



European Business Review

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Buriata Eti-Tofinga, Heather Douglas, Gurmeet Singh, (2017) "Influence of evolving culture on leadership: a study of Fijian cooperatives", European Business Review, Vol. 29 Issue: 5, pp.534-550, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-10-2015-0122>

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Influence of evolving culture on leadership: a study of Fijian cooperatives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how leadership is shaped by a changing cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an exploratory study based on semi-structured interviews with leaders of Fijian cooperatives.

Findings – The political and cultural environment in Fiji has changed over time, and these changing arrangements shape expectations of what is considered to be appropriate leadership in Fijian cooperatives. To be consistent with changing societal values, leaders of Fijian cooperatives employ a context-sensitive hybrid leadership style in which legitimacy is an important dimension.

Research implications – Researchers need to examine the cultural context as a dynamic influencing element of leadership.

Practical implications – Leaders of cooperatives and similar values-based organizations would benefit from applying a legitimate and context-sensitive hybrid leadership style.

Originality/value – This study contributes new understandings of the cultural influences on organizational leadership.

Keywords Leadership, Leadership culture, Fiji, Cooperatives, Hybrid leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leadership in organizations is effective when it can adapt strategically to changing situations and also to what is deemed appropriate to people, groups, culture, place or time (Kriger and Zhovtobryukh, 2013). When situations change, leaders need to be adaptable, and skilled leaders must attend to these situations strategically by varying their style of leading. Strategic leaders require the skills to anticipate, interpret, challenge, decide, align and learn from diverse operating contexts (Schoemaker *et al.*, 2013).

In all societies, leaders are influenced by culture (House *et al.*, 2002, Hofstede, 2001), but little is known about the effects of cultural change on the operation of leadership as societies undergo cultural transformation. Culture is a collection of acquired norms, values, beliefs



and meanings that are constructed over time through interactions among people (Shweder, 2001). More specifically, culture affects the way leaders operate organizations across national borders. The most recent review by Rohlfer and Zhang (2016) suggested that the debate on culture as a dynamic element needs to be advanced in the field of international business. Culture evolves over time in response to a transforming society (Durham, 2001), and in the course of cultural transformation, people adjust their behaviour and responses to changing contexts. This process of adjustment, known as conditioning (Cerutti, 2001), is an important process in the leadership context. To ensure that leaders adjust and remain effective and appropriate in mobilizing actions and accomplishing goals, the evolutionary view of society and culture and the impacts of conditioning in response to a changing leadership culture and society needs further empirical development. Local culture is evolving in many developing countries (Shahin and Wright, 2004), yet there is still much to understand about the nature of leadership culture within developing countries as these societies undergo transformation. This is especially so in Pacific island organizations which have received little attention in organizational studies.

Cooperatives offer an appropriate context to analyse leadership in organizations from an evolutionary perspective of society and culture. Cooperatives are values-based organizations which blend market-like attributes with hierarchy-like mechanisms (Chaddad, 2012) to promote the welfare of a specific group of people through member-based business activities (Boone and Özcan, 2014). Cooperatives differ from traditional firms as they embrace a particular value set (Schmid, 2008). Traditional firms are expected to commit to a dominant value that upholds competition, profit maximization (Scherer, 2001) and offering incentives to compete for higher market share (Useem, 2001). In contrast, cooperatives are expected to embrace self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity while believing in honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others (Novkovic, 2008). Cooperatives may function to benefit consumers, workers or the community or they may function as social cooperatives (Monzon and Chaves, 2008). They operate in diverse sectors such as agriculture, social housing and renewable energy, and exist in developed nations and also in developing countries. The benefits these organizations offer have long been recognized, yet knowledge of how context affects the leadership of cooperatives is inadequate. Examining the evolving leadership culture in a Pacific island society in the context of cooperatives is highly pertinent, as these organizations have existed since the early colonial period when local culture was steeped in established leadership traditions, yet these traditions are being challenged in contemporary society.

Responding to recent calls to advance empirical knowledge of culture as a dynamic element (Rohlfer and Zhang, 2016), this paper reports the results of a study which examined the effects on the leadership styles adopted in cooperatives of an evolving leadership culture in a society which is undergoing significant transformation. The question guiding this study was, "How is leadership in cooperative organizations being shaped by an evolving leadership culture in a transforming society?" Fiji was chosen as a study site because of its gradual transition to contemporary leadership modes from a traditional chiefly system shaped by early European contact, colonialism and more recently by ethnic-related political coups and a movement towards multi-ethnic democracy. The first section of this paper examines the literature that shapes the multidimensional construct of leadership, leadership in cooperative organizations, the cultural context of leadership and Pacific leadership culture. Then, a brief introduction to Fijian society is offered to provide a context for the study, after which the methodology and findings are presented. The final section considers implications of this study and offers suggestions for future research.

Literature review

The multidimensional construct of leadership

Leadership is a social interaction process whereby leaders influenced followers to carry out tasks and achieve expected outcomes. The dialectic relationship between structure and leaders is complex and complicated by changing social contexts and the capacity of leaders to respond to these changes (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The construct of leadership is multidimensional. Leadership perspectives have moved on from the Great Man and Trait theories to contemporary notions of leadership such as situational, transactional and transformational leadership, and more recently, leadership theories (Day *et al.*, 2014). Current studies confirm that leaders are not born with essential traits. Leadership skills can be developed through training and experience. Leaders can be acculturated with the social skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for them to adapt to social situations effectively and interact with followers appropriately in a given social context. Leadership styles may be either transactional – focused on task performance and rewards – or transformational – inspiring and leading by example (Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987). Leadership may be authoritarian, laissez-faire or democratic (Lewin *et al.*, 1939). Goleman (2000) proposed six leadership styles: coercive (do what I say), authoritative (do what I want), affiliative (come with me), democratic (what do we want and what we can do together), pacesetter (do as I do now) and coaching (try this). Leaders may, or may not be, focused on developing relationships with followers within organizations and across networks of organizations, and they may or may not aim to empower people (Heinecke *et al.*, 2014).

Uhl-Bien (2006) argued for a framework of relational leadership in which a changing context of social relationships establishes the cultural context of leadership actions. The process of leadership, therefore, varies according to the social context, which includes, embedded cultural beliefs, norms and values. Leadership in societies varies according to different beliefs and norms of power distance, individualism or collectivism (Pasa, 2000), risk tolerance (Hannah *et al.*, 2009), gender equality (Mendez and Rusenbark, 2015), assertiveness and orientations on the future, people and performance (Calza *et al.*, 2010). While the perspective of leadership has evolved with extended understandings of the cultural context, current research considers the dynamic nature of context, its cultural elements (Rohlfers and Zhang, 2016) and how it translates to the nature of potentially multifaceted leadership actions at the organizational level.

Leadership in cooperative organizations

Ethical and genuine interactions between leaders and members are central to values-based organizations like cooperatives. Schmid (2008) emphasizes leaders of these organizations operate from a value system which is shaped by societal values of justice, fairness and integrity. Leaders should behave ethically while maintaining an effective and efficient business (Eisenbeiss, 2012). They are expected to understand members' needs and how the organization might provide for those needs, yet Spear *et al.* (2009) identify governance issues may arise when members become critical of the way leaders manage their cooperatives. Schmid (2008) proposed that leaders of values-based organizations adopt four leadership orientations which focus either internally or externally, and either on tasks or people. People-oriented leaders listen and empathize and use good interpersonal communication skills to motivate workers. In contrast, task-oriented leaders focus on functional aspects of the organization such as planning and budgeting. In addition to task/people orientation, leaders may be primarily concerned with internal organizational affairs or with the external environment. These four leadership styles that Schmid (2008) proposed may be over simplistic however, since other studies affirmed that leadership is shaped by elements such as gender. Women are less likely than men to be found in higher status leadership positions

even in values-based organizations (Teasdale *et al.*, 2011). The leadership environment is complex, as it changes continuously and allows new values, such as gender, to have transforming impacts on leadership patterns in these organizations.

Cultural context and Pacific leadership culture

The cultural context of leadership, that is the shared meanings, norms and values of how leadership is supposed to be exercised, represents a situation which is unpredictable but which is likely to influence what leaders do. Leadership contexts may be stable, chaotic, unpredictable or vulnerable (Osborn *et al.*, 2002), as demonstrated by studies that explored various impacts of cultural dimensions and changing values on leadership styles and effectiveness (House *et al.*, 2002). Osborn *et al.*'s (2002) study provides the basis of a leadership theory that considers context as highly relevant; however, Rohlfer and Zhang (2016) argue for a more practical development in relation to advancing knowledge of culture as a dynamic element. Leadership actions are being influenced by global and local cultural contexts, and therefore according to Uhl-Bien (2006), these are important sites for exploring how cultural context influences dynamic leadership actions and relations in cooperative organizations.

Leadership is under-researched in the multi-cultural context of the distinct Pacific cultural regions: *Polynesia*, *Melanesia* and *Micronesia* (Hassall *et al.*, 2011). Big man leadership is common in Melanesian societies, which is characterized by leaders who obtain prestige through achievement and accumulated wealth (Lederman, 2001). Chiefly leadership is based on status obtained through hereditary positions, and common in Polynesian and Micronesian societies, while some Micronesian societies with elderly leadership traditions recognized older members of the community as traditional leaders (Hassall *et al.*, 2011). These leadership traditions, however, have been altered by the arrival of European colonizers and the recent globalization of Pacific island societies (Besnier, 2001). The British colonial legacy of government and arrival of new religion has affected the knowledge and religious beliefs of traditional leaders, such as those in Melanesian societies (Foster, 2001). Hassall *et al.* (2011) argued that some Pacific island societies continue to uphold strong traditional leadership whereas others such as in Fiji, leadership traditions are evolving. However, the effects of Pacific leadership traditions including external influences such as colonial traditions on the leadership of Pacific island organizations are still indefinite and not fully understood.

Fijian society

Fiji is a small nation state in the South Pacific region located at the junction of Melanesia and Polynesia. A British colony for a century, the country became an independent nation in 1970 as a democracy within the British Commonwealth. Fijian society has a complex traditional social structure characterized by kinship groups led by indigenous (*iTaukei*) chiefs, organized into tribes, clans and families (Sutherland, 1984). While leadership is no longer confined to chieftainship, *iTaukei* chiefs continue to be authoritative, delegative and accommodating to the needs of their communities (Ramesh, 2003). This traditional leadership gradually changed throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras. Christianity was introduced in the nineteenth century as a new religion and the idea of trading had implications on the Fijian way of life (Lal, 1992) and thus the way its traditional chiefly leaders interact with members of their community. As chiefs converted to Christianity, their people also converted. Today, approximately 65 per cent of Fijians are Christians, with other religions, especially Hinduism, Sikh and Islam, also prominent (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Fiji is one of the most

multicultural nations in the South Pacific region with a population of indigenous Fijians (57 per cent), Indians (37 per cent) and the remaining being Rotuman, European, Chinese and other Pacific islanders (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The British colonial administration expanded the Fijian economy through large-scale sugar plantations, and recruited indentured labourers from India to work on these plantations who later subsequently settled in Fiji (Sutherland, 1984). Chiefs accumulated wealth and power by trading sandalwood in this period even though accumulating material possessions is not traditional in a Fijian society (Nayacakalou, 1975). Early trading arrangements in Fiji favoured *iTaukei* chiefs who were also recruited to British colonial administrative positions at provincial, district and village levels (Macnaught, 1974). The rest of the community was virtually excluded and benefiting little from trading. To address this situation, cooperatives were encouraged to promote the economic welfare of Fijian citizens (Qalo, 2011). The first Fijian cooperative was established in 1919 (Fischer and Bruett, 2010) as a way for ordinary people to participate directly in economic activities and conduct a business for members' benefit. British law formed the basis of commercial practices and legal arrangements for Fijian cooperatives (UNESCO, 2004).

Post-colonial political and cultural arrangements

The Fijian constitution adopted at independence promoted human rights, movement towards equality, democracy, non-discrimination based on gender or race and the empowerment of disadvantaged (Amnesty International, 2014). However, ethnic tensions between *iTaukei* people and Indians (Rao, 2004) led to a series of coups in 1987 and 2000, and a military dictatorship, led by an *iTaukei* former military leader, replaced elected government in 2006. Fiji revised its constitution under each dictatorship to maintain the *iTaukei* control of cultural and political institutions including the abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs while it slowly moved towards multi-ethnic democracy. Fiji remains a patriarchal society. Chiefs are mostly men, and these men dominate leadership positions (Reddy, 2000) and are expected to retain authority over women. Women have had low status unless they were from a chiefly ancestry (Reddy, 2000). The traditional role of *iTaukei* women was strictly constrained to childbearing and caretaking. This role is changing however, as more women gained leadership positions and as public perceptions on the role of women are changing (Reddy, 2000). At the 2014 elections, 15 per cent of the votes were cast for female candidates. Fiji has its nation's first female Speaker and 14 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women. Young people including young women are encouraged to engage in building cohesion and strengthening a multicultural and former politically unstable Fijian society (Vakaoti and Mishra, 2009). With these political and cultural changes, it is clear that there has been a gradual shift in the way leadership is operated in the Fijian society.

Methodology

This exploratory study examined leaders' experiences of managing Fijian cooperatives. Adopting a social constructionist ontology (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), study participants were selected with theoretical sampling to maximize diversity and the potential to generate new theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Theoretical sampling is the process of selecting participants with the potential to influence emerging theory based on concepts that emerged from the literature review and data collection. Eight cooperatives were recruited to this study reflecting diversity in the nature and location of the cooperative, its outreach (urban or rural), age, size of operation, sources of income and types of business activities. All conducted a business with the aim of creating economic and societal impact. A leader of

each cooperative was interviewed who held a responsible position such as Chairperson, Manager or Director. Each was knowledgeable and influential in the decision-making processes for the organization (see Table I). These leaders were encouraged to freely express their views about their leadership experiences in semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 min.

Interview protocol

- *General question:* What are the challenges you faced in starting a business and income-generating initiative in your organization?
- *Probing question:* Can you please describe your experience of how you led the organization cope with any of these challenges?
- *General question:* Tell me about your experience of how easy or hard it is to work with others to mobilize resources, implement initiatives and accomplish goals in your organization?
- *Probing question:* Which skill is most important to you in accomplishing these tasks successfully?
- *General question:* How do you work with other organizations operating in the same area as your organization?
- *Probing question:* How do you cope with competing or complementary interests if any? Do you find it effective to work with these other organizations?
- *General question:* Tell me about your experience of how the organization is being affected by cultural practices and norms in this country? Do these practices have any effect at all on the way you work with others or implement activities in your organization?

ID	Interviewee	Outreach	Started	Business	Beneficiaries
P1	Chairman	Urban	1978	Banking, loan and saving services; real estate property investment	Local teachers, particularly employed in the civil service
P2	Chairman/Manager	Rural and urban	1983	Grocery, dairy shop, hiring vehicles, transport, bakery	Villagers and their families, male farmers and those working in urban centres
P3	Chairlady/Manager	Rural	2009	Grocery, dairy shop	Village women and their families
P4	Vice Chairman	Rural and urban	2012	Taxi services, venue hiring	Government retirees, mostly men
P5	Officer-In-Charge/ Village Headman	Rural	2009	Village eco-tourism	Villagers
P6	Chairlady/Manager	Urban	1983	Steel work, transitioning to farming	Family members employed in the business
P7	Chairlady/Manager	Rural	2010	Honey, virgin coconut oil, marketing locally made products	Unemployed village women and their families
P8	Board Member	Rural and urban	1964	Marketing agency for fish products, hardware store	Rural fishermen located in remote villages

Table I.
Details of
participating
cooperatives

- *Probing question: What will happen if you don't abide by these cultural practices? Does religion have any effect at all on your operation?*
- *General question: Tell me about how is the organization being affected by the legal system – laws and regulations in the country?*
- *Probing question: Do these laws and regulations help you in accomplishing tasks successfully?*
- *General question: Does the government value your work? If yes, how do you know?*
- *Probing question: Please describe your experience of how you work together with the government?*
- *General question: Do people in the community appreciate the work of your organization? If yes how do you know?*
- *Probing question: Please describe your experience of how you work with the community?*

Participants discussed topics related to leadership and management challenges, relationships with stakeholders and experiences of success and/or failure. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed with a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to summarize and code the interview data meaningfully in a way that addressed the research question and objective of this study. Constructs were identified relevant to the changing cultural and political context of leadership culture in Fiji and implications on leadership in cooperatives (see Table I). The concepts “gender”, “family welfare” and “village welfare”, “urban and rural outreach” were derived from early interviews with Fijian cooperatives (P1 and P2) (see Table I). Subsequent participants were selected to investigate the emerging concepts of missions supporting the interests of women and men (P3, P4, P8), the promotion of family and village welfare (P3, P6, P7, P8) and urban and rural outreach (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8). This study was conducted in accordance to the ethical procedures of the University of the South Pacific.

Findings

Leadership in Fijian cooperatives is diverse and embedded in an evolving cultural and political context. Participants in this study expressed concerns towards development challenges faced in Fiji and these concerns help explain their intentions when interacting with members and followers. In this study, leaders combined transactional, visionary, transformational, democratic, authoritative and delegative styles into a hybrid leadership approach. Transactional leadership was the dominant style adopted with other styles integrated in response to cultural changes brought about by local, political, social, economic and cultural factors. We argue that the evolving leadership culture in Fijian society affects the way leaders are expected to behave and this shapes their attitude towards leadership in cooperative organizations. The following section provides details and discusses the implications of these findings which are summarized in Table II.

A dominant transactional leadership style

While transactional leadership was the dominant style, each leader in this study revealed different ways in which they exercised transactional leadership. Transactional leadership may seem to be a somewhat old-fashioned style; however, participants indicated that it was necessary for them to follow established regulative, constitutional and administrative rules as well as to conform to cultural roles and standards. As

Leadership constructs	Contextualizing and conditioning of leadership styles	
	<i>Dynamic context</i>	<i>Leadership style</i>
<i>Transactional leadership</i>		
Quality standards	Colonial bureaucracy	Setting performance standards
Performance rewards	Chiefly hierarchical structure	Following rules and standards
Task routines	Patriarchal society	Offering rewards for achieving performance standards
Internal constitutional rules	Rationalization of market economy and cooperatives	Coercive 'Do what I say'
Cultural rules	Colonial provincial and village administrative positions	
Regulative rules (cooperative)		
Regulative rules (By-laws)		
Mutually agreed standards		
Personalized rules		
Administrative rules		
<i>Transformational leadership</i>		
Inspiring (collective)	Democratic values	Aims to inspire and empower, e.g. women, young people, community
Empowering (women)	Women's rights movement	Set example for people to follow
Empowering (young people)	Empowering disadvantaged, women, young people	Affiliative 'Come with me'
	Empowering young people as peace-building leaders	
<i>Democratic leadership</i>		
Equality	Move towards Democracy	Equality-based/inclusive approach
Collective participation	Cooperative values	Participate in functions as a group
Inclusive empowerment	Communal society	Inclusive approach to empowering
Inclusive knowledge sharing		Sharing knowledge with people
		Democratic 'What do we want and what we can do together'
<i>Visionary leadership</i>		
Opportunity seeking	Cooperative values	Visualize opportunities
Opportunity identification	Christian value(s)	Identify opportunities
Action following opportunity identified and visualized	Collaboration with churches	Action implemented after opportunities identified
Forward-looking outcome		Visualize outcomes of actions
		Affiliative 'Come with me'
<i>Authoritative leadership</i>		
Directive command	Patriarchal society	Direct and commanding approach
Authoritative	Chiefly hierarchical structure	People obey authority of leader
	Bureaucracy and village administrative position	Partially authoritative
		Coercive 'Do what I say'
		Authoritative 'Do what I want'
<i>Delegative leadership</i>		
Task allocation	Non-capitalist values	Allocate tasks to people
	Communal reliance	Coercive 'Do what I say'
	<i>iTaukei</i> way of vakaturaga	

Table II.
Results of analysis
on leadership in
Fijian cooperatives

transactional leaders, they would lead their followers in this manner. They acknowledged the importance of administrative rules and adhering to a systematic bureaucratic process which was primarily developed and influenced from a British culture of leadership, business administration and legal system:

The government enforces the Cooperative Act, which has been with us since the British were here. There's a provision there for tax holiday; for auditing to be done by the Department of Cooperative who pay very minimum fees and it's compulsory for us. So those are the provisions that are in here for us to comply with. [P6]

Internal constitutional rules within cooperatives regulate actions of members and leaders, including who could or could not join the organization. Such rules promote cultural arrangements among organizational leaders and members, for example, the culture of transparency, accountability and integrity of the organization. Rules and arrangements which encourage cooperation, community orientation and equality are important values in cooperatives; however, habits of villages that do not conform to cooperative values can lead to problems that the leaders must attend to:

The cooperative is good but people from the village who run the business follow their own way. They don't follow the cooperative rules. That's why the communication breaks down. [P5]

Values promoted by leaders are social norms that become standards for leadership behaviours in organizations (Scott, 2001). Scott notes that standards are ways in which a particular task is expected to be carried out to achieve specific outcomes, while rewards may also be used as incentives to achieve desired results. A system of rewarding the performance of administrators with salaries was developed during the British colonial times. Following independence however, the Fijian government recognized that performance standards can be controlled through contracts, the market and even job descriptions. Transactional leaders now use these mechanisms to influence behaviour and get things done in their organization. As two leaders in this study indicated, these standards can be reflected in a formal agreement, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, or as mutually agreed arrangements between two or more parties where a prescribed standard, such as a job description, shapes the procedures and skill set required to carry out particular tasks:

There is a quality level of skills that we need to get in order to meet market standards so that we can be marketed in a job market. We keep telling our boys. Keep the good marks so that you can get the scholarship. [P6]

Transactional leaders of these cooperatives are culturally conscious. This cultural awareness is important whether the leaders are *iTaukei*, non-indigenous Fijians or foreigners. The *iTaukei* leaders acknowledge their intention not to offend their culture of traditional chieftainship when doing business, and since these leaders admit respecting and listening to their chiefs, leaders from other races are expected to be equally culturally conscious. The administrative positions such as *Roko* (head of Provincial Council) and *turaga ni koro* (village headman) today are seen as culturally acceptable roles situated in village and district communities in Fiji. These positions were occupied by chiefs in the colonial days to allow the *iTaukei* people govern themselves in a culturally appropriate way. With some changes, this culturally manipulated governance continues to influence the way things happen in the communities where cooperatives operate. When delivering initiatives and services in a village, leaders of cooperatives acknowledged the obligation to follow cultural rules, respect and listen to their chiefs, and consult the *turaga ni koro* before any actions are undertaken:

When we enter the area and before we are servicing that area, we need to go through a protocol. We have to go to see the chiefs, the *turaga ni koro*, the village headman and all that. [P7]

[...] whatever the chief says or does especially for us in the remote areas, we do it. Of course we do it whether the outcome will affect us or not. [P3]

Christianity as a cultural practice also influenced these leaders, some of whom considered Christian Churches to be partners in the delivery of cooperative initiatives. The participants in this study did not expect this partnering would be influenced by religious beliefs, but instead saw the compliance with behaviours expected by the predominantly and overtly Christian Fijian society as implying respect for established religious practices. For example, participants expressed their respect for the Christian Sabbath day and the effects this compliance has on their enterprise and ways of influencing opportunities:

Sundays, by the time we have the church, our service, that's the time to close; to have the shopkeeper has the time to attend the service. [P2]

A hybrid form of leadership

Although a transactional style was commonly observed among the leaders of Fijian cooperatives included in this study, leadership had many faces. Leaders adopted transactional, transformational, democratic and authoritative or a mix of these styles at different times. This indicates that leadership in cooperatives in Fiji is moving towards a new style which allows predominantly transactional leaders to adopt alternative styles of leadership. In this study, visionary, transformational and democratic leadership were commonly integrated with transactional leadership, while other styles were adopted occasionally, especially authoritative and delegative leadership (see [Table II](#)). This new style is described as a hybrid leadership.

Visionary, transformational and democratic leadership styles

Leaders of Fijian cooperatives in this study had their own way of visualizing, identifying and seeking opportunities to take action and achieve their vision. Not only were they forward-looking, but they also predicted a future outcome. Some leaders demonstrated their capacity for visionary leadership, for example:

How do we raise the group to have the money? Look around. What is around us? Ok it's the coconut tree. That is the first thing for us to use to raise the group. Ok then next go and make five sasa [a locally made broom] and syrup from it. [P7]

Some leaders embraced a transformational style specifically for disadvantaged people or sought to inspire young people:

It's very hard for us to do the work. So we try our best to do the work and to move on in the group and not just for the group, but also other village[s], and other women. We try our best to teach them what we are because we know the cooperative was helping us [P7]. If I am going somewhere, I tell all the groups this – whatever I can do you can do. I challenge them all the time. You go on the training, you train and come back. You can be the one like me. [P7]

The commitment to empowerment and capacity to inspire others, which is evident among leaders interviewed in this study, indicates that leaders in Fijian cooperatives are respectful and have a desire to work for a common good. Also was observed among some of these leaders was a commitment to democracy, sharing knowledge, encouraging participation, inclusive empowerment and recognition of unity. For example, one leader expressed her particular desire to empower women:

I can help in a way for poverty and teach women to stand up on their own two feet. Sometimes I asked them to come so we all have a handicraft gathering and sale. Come to my shed. Like we bring and buy things from one another. We all live in the same village. [P3]

Delegative leadership style

Along with a transactional style, delegative leadership is accepted as appropriate in Fiji. With a prevailing culture of respect, it is acceptable for a respected person in authority to give orders and expect others to do the work. Delegative leaders instruct others to carry out prescribed tasks, usually with a relaxed and less overt approach to supervising work. [Ravuvu \(1983\)](#) refers to a version of this approach in the *iTaukei* way as the *vakaturaga*, which is useful if employed by authoritative leaders such as chiefs, and amongst respectful and culturally conscious leaders. There was evidence that delegative leadership was employed occasionally by leaders in Fijian cooperatives. For example, one participant described allocating tasks to each member of the organization when arranging a *solu* which is a cultural social event used in Fiji as a way to raise funds. Members of the organization gather together, socialize and make monetary contributions. On these occasions, leaders can delegate organizing tasks to individual members and encourage socializing:

I tell others to make a cup of tea and boil the water and put lemon leaf, put sugar and for them to bring one plate and we all come and eat, while we throw 10 cents, 20 cents. [P3]

Authoritative leadership style

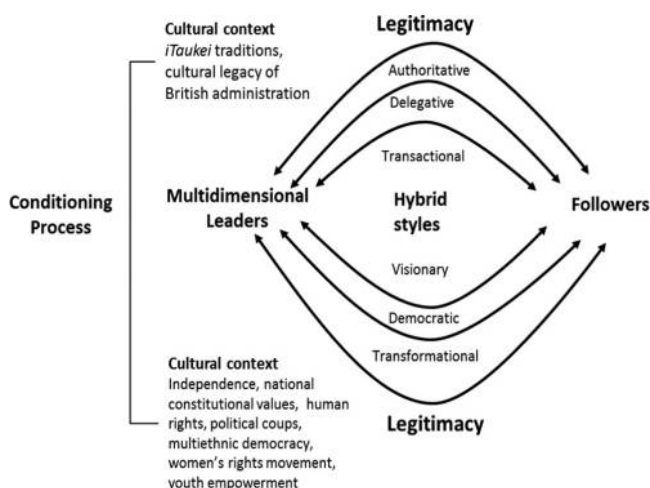
The patriarchal and authoritative nature of Fijian society shapes the expectations and behaviour of male leadership, as one participant boldly described himself:

I am the turaga ni koro. I'm in charge of the village. Anybody, even when the Minister comes here. It is part of the culture and it's a government rule too. Turaga ni koro are the main people in the village. I'm the doorway to the government. [P5]

An important, but less acknowledged, aspect of cooperative leadership is that women can become strong leaders. Female leaders in Fijian cooperatives may be equally directive and as self-assured as male leaders. One confident and outspoken female participant indicated her potential to exercise authoritative influence over her staff. She stated, "*I don't play haywire. If I said No it's a No.*" [P3]. This strong statement questions the stereotype of women as accommodating, inclusive and democratic leaders.

Discussion

The results of this study contribute valuable new understandings of the effects of an evolving culture in Fiji on styles of leading in cooperatives. Leadership does not operate as isomorphic actions, especially when societies are undergoing significant social, economic and/or political change. This finding reflects the effects of change in Pacific societies on local leadership traditions as proposed by [Hassall et al. \(2011\)](#). Societal changes in Fiji have effects on the local leadership culture which in turn influences the nature of organizational leadership in cooperatives and how leaders interact with their members in a culturally acceptable manner. Context-sensitivity and legitimacy of actions are important characteristics of the dialectic relationship between agents (leader/follower) in leadership. Legitimacy is a generalized assumption that the actions of an agent are culturally supported by people in the society ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Context sensitivity of leaders is viewed not only from the spatial but also temporal perspectives. Leaders adapt to changing situations strategically and appropriately to suit context, time or place. The findings from this study contribute new understandings of a hybrid leadership style of a multidimensional leader who has the capacity to vary the nature of their relationship to followers. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the effects of social context on the relationship between multidimensional leaders and followers.



Influence of
evolving
culture on
leadership

545

Figure 1.
Conditioning process
of obtaining
legitimacy through
Fijian hybrid
leadership styles

Dimensions of hybrid leadership: context-sensitivity and legitimacy of purpose

This study provides evidence of a hybrid leadership style which is context-sensitive and legitimate, thus, contributing new empirical evidence underlying the evolutionary view of culture (Rohlfer and Zhang, 2016). Contemporary leadership is developing in response to changes in the social, economic and political environment of Fiji, a finding which supports Griffin's (2006) observation that Fijian leaders construct realities by reflecting on past and current development experiences in their society. Emergence of alternative social and political arrangements has (re)shaped traditional leadership patterns in Fijian cooperatives. Some leadership styles employed in these cooperatives relate to the leadership patterns observed by Schmid (2008) in values-based organizations. We extend Schmid's (2008) work and observe a mix of different styles which are grafted onto the task-orientation tradition of transactional leadership which was embedded during the British colonial era. The expectation of authority associated with positions of power remains in Fiji; however, there is a growing expectation that new sites of influence are also appropriate. With lessons learned from past political instability, Fijian leaders perceive a need to empower young people, and acknowledge the importance of building the capacity of the youth population as the next generation of leaders (Vakaoti and Mishra, 2009). The national Constitution and the movement towards democracy, non-discrimination against gender, race and minorities shaped important Fijian leadership values. Cooperatives and similar socially responsible organizations continue to generate value for people who are disadvantaged, disempowered or displaced. Leaders are exposed to cooperative values and standards, for example, to treat one another equally, give communal support and help others in the community to prosper. These values and on-going changes establish legitimacy associated with the visionary, democratic and transformational aspect of the hybrid leadership observed in this study (see Figure 1).

In discussing how multidimensional leaders adapt to changing conditions, the leaders in this study demonstrate how they can maintain legitimacy and authority by adopting a hybrid leadership style. Legitimacy, as illustrated in Figure 1, confers status and prestige on leaders of organizations, including those who lead cooperatives. To maintain legitimacy, leaders of ethically responsible organizations must assert moral legitimacy while responding and adapting to new situations (Dart, 2004). Not only does innovation, and the

array of organizational models increase during times of societal change (Hambrick *et al.*, 2005), leaders also become institutional entrepreneurs in their quest to offer sustainable change that may be institutionalized within new societal structures and processes. Ruebottom (2013) illustrates how leaders adopt rhetorical strategies that create tensions and persuade others of their own and their organization's legitimacy. Thus, adopting a hybrid leadership style confers legitimacy in a traditional society where leaders must maintain connection with social and political traditions of leadership and at the same time establish an organizational agenda which provides relevant services to communities and people in need. Moreover, while adaptability is acknowledged as an essential aspect of effective strategic leadership (Goleman, 2000), the fluidity of interchange among different forms of leadership embraced by these cooperative leaders indicates the extent of their attention to the evolving nature of Fijian society.

Acknowledging that various contextual dimensions of society are changing, these leaders adjust to diverse circumstances and modify their behaviour to suit particular situations. Thus conditioning, as illustrated in Figure 1, is an important aspect of the leadership process and adaptation to a changing cultural context. This task of conditioning to a dynamic cultural context is attributed to both leaders and followers, given their dialectic relationship in the social process of leadership. Leadership in this context is not a static commodity, but rather an adaptive hybrid function which responds to the evolving local political, social, economic and cultural elements of society.

Context is a complex construct with multiple dimensions and relationships as shown in Figure 1. Smith and Stevens (2010) demonstrate that actions, motivations, behaviours and decisions are embedded in concrete and enduring relationships within a specific context. Local culture affects the way populations lead and self-organize into socially responsible organizations (Williams, 2007). In this study, the nature of organizational leadership is influenced by cultural traditions, age, gender, ethnicity and even the remote location in the Pacific Ocean. Our observation of the effects of cultural traditions and political systems on cooperatives practices has been confirmed previously in a comparative study of Turkey and the UK (Brady and Haugh, 2014). Although not noted specifically in this study, it is likely that embedded religious traditions would also influenced leadership as previously noted with Islamic context affecting business practices (Aloulou, 2016). Likewise, indigently is an important, but variable element within the cultural context of leadership. Our study in Fiji shows the influence of indigenous culture and demonstrates the evolution of the *iTaukei* traditional leadership which is deeply interwoven in the authoritative and delegative aspect of the hybrid leadership employed in cooperatives. In doing so, leaders who employ hybrid leadership are multidimensional and context-sensitive. They can vary their relationships with followers, not only in response to changing situations over time but to establish and maintain legitimacy in a dynamic local context. We urge researchers to further examine the effects of culture as a dynamic influencing element of leadership.

Conclusion

This study is an important step in gathering evidence of how leadership is affected by social norms, cultural practices and political arrangements in a developing country. By exploring Fijian cooperatives, we established a relationship between the changing culture and the hybrid form of leadership which is adopted to maintain connections between local leadership traditions and the need to provide new services effectively. Noting that the cultural context of leadership is complex, we find that multidimensional leaders have the capacity to adapt to social, economic, political and cultural changes in their society, and that a hybrid, context-sensitive style of leading is appropriate in a rapidly changing, or unstable

social context. Strategic leaders are multidimensional as long as they have the capacity to be context-sensitive, but they are genuinely ethical when they have the capacity to maintain the moral legitimacy of their actions when adapting and responding to their local environments. Effective leaders acknowledge changing contexts, adjust their behaviour strategically through conditioning and adopt hybrid styles of leading that are perceived as legitimate and conforming to societal norms.

These findings do not support an assumption that the local cultural context is static and may be ignored. Instead, we assert that since social norms and political, cultural and economic arrangements evolve over time, leadership and organizational studies researchers should not consider context as a static element, but rather should explicitly examine its effects. Context is specific and local and should be considered as a vital and variable element with significant, temporally related influences. Understanding how leadership functions in relation to the particular local context is an essential step towards establishing long-term organizational legitimacy and sustainability. This is particularly important for socially responsible and values-based organizations which require leaders to respect and respond to local cultural norms and values and adapt to societal changes.

There is need to further improve leadership capabilities by understanding how leaders adapt in changing environments. A better understanding of hybrid leadership behaviour would add value for policy makers in their quest for regional and local development. Future studies of hybrid values-based organizations in developing regions would especially add value since these nations would benefit greatly from culturally appropriate development. For developed countries, an improved understanding of legitimate hybrid leadership behaviour would be useful in facilitating organizational change and development; especially in societies where people are culturally sensitive and experiencing a changing cultural context of their social reality due to advanced political and economic reforms.

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