

The context behind the context: A Pacific leadership research *tok stori*

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This article takes a relational approach to Pacific leadership by presenting three layers of discussion. First, we provide findings from our research team members about the relationships between the Pacific community and school leaders' understandings of leadership. We include accounts of how leaders negotiate in context between forms of leadership from different domains. Second, we reflexively probe ideas of relationality, distance and closeness in leadership research by considering researchers' experiences of the research process. Third, we show how Indigenous oracles such as tok stori can provide space and opportunity to rethink leadership as the ethical negotiation of positionality tensions. The overall findings centre relationships as a key concern of leadership practice and research, and discussion of Pacific-origin ideas of leadership, activities where the relational context behind the context is ignored at one's peril.

Keywords: leadership, education, customary/kastom, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Marshall Islands

INTRODUCTION

Hallinger and Truong (2016) observe that 'relational theories of leadership have gained increased traction in the global discourse in education' (p. 677). Such traction is a welcome development for the Pacific region, where many relational ontologies are in place (Koya-

The context behind the context

Vaka'uta, 2017; Matapo, 2021; Sanga & Reynolds, 2019). Relational ontologies support leadership to be understood as reciprocal relationships of influence (McLeod, 2008) and as service to the community (Sanga, Johannson-Fua, et al., 2020), in education (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014) as elsewhere. By contrast, positional leadership is where leadership legitimacy derives from a position in a hierarchy to which a person is appointed – such as a job as a head teacher in a school. Such leadership tends to be uni-directional (top-down) and can have paternalistic tendencies (Sanders, 2014).

Education as an institution introduced under Western influence in the Pacific is a relational matter, integrated into webs of relationships in Pacific societies. Such integrations can be seen physically – schools are frequently built on sites determined by negotiations with local landowners – and socially – schools are often staffed by people related to the communities they serve. Because of that integration, more than one understanding of what leadership is or could be can be in place. For example, imported positional structures and the appointment protocols that accompany them may stress positional leadership as an individual concern; village-centred forms of leadership may stress communality.

Acknowledging this complexity, this article discusses the relationships between Western leadership theories and the understanding of leadership by communities in the Solomon Islands, Tonga and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). The data include collective knowledge sharing gathered in the field and subsequent material iteratively developed through exploration of the field data during a conference session. Like all research reports, the scope of this paper is context bound, representing our attention to context in time and space and translated through relationships and dialogue.

The paper takes a layered approach. The first layer centres on fieldwork information gifted by school and community leaders in the three Pacific jurisdictions. The aims of this layer include presenting research findings about school leaders' understandings of leadership as an institutional practice as it is negotiated in community contexts. The knowledge garnered for this layer derives from oral encounters between school leaders and researchers, activities covered by both locally framed and institutionally framed ethics, the latter deriving from University of the South Pacific (USP) protocols.

We take a reflexive turn in the second layer and pay attention to learning about and caring for knowledge gained through research activities, including those featured in the first layer of relationality and distance in leadership research. The reflections presented in this layer are the expressions of researchers offered in a conference session. In the third layer, we discuss the value of exploratory talk about research knowledge and show how Indigenous oracles, such as *tok stori* (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020), a Melanesian orality, can provide space and opportunity to rethink leadership. The data for this tri-partite exploration – research knowledge, reflexive attention to research practice, and exploration of orality – is drawn from a *tok stori* session within the 2021 OCIES Conference programme. The *tok stori* was structured around school leadership research enabled by the Development Leadership Program (DLP) and funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

During the conference *tok stori* session, questions regarding authority were asked: Who holds control in *tok stori*? Who can be a legitimate convenor of a *tok stori*? Why or when do people become legitimate in this context? The creative potential of this line of questioning subsequently emerged in the form of attention to the 'context behind the context' (Sanga, cited in Airini et al., 2010, p. 11); that is, what lies behind what can be seen in terms of

relationships, experiences, understandings and so on. We thank the questioner for starting a journey that has led to the article as it stands today.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our field research aimed to improve our knowledge of how leadership is understood in different Pacific cultural contexts, particularly, for this research, how school leaders and Indigenous communities across three Pacific nations view leadership. Our assumption was that, within Pacific societies, there are multiple domains relevant to how people live, relate and lead.

Sanga (2009) notes that, in the Melanesian mind, there are three 'masters': culture (or *kastom*), church and formalised institutions (including education). 'Each domain is legitimate, demands allegiance, and competes for loyalty with the others' (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019, p. 11). Understanding how various domains operate within the holism of a specific Pacific society is relevant to an area such as school leadership because of how education is contextually embedded. One value of research into this area stems from how agencies, such as donors and governments, often seek to strengthen education by attending to leadership. Sanga explains that, for improvement in this area, '[t]he need is for programme designers to appreciate better, the tensions between understanding of roles, rules and knowledge in [the various] domain[s]' (Sanga, 2009, p. 1). One of the overall aims of this paper's field research is to seek knowledge to enable deep contextualisation, so that intervention outcomes are effective and worthwhile to those on the ground. This is because contextualisation is the key to a good 'fit' between the intent and outcomes of leadership development programmes. In Pacific leadership research, a relevant orality or Indigenous conversational mode (Kovach, 2010) may be useful to frame the kinds of storying that can assist the development and collection of contextual knowledge (Sanga, Reynolds, Houma et al., 2021). The research approach adopted in our fieldwork was to investigate cross-domain relationships between leadership ideas through appropriate oracles. In Tonga, the team applied *talanoa* (Fa'avae et al., 2016); in Marshall Islands, *bwebwenato* (Jim et al., 2021); and in Solomon Islands, *tok stori* (Sanga et al., 2018). Because *tok stori* was also the mode named for the 2021 OCIES conference session '*Leadership negotiations in education: Stories from Oceania*', we offer a summary of the form here.

Tok stori

Tok stori is a Melanesian orality through which Melanesian connectedness is operationalised. As an everyday activity, *tok stori* shapes discursive group communication. It involves negotiation in the social world so that relationality, time, space and information come together to form a way of being (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021). *Tok stori* is habitually used to share what is known (Vella & Maebuta, 2018), is legitimised by its longevity and ubiquity (Brigg et al., 2015) and is an oral activity for problem-solving within *kastom* parameters (Evans et al., 2010).

A well-configured *tok stori* is an orally mediated relational activity in which meaning is located in narratives rather than understood strategically (Sanga, 2017). In *tok stori*, speakers and listeners construct a shared reality in a safe space attuned to relational harmony (Sanga, Reynolds, Houma, et al., 2021). Fluid power dynamics are an aspect of *tok stori* (Davidson, 2012; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Sanga et al., 2018). Speakers and their stories do not compete but contribute to mutual learning. Emotion as an aspect of truth-telling is integral to *tok stori* (Andersen, 2017) because each contribution is personally positioned. Listeners are expected to respond accordingly, although this can be with silence, gesture or words.

In research contexts, *tok stori* has been used in several ways: for critical reflection in adult education (Evans et al., 2010; Honan et al., 2012); as *toktok* in programme evaluation (Joskin, 2013); in the evaluation of literacy initiatives (Paulsen & Spratt, 2020); to investigate relational positionality (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019); as pedagogy in leadership development (Sanga, Maebuta, et al., 2020); and in articulating land rights (Stead, 2013). In the digital mode, as a way of understanding and practising communication in virtual environments, including through platforms such as video links, *tok stori* has been used to investigate ethics (Iromea & Reynolds, 2021), relationality (Sanga, Reynolds, Ormond, et al., 2021), oral literature, and leadership (Sanga, Johansson-Fua, et al., 2021).

The *tok stori* sessions central to this paper progressed through a shared video link that provided the platform for the presentation and discursive exploration of leadership research.

THE OCIES 2021 CONFERENCE TOK STORI

The OCIES 2021 conference *tok stori* was an invitation for researchers and other conference session participants to share their contextual expertise, probe that of others and weave a joint *tok stori* of leadership, research and learning. The session was intended to combine dissemination with new discursive knowledge generation. The narrative began with scene setting, progressed to school leadership research, moved on to dialogue about research as an activity and closed with a summary. The sections in this article largely follow that order; however, participants' offerings are sequenced using a thematic approach to acknowledge the weaving in *tok stori* in which recursive expression and thematic iteration are often aspects of exploration.

We thank conference session participants for agreeing to gift their comments to the scholarship as reciprocation for the gift of the field data. The session was recorded and transcribed, and contributions were thematically coded. We respect conference session participants' sanctity through anonymity. At the same time, we acknowledge the significance of individual experiences and backgrounds as context to contributions. To focus on the woven *stori* rather than the storytellers, categoric and relational information about speakers, such as gender and ethnicity, is included only when directly relevant to cited comments.

Layer #1: Leadership information gifted by school and community leaders

The *tok stori* was framed at the outset by the notion of the various domains present in Pacific societies. Education in the form of schooling sits in the institutional domain, while community leadership draws from *kastom* or the customary domain. The *tok stori* reveals how conceptions of leadership straddle domains. This line of argument can be elaborated by considering the community origins of school leaders' understandings of leadership, the embeddedness of school leaders in communities and the contextual nature of negotiations between school leaders and community leadership.

The community origins of school leaders' understandings of leadership

Four examples of the influence of *kastom* (customary) and church domains on school leaders' understandings of leadership can be given from the *tok stori*. These involve relational and ethical socialisation, the location of leadership in space and time and the usefulness of metaphors to understand flows of influence. Examples are variously drawn from the Solomon Islands, Tongan and RMI research arms as reported from the field to the conference *tok stori* by members of each research team.

Socialisation: Relational cohesion

In the *tok stori*, researchers explained that Solomon Islands school leaders recognise a role that demands they 'organise teachers and students and work together with members of the

community to implement programmes that will support and develop teaching and learning'. Researchers summarised field-based *tok stori* school leaders' recollections of their leadership socialisation. These focussed on the ways that *kastom* leadership informs school leadership. In the case of one leader, this involved:

Learning for my family . . . giving, caring and sharing, building good relationships with other leaders and people in the community, organising programmes that bring people together to promote peace and harmony, planning and working . . . to meet expectations of the community.

Contextual results of this understanding of leadership as described by the school leader and summarised by the research team member include that leader:

[H]as mentored her staff . . . worked to build good relationship with parents . . . talked with parents for them to send their children to school, and more so, offered to take care of children after classes for busy adults.

In this *kastom*-origin, community-focused understanding of school leadership, the significance of cohesion provokes the organisation of social activities. These provide opportunities for relationships to develop or be renewed. The school leader cares for relationships in education and the community setting while simultaneously downplaying the significance of domain boundaries – in this case the boundaries of the school. Staff, as members of the school community, are gifted time by the school leader through mentoring; the gift of 'personal' time by the school leader shows her exercising care for the broader community by offering needed childcare regardless of school hours. This *stori* suggests that when influenced by *kastom*, the focus of leadership in the institutional domain is relational, external to the leader, and not fixed within institutional boundaries but extends to relationships beyond the school.

Socialisation: Ethics

For school leaders in the Solomon Islands, socialisation into leadership ethics occurs in the *kastom* and church domains. In the *tok stori*, researchers that reported the Solomon Islands school leaders' understandings of leadership often reference *kastom* and church-derived ethics. For example:

[Leaders] rely on what they have been groomed in—what they have learned in terms of important qualities and values . . . including being honest and fair, delegation of duties, trust and collaboration. . . . These cultural practices and values are what they brought with them to the vocation. Many rely on Christian principles as well . . . in terms of leading and managing schools.

Values from *kastom* and church domains travel with the Solomon Islands school leaders to underpin thinking and inspire practice in their school. The explanation of one school leader given to the researchers captures the ethical element well:

My upbringing in the church environment influences me to do things in a more God-fearing way.

To be God-fearing is to act in accordance with a moral code that transcends institutional boundaries so that values transmitted by socialisation in church apply to school leadership practice. The social harmony encouraged by the ethic of love within Christian ethics also sits well with the focus on relational cohesion promoted in *kastom* leadership. Consequently, school leadership has reference points and significance in spiritual and cultural terms as well as in social and physical contexts.

Time and space

Cross-domain influences on educational leadership were also revealed to the *tok stori* by researchers from Tonga. A central concept underpinning Tongan leadership, *fatongia* (duty/obligation) (see, e.g., Tofuaipangai & Camilleri, 2016), informs Tongan school leaders' understandings of leadership. This element of the *tok stori* extends the discussion of inter-domain leadership by reference to time and space.

As explained by a researcher from the Tongan arm of the research, where cultural origins such as *fatongia* are involved, school leadership is:

[N]ot necessarily tied to qualifications but is tied to relational aspects and values . . . [It is] tied to commitment to work . . . deep commitment to your community.

Although it can be translated as 'obligation', 'For the receiver, obligation is not about coercion, lack of choice or mandatory behaviour; it is a gift, a pleasure, not a burden' (Tofuaipangai & Camilleri, 2016, p. 61).

Obligation is a relational matter that implies a giver, a recipient and a relational state redolent of the gift. In the *tok stori*, researchers revealed how leadership as *fatongia* transcends the here and now.

Fatongia . . . is important as part of leadership . . . there is a sense in which it is inherited . . . someone is there before you and you are only there temporarily, and somebody is going to come after you. Also . . . stewardship—you are looking after this in your time. This is linked again to the influence of elders, and mentoring leaders.

When understood as *fatongia*, leadership is framed inter-generationally because school leaders recognise a responsibility to the past. Such responsibility raises the stakes for their leadership while assuring them of the value of their contribution. The notion of stewardship also indicates that the roles and relationships associated with school leadership are entrusted to leaders by the community as an opportunity to contribute to constructing the future. Thus, leadership is a matter of legacy as well as inheritance. School leadership informed by community understandings in this way transcends the present space and time. It takes place in:

[A] complex, messy, negotiable space linked to the past with our ancestors, the land and the people we have come from . . . as well as linking to the future, our children.

Metaphor

Another way of approaching the relationships between leadership in institutional and other domains was contributed to the *tok stori* from the RMI part of the research. This involved unpacking the cultural references of *kajoor wōt wōr* and *wōdde jeppel*, which refer to collaboration or, as explained by a Marshallese researcher, 'the Marshallese context of community responsibility towards student learning'. In the *tok stori*, this concept shows how metaphor is helpful when approaching the influence of the traditional domain on the institutional domain. The researcher, also a member of RMI communities, explained:

We are using this concept as very important when we are dealing with both community leaders and the school leaders. We can think of when we are building a canoe and house building. Every time that the community is doing this kind of task, it involves all the people in the community. The whole clan . . . And this relates to how we are delivering education to the children in the community. And in our school system today, the concept of no child left behind also requires the whole community's effort in raising and educating a child.

This *tok stori* contribution shows how metaphors of customary communal practice are valuable for understanding the influence of tradition on leadership in the institutional domain. The metaphors show that traditional Marshallese leadership is centred on the collective. When creating resources, people participate in their different roles, but everyone has their contribution. The skills and knowledge required have been passed across generations so that

the society is sustainable. When applied to school leadership, the metaphors suggest that leaders should pursue education that is inclusive, useful to the village and beneficial to the group. School leadership may be a specialised activity, but it is not a solo concern—partnership with the community is essential

Put together, the elements of relational cohesion, ethics, the transcendence of time and space, and metaphorical representations of leadership illustrate the profound influence of leadership from the *kastom* and church domains on school leadership in the institutional domain. Within the general notion of influence, some core features play out in various contexts and contextual differences.

In general, school leadership influenced by *kastom* and church is enacted through relationships between people, including those in the community, and seeks the benefit of the collective. It has an outward-facing stance and ethics of responsibility to others that extend beyond management of the here and now. For school leadership, this means that leading is as much a matter of community relationships as it is the exercise of skills in teaching and learning or management.

Consistency in leadership supports the integration of school and community because the ethics and values by which leadership is judged travel across domains. School leadership is relevant to community sustainability, so transferring leadership ideas and skills is significant and worthy of attention. Leadership socialisation can involve family, church membership, participation in communal activities where leadership can be observed and understood, or professional mentorship.

The embeddedness of school leaders in communities

Tok stori participants explained the depth of influence of *kastom* and church domains on the institutional domain. A common key element is the embeddedness of school leaders in communities, an aspect of the integration of schools within communities in Pacific societies. Two examples contribute to a nuanced picture of how community embeddedness shapes how various school leaders operationalise their leadership. These address the significance of presence and the effect of reciprocal relationships.

Presence

The physical presence of school leaders in their wider school community contributes to the significance of *kastom* and church domains in school leadership. Indeed, school leaders can also be community or *kastom* leaders, such as a Solomon Islands ECE supervisor who:

[M]aintains connections to . . . community by giving advice and making decisions over land resources.

A researcher from the Tongan part of the research contributed this account of the significance of presence to the *tok stori*:

In our context, the life of a school leader is very transparent because there is no division between your personal life and your professional life. You are judged 24/7. What you do after hours, you are still going to be accountable for that as well as what you do inside the classroom. People in the community know what you get up to on Friday night, and they won't see you at church on Sunday, and then they'll see you on a Monday and remind you.

This explains how presence in the community maintains coherence between a leader's actions in their positional role and their leadership in everyday life. A teacher may be a leader in school with a particular kind of expertise, and they may have authority in the classroom, but their leadership legitimacy requires appropriately sanctioned behaviour in a range of other community contexts, including family and church. Because of the way school leadership transcends institutional time and space, the consistent application of ethics in behaviour on the part of a school leader is essential for relational cohesion and community support. That is,

how behaviour in the community embodies (or undermines) ethics can legitimise (or erode) leadership legitimacy in the institutional domain.

However, the way leadership is framed in school as an institution does not necessarily reflect the embeddedness of school leaders in communities. A Tongan contribution to the *tok stori* problematised institutional practice in the light of school leaders' presence in the community.

The accountability put on a school leader . . . is so much more widespread [than school boundaries] . . . Transparency and accountability . . . is something we don't often recognise . . . in our strategic plans or policies. They are part of the social contract and they are part of the understanding, the relationality and the social environment that we live in.

This element of the *tok stori* suggests that while *kastom*, church-founded leadership and presence in the community are influential mediators in the construction of institutional leadership, institutional practice can sometimes work in another direction. A narrow institutional conception of leadership may mute the holistic nature of Pacific societies and erode the integration of education and community. The construction of tension between following policy and institutional strategy and furthering the integration of education and community may encourage unintended separation of school and community.

Reciprocal relationships

The communities in which school leaders are embedded may be active in their relationship with schools and extend their leadership into the institutional domain. Communities sometimes set expectations for schools and work to support the integration of school and community. This contribution to the *tok stori* from an RMI researcher is a case in point:

Community leaders felt they needed to strengthen collaboration through PTA (Parent/Teacher Association) meetings and training workshop to inform teachers, parents and community leaders on roles and responsibilities—linking child and school, increas[ing] the teaching and learning network behind the classroom, connecting local experts on knowledge and skills that are relevant and meaningful [such as] legends, [knowledge of the] livelihood of man and women, and also history.

This *stori* suggests the significance of reciprocal relationships as *kastom* influences on school leadership and the importance of communication and gifting in reciprocation. The PTA is a key structure through which communication is focused. When working well, a PTA can provide a forum where a relevant Indigenous oracy frames the respectful exchange of views, understandings and information, thereby cementing school-community relationships. The *stori* shows that the wider community understands the benefits of integrating community and school and the value to children of traditional knowledge. A 'network behind the classroom' involves a web of complex relational responsibility through which the community can contribute to education—in this example, in the form of legends, skills and histories. Community contributions illustrate the value placed on education beyond the institutional domain. It also illustrates that communities can offer leadership, for example, by supporting a place-based curriculum with relational resources.

The presence of school leaders in community and the potential of reciprocal relationships between community and school are complementary explanatory features of the influence of *kastom* and church domains on leadership in the institutional domain. Once again, the emphasis is on cohesive relationships and the communal good.

Negotiations between school leaders and community leadership

In this section, three episodes from the *tok stori* illustrate a range of domain-related challenges a Pacific school leader may encounter and the kinds of ethical and social navigation required. The examples involve negotiating conflicts of understanding and the ownership of resources.

Conflicts of understanding

The first example, given by a Solomon Islands researcher, shows how expectations and understandings founded in one domain can cause issues in another. Problems for a school leader occurred when landowners on whose land a school was built expected their children to access free education and had not paid fees for five years of schooling. When a new school leader refused to accept this situation:

[H]e was bashed and threatened because he enforced that every student must settle their school fees. With this conflict of understanding, the school was closed for a week because the principal had to run away to the town for safety.

This illustrates what can happen when legitimacy for decision-making is sourced in different domains. On the one hand, land ownership creates *kastom* authority; on the other hand, authority is invested positionally in the school leader. This clash presents practical and financial issues and requires negotiation.

The solution described in the *tok stori* shows how leadership legitimacy from church and *kastom* provides enough clarification for the conflict of understanding to be resolved, and continuity of education assured:

[With] the beauty of having the community chief, the tribal chief and the church leaders in the community, the problem was solved, and classes resumed.

This points to community cohesion as an enabler in how leadership from *kastom* and church domains are an asset within the institutional domain.

Resources

How resource ownership is understood in communities may result in school leaders navigating institutional boundaries. For example:

A head stated community would just go into the school and collect water from the school tank. When the tanks are empty the children do not have water.

In many Pacific locations, such as this Solomon Island example, tank water is an essential resource required for sustainable education. In times of shortage or as a matter of convenience, community members may avail themselves of water. The school leader must decide whether to provide school water to the community or protect the continuation of education.

Another finite resource is time. From the Solomon Islands research part, the *tok stori* learned that to avoid conflict with *kastom*, especially in rural communities:

[W]hen a person dies, a school must close for many days depending on the cultural practices of the community. For some . . . the mourning period may last for ten days.

Cohesive relationships with churches require negotiation. For example, in the Solomon Islands settings:

[C]hurch leadership expected the school to be closed [in term time] . . . for instance on Saint's day, church anniversaries or conferences.

Being embedded in community may be a resource that offers routes through these complex negotiations. The *tok stori* learned that some:

[S]chool leaders have a way of negotiating *kastom* and culture . . . and make use of cultural practices that can appease tensions in the running and management of the school.

Taken together, these examples of negotiation suggest that leadership and ethics drawn from *kastom* and church domains are vital assets for school leaders who value coherent relationships between schools and their communities. Trade-offs over resources, such as water and time, may be needed to maintain a balance between educational continuity and

community-school relations, but the ethics involved need to make sense in community and focus on school priorities.

Layer#2 Reflecting on leadership research during and after the process

Having presented themes from the *tok stori* that show leadership matters travelling across domain boundaries, we now turn attention to the *tok stori* narrative about how knowledge about leadership was generated through the research process. The concept of distance, which informed the *tok stori*, is used to structure discussion.

Distance in research

In the *tok stori*, a New Zealand-based researcher explored the experience of supporting research in the RMI through the concept of distance:

Looking at a piece of data . . . we asked ourselves, what does it mean? . . . Suddenly, the distance between us in New Zealand and the context appeared. We tried to think about . . . things like time and physical distance . . . what does time actually mean to a school principal who has to travel four hours on a canoe to talk about educational leadership with someone from USP? We tried to map what distance looked like for ourselves.

Distance here appears as a challenge to research. It is layered and includes physical space, the necessity of digital communication in COVID-affected research and aspects of the various roles enacted by researchers and participants.

Another *tok stori* participant elaborated on the concept of distance from her experience:

[A]cademics were writing about physical distance and . . . it was just so simplistic because . . . somebody is in the same space as others and they are all talking the same language, but they are not communicating with each other and nobody is understanding. . . . For me, [distance is] more conceptual, how people understand the world because of their cultural context or cultural heritage.

All forms of distance are relational by nature and can affect how ideas of leadership travel from educational and cultural communities to the research community. Physical distance emphasises the relative position of bodies, but cultural distance implies that researchers need to shift their minds to make claims about leadership that have contextual relevance. Attention to contextual validity means taking stock of ways that research can proactively reduce distance in its various forms.

Reflexivity and distance

One *tok stori* participant offered a speculative inventory of approaches to reducing distance in research:

How do you close the distance? This got us thinking about . . . language . . . custom . . . paradigms . . . metaphors. That forced us into a position to consider who we are and what we are . . . What is the relationship that is needed here?

In this account, the key to reducing distance in research is relational. Indeed, the relational notion of ‘walking towards’ as a deliberate strategy that surfaced in the *tok stori* places primary responsibility on the researcher to approach the context with humility. This includes interrogating what close-to-context on-the-ground research partners are asked to do and extends from the initiation to the dissemination phase.

Is it OK for [local researchers] to approach a traditional leader and ask a certain type of question? . . . What happens to that knowledge and understanding that is shared then? Is it ethical? Who is going to benefit and decide what the value of the benefit is?

Attending to the context behind the context in this way can reduce distance because nuanced, distance-orientated questions of this nature provide a path towards greater mutual understanding and appreciation.

Direction and distance

Another *tok stori* participant developed the idea of reducing distance through the notion of direction, which was experienced in another research initiative. He explained that:

When we tried to engage the community . . . somehow it is not sinking in for the parents to understand why education is important to go to school. . . . Not until we start . . . shifting from education to the child and they start talking about the child as the gift from God and as the successor to look after the land and the forest and the generation after them . . . We must shift the conversation from the head to the heart because in my culture, the head is less important than the *sae*, the heart.

In this case, changing the approach's direction brought the research's core closer to the participants' lives and interests.

Similarly, another participant storied about her experiences in women's leadership in Melanesia. She explained that in her catalytic research:

We have to be very sensitive to the local protocols and the church . . . We have to embrace the local principles if we are going to use things from an educator's perspective . . . to lead change.

Some of the distance between an educator's priorities and those of communities can be bridged through protocols, values and relationships.

These contributions to the *tok stori* indicate that distance in research is reduced where research values participants' concerns and ways of thinking and acting. Consequently, self-awareness is important for researchers to appreciate cultural resources that are already part of the context to close distance by 'walking towards'.

Layer #3 Exploring leadership through the dialogic activity of *tok stori*

The third layer of this paper pays attention to the value of exploratory dissemination of *tok stori*—the approach used to garner the data discussed above. Like all Indigenous oralities, *tok stori* is ubiquitous and well-understood in its Melanesian home. It is also being adapted to embrace digital communication. In this paper, one value of the form in the digital space is as a discursive exercise to appreciate participants' experiential wisdoms as oral literature (Sanga, Johansson-Fua, et al., 2021). The narratives offered to represent the three arms of the research and, in addition, the understandings of people with a wide range of experiences of Pacific leadership. The *tok stori* enabled the intersection of these perspectives.

In research, *tok stori* provides opportunities to reduce distance, especially for those practised in its use. One participant introduced a narrative from another context to explain how the distance between the researcher and participants can be managed. In this example, the potential distance between research actors attendant on uncomfortable disclosure in gendered contexts was managed through *tok stori*:

Sometimes they [women participants] organise tok stori within the tok stori . . . a small tok stori taking place within the women themselves—and they pass information to the brave one to give it to the bigger tok stori.

When *tok stori* takes place, there is always a context behind the context of which gender can be an element. In this case, participants worked to limit the effects of distance.

Time is a factor that can reduce distance so *tok stori* works to provide a deep exploratory space. Thinking about the 2021 OCIES Conference dissemination session, a session participant noted:

The context behind the context

Most people in this room are related as colleagues, as wantoks, as kainga in one way and another . . . even when we are silent, we understand each other and why we are silent . . . Reading our relationships across time and across space requires us as researchers, as academics to be humble enough to know how to listen and . . . to know this is a journey we are taking together.

Tok stori is iterative and continues across time through the relationships developed in its safe space. Because it pays attention to listening, values humility and sees the construction of a woven narrative as an element on the relational journey of (academic) life. *Tok stori* is helpful in explorations that value leadership as a relational rather than a positional activity. Deep connection and an ongoing sense of oneness are possible in *tok stori* so that shared ideas of leadership informed from multiple viewpoints can construct nuanced and responsive ideas about leadership.

As a final reflection, as described above during the conference session, a question was asked regarding positional legitimacy to ‘lead’ by convening the *tok stori*. This implied that legitimacy in matters of Pacific leadership derives from ethnicity. Categorical ideas of positionality such as this tend towards keeping people apart because they locate some as ‘inside’ and others as ‘outside’. However, appreciating the ‘context behind the context’ means appreciating that leadership is symptomatic of life as multi-layered, complex and not always available to our senses; that everyone’s understanding is necessarily partial; and that creating space for new understandings can serve one well. In *tok stori* and leadership research, taking account of the context behind the context can mean that speaking is not necessarily an act legitimised by one’s position as defined by categorical markers. Complexity exists so that, for example, a speaker can be a ‘talking chief’, facilitating as an act of service because ‘the chief will not start the ceremony’. While some have explored the approach of relational positionality (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019) when negotiating the complexities of how people are together in research (and beyond), at this *tok stori*, a speaker noted:

For me it’s better to understand this as relationships—researcher relationships—where you are on a journey and at some point, you may be facing a particular direction and you are walking along that path as part of a bigger journey. If we understood our experiences as being on journeys, we are likely to appreciate the complexities of the worlds we straddle every day.

In this understanding, focusing leadership claims on relationships provides ethical negotiation of any positionality tensions that may seem to exist. When considering Pacific leadership, relationality is the common thread that straddles domains. Thus, it makes sense for leadership researchers to seek to reduce ‘distance’ through relational activity. The same logic values relationally-focused oralities such as *tok stori* as exploratory platforms capable of plumbing the complexities of Pacific leadership.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, an account of a conference *tok stori* session has made possible a layered discussion. Leadership emerged as relationally-centred practice constructed through and across the domains inherent in Pacific societies. As reported by researchers in the *tok stori*, field data make a case for more contextually aware approaches to school leader development in Pacific societies. The significance of relational cohesion resulting from effective leadership is an important aspect of being a school leader. Acknowledgment of the situated (as opposed to professional) socialisation of ethics for Pacific school leaders, present as they are in community, is an aspect of this cohesion. Relational cohesion also provides a key to understanding the importance of reciprocity, leadership metaphors and conflict-resolution strategies for school leaders. All these aspects of school leadership are contextually informed.

For those who seek to develop Pacific leaders, attention to aspects of context such as *kastom* understandings of leadership, the implications of living in communities in which one leads and ideas about resource ownership would assist in providing nuanced support.

Pacific leadership is practised in context and thus needs to make sense in situ. Leadership that produces disunity is dysfunctional and requires renegotiation. School and other leaders would benefit from opportunities to consider how to perform negotiations regarding leadership across domain boundaries successfully. One way to achieve this would be to listen for and respond to the leadership stories of others.

In addition, the paper has related the accounts of those involved in Pacific leadership research. These accounts describe strategies to reduce distance so that research relationships will be close, understandings clear and benefits shared. These strands point to the importance of understanding leadership research in the region as a relational activity in which the complexity and significance of any data gained are likely to be affected by the relative distance between the researcher and, in this case, the leader. All pictures of leadership drawn from research are partial, but there is an ethical obligation on researchers to develop relational closeness to better support the Pacific communities they wish to serve. A significant aspect of research with ethical implications is reflexivity. When a leadership researcher attempts to 'walk towards' community, the focus must be on relationships, not data, an element of research that may or may not follow. Time, stories, presence and closeness are all gifts to be much treasured—in digital *tok stori* as in field research.

Finally, *tok stori* in the conference setting has provided rich exploratory dissemination data on Pacific leadership because *tok stori* is a relationally manifested safe space where the ideas and participants are respected, valued and treasured—as are participants. All questions are opportunities to learn in a *stori* that continues after any specific session has ended. Indeed, this paper continues the *stori* and, when later discussed, will be continued in its turn. Together these threads illustrate the value of applying relational theories to leadership in Pacific life, Pacific leadership research and exploring ideas through Pacific Indigenous oracy.

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