away from practicing what he has preached.

However, the more comprehensive application of general systems principles within the discipline will be required to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of complex phenomena like the human response to adversity and its consequences. Organisational and social psychological research into traumatic stress increasingly highlight the importance of environmental agents as causal factors within this process, opening the way for a proactive approach to primary prevention at individual and community levels (Paton, 2000; Paton et al., 2003). Closer collaboration within the discipline of psychology can thus ensure we progress to develop comprehensive models of the natural history of the human response to adversity.

Collectively, Taylor provides a role model for the application of the scientist-practitioner model. His writings and experience afford several lessons regarding research, practice and the training of psychologists that transcend the legacy of his formal contribution to the literature. We can distil from his collective works the importance of observation, critical questioning, cultural sensitivity, diplomacy and negotiation as important tools for the psychologist. Finally, his argument that multi-disciplinary research is essential to the development of comprehensive models of complex phenomena such as the human response to adversity highlights a need for us to analyse our own work within this broader context and to expand our efforts towards realising the potential of this approach.

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