Reframing the Conflict in Fiji: Economic and Transpersonal Frameworks for Peace

Harris Friedman
Saybrook Graduate School

Reframing the Conflict in Fiji:
Economic and Transpersonal Frameworks for Peace

Harris Friedman, Ph.D.

Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center

Reframing is presented as a psychological technique applicable to facilitating change leading to conflict resolution and the achievement of peace. The current conflict in Fiji is discussed as a case study of one such application. Fijian problems have been commonly attributed to racial and ethnic divides that are not easily amenable to change. An intervention providing an alternative understanding of these conflicts, namely that they are better seen as due to competing economic models, is described. The scientific transpersonal perspective is presented as another alternative framework, seen as especially applicable to religious conflicts, which potentially provides an inclusive way to reconcile differences. It is concluded that reframing might be useful in a wide range of conflicts through providing integrative frameworks that change the level and content of divisive discourse.

Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch defined reframing as "to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the 'facts' of the same situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning" (in Segal, 2001, p. 90). Reframing has been used in many counseling and psychotherapy interventions, most notably Eriksonian approaches (e.g., Haley, 1973), and has important implications for facilitating peace. When oppositional sides become polarized to the point where violence is seen not only as a viable but perhaps the only available option, often the underlying dynamic is an impasse in the worldviews of the participants in the conflict. These require more than mere bargaining in which conflicting sides are compromising. Rather they require solutions changing the dynamics from lose–lose, which are always part of mutual compromise, into win–win outcomes. Reframing is a technique that can provide such synergy.

One research approach to understanding how this can operate stems from the classic model proposed by Lewin (1951) in which successful change involves three stages: "unfreezing…moving to the new level…and freezing" (p. 228). Vallacher and Wegner (1985) expanded this notion into action identification theory in which an existing equilibrium, such as a stable worldview, must first be disrupted in order to have a meaningful change that allows regaining a new equilibrium. A recent example demonstrating how this can be applied is the work of Davis and Knowles (1999) in which reframing is shown as effective in influencing behavioral change.

In this paper, I discuss reframing as a psychological tool to address some of the complex difficulties in Fiji, a nation demographically polarized and torn by resulting conflicts, in order to facilitate peaceful solutions of its many problems. The approach offered stems from my research (e.g., Van Deusen, Mueller, Jones, & Friedman, 2002) and consulting involvements over the past decade in Fiji, including my involvement as one of the founders of an organization in Fiji that has provided intensive training to the majority of the current Fijian cabinet members, as well as to many of the country's top business leaders. This consulting has focused on designing and implementing appropriate models for economic development at the local and national level. I also speculate about the possible role of transpersonal psychology in providing an overarching perspective through which reframing religious conflicts, some of the most daunting bases of global

strife, could lead to a more peaceful world. Finally, I discuss how the type of solution applied in Fiji can be expanded, for example to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in ways that could be similarly useful.

Background on Fiji

Fiji has a bifurcated ethnic composition in which a little more than half of the population are native Fijians and slightly more than 40 percent are Fijian Indians, based on an estimated population of under a million people. There are also various minorities, including Chinese, Europeans, and other Pacific Islanders. These demographics are the consequence of British colonialism, in which indentured Asian Indians were brought to Fiji to work in agriculture and other industries—since the native Fijians could not be coerced into such roles. Native Fijians typically resisted Westernization, pursuing more traditional village ways, while the Fijian Indians emulated the British—resulting in the emergence of two divergent Fijian cultures.

When the British left Fiji, many conflicts ensued. For example, the Fijian Indians became, as a group, more Western in culture, and controlled the majority of professional and business endeavors in the nation. However, the majority of native Fijians retained their traditional village lifestyle, as well as collective ownership by villages of more than 80 percent of the land (Finin & Wesley-Smith, 2001). This disparity became the basis for much of the ongoing national conflicts. Although the majority of the Western press, as well as many Fijians (both native and Indian) attribute the various crises in Fiji as due to racial and ethnic tensions, there are other more useful interpretations.

It is undeniable, however, that racial and ethnic factors are at play in these conflicts. For example, the differential appearance of the two peoples is striking. Though both tend to be dark skinned, the native Fijians are a large people among whom males are commonly heavily muscled and females are admired for their size. In contrast, the Fijian Indians are, on average, a small and slender people. This lends to ready stereotyping across the two cultures. Also, despite that there are some noteworthy cultural similarities, ethnic differences are often magnified by members of the two groups. For example, both cultures share in the rich religious tradition of fire walking. However, this is often seen as a source of contention rather than being perceived as common ground. Specifically, I witnessed both sides, rather than mutually respecting the similar-ities of their rituals, frequently disparaging each other's fire walking as inauthentic. For example, there were accusations from the native Fijians that the coals used by the Fijian Indians were prepared in a way such that they were not really very hot (by being covered with ashes) and corresponding accusations from the Fijian Indians that the native Fijians used a protective balm on their feet.

When first visiting Fiji while involved in consulting to the hospitality industry during the early 1990s, I met with a group of Fijian hotel workers and immediately hit the impasse between the two cultures. When, in a team-building group I was facilitating, I referred to a Fijian Indian using the term, "Fijian Indian," I was rebuffed, as follows: "Sir, I am not a Fijian Indian, just a Fijian. My family has lived in Fiji for many generations." In contrast, a native Fijian replied, "I partially agree; you are not a Fijian Indian. You are an Indian whose ancestors were brought to my country by the British. And you are a guest in my land who must recognize you are neither Fijian nor Fijian Indian, just Indian." Similarly, I noticed how the prevalent division of labor in hotels mirrored rifts in Fijian society. For example, tourists who come to Fiji are often greeted by native Fijians in traditional garb with warm "Bulas," the indigenous hello and goodbye. Likewise, the majority of the front office workers, wait staff, and others who interact directly with visitors are native Fijian—communicating the sense of "place" to tourists. However, the Fijian Indian workers, who perform the majority of the professional and technical functions, mainly worked behind the public scene.

With the recent coup in Fiji, in which a democratically elected Fijian Indian leader was replaced with a native Fijian, conflicts have reached precipitous proportions. Without going into the complex dynamics behind the change in government, it is sufficient to state that the situation there is extremely difficult and both sides of the divide have legitimate concerns and grievances.

Reframing the Fijian Conflict

When problems are blamed on immutable racial categories, there is no room for reconciliation. Similarly, when difficulties are blamed on ethnicity, the situation is also change resistant. In the case of Fiji, if the conflict remains defined as one of race and ethnicity, little positive is likely to emerge—since these are deeply ascribed characteristics not amenable to

change. One potentially useful strategy is to reframe these problems into a less emotional discourse through looking for common ground to synergistically pose solutions.

Much of my work in Fiji has focused on reframing the fundamental differences between the Fijian Indians and native Fijians as due to culturally different and competing economic models—since such models can be discussed relatively dispassionately, and reconciled, whereas discussing racial and ethnic attributions is typically counterproductive. This work has occurred in a variety of settings, including in one-on-one coaching, small groups, and large workshops. Specifically, I have advocated that the primary differences between the Fijian Indian and native Fijian groups are better seen as due to a conflict between individual and collective capitalism (Friedman, Glover, & Avegalio, 2002). In this sense, the traditional collective economy of the native Fijian village, despite the ever-growing influence of modernism, is currently a form of collective capitalism. In contrast, the Fijian Indians have assumed a British individualistic form of capitalism. These competing economic models result in many conflicts that are too easily misattributed to racial and ethnic causes.

I previously illustrated this in a case study through describing how a Western expatriate manager in Fiji perceived problems with the native Fijian work ethic (Glover, Friedman, & Jones, 2002). The manager stated he had asked a local village chief to send three men to clear a field, with each man to receive a payment for eight hours' work. However, the entire group of 40 able-bodied men from the village showed up. The expatriate wanted only three and consequently asked the chief to send the remainder back to the village. The chief, however, requested that all 40 could do the work quickly and the payment could be made to the communal fund that helped all in the village collectively. Not understanding this collective approach, the expatriate sent all the men away and, instead, hired three Fijian Indian workers from the city who were more comfortable with an individual model of capitalism, illustrating the clash of different work values and productivity models. The result was that the manager's selection of the Fijian Indians fueled mutual resentments—from the native Fijians toward both the manager and the Fijian Indians whose competing labor deprived the village of needed resources, and back from the manager and Fijian Indians, who perceived the native Fijian behavior through the stereotypes of Western culture as laziness (i.e., not individually willing to do a "full day's work for a full day's pay").

Adding to the problem of competing economic models is a deep Western-based ethnocentrism that tends to deprecate native Fijian culture. I previously illustrated this in a case study comparing native Fijian ways of fishing with modern ways embraced by Fijian Indians (Friedman, Glover, & Avegalio, 2002). Traditionally, all able-bodied members of a native Fijian village will collectively go into the ocean, forming a large circle as the tide recedes. Gradually they close their circle, trapping the fish as they become stranded with the withdrawing tide; then, all that is needed is to gather the fish. This method provides much greater yield than using individual fishing poles and is likely one of the world's most productive resource-gathering techniques. Yet many Indian Fijians scoff at this "primitive" fishing technique.

Valuing cultural differences, rather than devaluing them, is essential for the type of reframing that can lead to peace. In Lewin's (1951) model, which starts with "unfreezing," first the ethnocentric belief that "my way is the best way" has to be challenged. Again, it is easier to challenge, or unfreeze, economic models that are less central to core worldview than assumptions about race or ethnicity. However, I am not implying that these are easy to confront, since they are implicitly held, but they are less value-laden than attributions based on race or ethnicity.

Applying reframing, during Lewin's (1951) second stage of establishing change, I have advocated that Fiji needs to free itself of the burden of other cultures' economic models and create its own unique unifying model that is sustainable among all of its constituents (Friedman, Glover, & Avegalio, 2002). This is quite different from accepting uncritically the extant Western models that are culturally inappropriate for Fiji. I have illustrated this by presenting a number of alternative economic models to those prevailing in the West—such as ones that are demonstrating success in non-Western cultures (e.g., the government-directed capitalism of Singapore) or that are emerging with promise of success (e.g., the modified Communist model in the Peoples Republic of China). Hopefully, as a uniquely Fijian economic model emerges, the divisiveness within Fiji will ameliorate, facilitated through reframing the bases of Fijian conflict as primarily economic.

Reframing Using a Transpersonal Perspective

Economics, however, is not the whole story. The role of spirituality is also crucial to any successful reframing of Fiji's conflicts. For example, Williksen-Bakker (2002) recognized that, though economic differences underlie many of Fiji's conflict, this fact has to be viewed in a wider frame than economics as usually understood in the West. For example, the importance of the native Fijian sense of "vanua," emphasizing a spiritual connection between people and the land, has to be considered, in contrast to the more Western notion of land held by most Fijian Indians, which views it primarily as a resource from which to profit. The implications of these differences are profound when it comes to decisions such as whether or not to timber old-growth forests.

Similarly, Ewins (1998) emphasized how the Fijian conflicts have roots in deep traditions more than in race or ethnicity. Likewise, Brison (2001) discussed how native Fijian identity is constructed through such traditions, particularly the kava ("yaqona") ceremonies—and, incidentally, how native Fijians use reframing as a traditional way of reconciling regional, tribal, and social class conflicts. Bosson (2000) also explored the role of traditions, mainly through festivals, as part of nation-building and reconciliation in Fiji. And Norton (2000) discussed how reconciliation at the Fijian national level must occur through dialogue that allows for accommodation of contending worldviews. Thus there are a number of convergent strands of thought pointing in a common direction for healing the rifts in Fiji, namely through the use of reframing emphasizing the role of spirituality.

I speculate that transpersonal psychology, which addresses spirituality from a scientific perspective, provides a possible avenue for establishing the most solid common ground on which to deeply reframe Fijian conflicts. The focus of transpersonal psychology involves an expansion of the perceived self as being "beyond (*trans*) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, *psyche*, and cosmos" (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, p. 3). Grof, for example, discussed his view of transpersonal psychology as involving a temporal-spatial expansion of the self beyond that of the corporeal-physical boundaries of the "skin-encapsulated ego existing in a world of separate beings and objects" (1992, p. 91). After reviewing 37 definitions of transpersonal psychology, Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) concluded that they commonly focused on "the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendental states of consciousness" (p. 91). Braud (1998) aptly described the meanings of "trans" in transpersonal psychology with a metaphor:

> The visible parts of trees in a dense forest seem to be separate entities until one looks beneath the surface of the earth and finds the extensive, interconnected root systems that bind the trees together. The peaks of mountains shrouded in mist seem isolated and unconnected until the mist melts away, revealing the common lower continuities that previously had been obscured. (p. 39)

Congruent with these approaches to transpersonal psychology, I proposed a transpersonal construct called "self-expansiveness" both to describe the potential of personal identity to expand through self-conception and to provide a corresponding empirical method to research the self-concept from such a perspective (Friedman, 1983). Studies done to critically examine the validity of the construct and its associated measure (i.e., the Self-Expansiveness Level Form; Friedman, 1983) have generally provided support for its scientific utility (e.g., Friedman & MacDonald, 2002; MacDonald, Gagnier, & Friedman, 2000).

I have become increasingly convinced that the human capacity to construct itself in ways that transcend individualistic limitations is salient to addressing Fijian conflicts. Specifically, there are no limits to how we conceptualize ourselves. As we can identify with only our isolated selves, as biological beings, we can also narrowly identify with our allegedly racial or ethnic roots. Alternatively, we can learn to identify in more expansive ways, such as with a sense of national patriotism—which could unify a conflicted nation such as Fiji.

The construct of self-expansiveness also allows understanding how to expand our identity beyond the limits of what is typically understood as the personal self, and even beyond the collective self of national identity, in a way that can have profound implications for peace. The model I developed for understanding this uses space-time cartography. From this approach, individuals can identify in the present with just their own behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and physical bodies—the usual Western sense of isolated self. They can, however, also expand their identification in enlarged

or contracted spatial ways. One could manifest an enlarged spatial identification through, for example, embracing others as a component of one's sense of self, as in love, or could manifest a contracted spatial identification through feeling resonant with body parts, such as identifying with one's heart feelings. Individuals can also expand their identification in temporal ways, through feeling identified with their pasts or with their anticipated futures. When such identification, either spatial or temporal, goes beyond connections with the individual as customarily understood in the West, it may be said to transcend the isolated individual level and enter into a transpersonal domain. Examples of such include identifying with possible future descendents who might be citizens of a unified world or even with the environment as a whole that sustains all life on earth. This transpersonal perspective allows for a way to reframe narrow identifications fueling much of the pain in the world. Consequently, a transpersonal reframing could involve native Fijians and Fijian Indians finding ways of honoring their past identifications, or differences, without rigidly holding on to them, leading to an expanded transpersonal identification that would include but also transcend the more limited identifications.

In the case of Fiji, there are strong extant spiritual traditions, both among the native Fijians, who now are mostly Methodist Christian but also adhere to many traditional beliefs (Katz, 1999) and the Fijian Indians, who are mostly Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh. These traditions are clearly related to their other prevailing worldviews, including competing economic models, and are germane to the nation's conflicts. One clear advantage of a transpersonal perspective is that it could lead to reconciliation based on a scientific integration of religious divisiveness through providing a common ground. Many have called for seeking peace through scientific understandings (e.g., Fliestra, 2002) and some have hypothesized how this could possibly happen (e.g., Burnell, 2002). Transpersonal psychology has made significant progress in scientifically exploring some areas (e.g., MacDonald & Friedman, 2002) and I have previously suggested how this could occur more broadly, including its potential practical applications to areas such as peace (Friedman, 2002). In this vein, perhaps reframing the most daunting cultural dilemmas into transpersonal perspectives would facilitate the emergence of peace in Fiji.

Conclusion

I have discussed the potential of the psychological technique of reframing for addressing cultural dilemmas in Fiji related to resolving conflicts and achieving peace. I presented my efforts in Fiji to reframe differences widely perceived as based on race and ethnicity into being seen as due to competing economic models, enabling a less divisive discourse to emerge. I also presented what I consider the widest possible lens that can be used to reframe conflicts threatening peace, the transpersonal perspective. When I think about the many current conflicts that are leading to so much suffering, I surmise that it is time to begin to reframe antiquated identifications into more universalistic understandings. I advocate unfreezing and reframing these identifications in ways that support innovative dialogue, equally honoring the narratives of different peoples as both true—but in limited senses that need to be transcended to find a deeper commonality.

The discussion about reframing these dilemmas in Fiji can also apply more broadly. For example, similar conflicts are found in other South Pacific nations (including in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vauatu). In addition, conflicts based on similar dynamics also occur in other societies in which the British introduced indentured Indian laborers, such as in Trinidad and Tobago. Finally, perhaps all conflicts that are currently framed as ethnic or racial can be seen in similar ways. Using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an example, as long as Israeli Jews somehow see themselves as part of a distinct Jewish state or promised Jewish homeland, they separate themselves from their Palestinian brethren in ways that cannot be sustained, and vice versa. One possible approach is to look for common ground within the divergent Jewish Israeli and Muslim Palestinian views of history and destiny so that each side can come to appreciate the differences of the other. It is asking a lot, however, to encourage simultaneous belief in contradictory stories or respect for one's story that demeans another's. For example, the current Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been widely seen as due to religious differences, though both sides have essentially the same scriptural base and worship the same deity. Some have argued that the similarities of the traditions should be stressed, for example, through focus on the common agreed-upon ancestor, Abraham, to facilitate peace (Biema, 2002). Unfortunately, both traditions interpret Abraham's role in mutually disadvantageous

lights. Instead, perhaps an economic reframing of the two traditions might be more useful, similar to what I have used in Fiji. Clearly, Westernized Jews who are dominant in Israel have different implicit economic models than the Muslims who are dominant among the Palestinians. Likewise, both sides are economically suffering because of the continuing conflicts—a situation that could provide a powerful motivational basis for accepting such reframing. However, for the most potent reframing of this conflict, I suggest a transpersonal perspective in which both sides can be encouraged to understand a deeper view congruent with the highest teaching of both traditions.

The world is filled with conflicts among peoples who hold on to narrow identifications. In some ways, Fiji is a microcosm of the wider conflicts that are most globally threatening. As an insular nation, it is somewhat less subject to the immediate influences of adjoining nations and, in this sense, I have come to appreciate island nations as natural laboratories for studying phenomena related to social change, particularly involving issues such as social justice, sustainability, and peace—since external influences, though always present, are usually less pressing. Consequently, extrapolating from the methods of reframing I have used in Fiji, and my speculation about the potential worth of reframing into transpersonal perspectives, may have relevance to conflicts elsewhere. It is my hope that reframing in this fashion could lead to reconciliations among those most threatened in our greatly challenged world, namely all of us.

References

Biema, D. (2002). The legacy of Abraham. *Time, September 30*, 64-75.

Bosson, C. (2000). Festival mania, tourism and nation building in Fiji: The case of the Hibiscus Festival, 1956-1970 [Electronic version]. *The Contemporary Pacific, 12*, 123-–154.

Braud, W. (1998). Integral inquiry: Complementary ways of knowing, being, and expression. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 35-–67). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Brison, K. (2001). Constructing identity through ceremonial language in rural Fiji [Electronic version]. *Ethnology, 40*, 309-327.

Burnell, J. (2002). The peace hypothesis. *Science and Spirit,* September-October, 37-42.

Davis, B., & Knowles, E. (1999). A disrupt-then-reframe technique of social influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*, 192-199.

Ewins, R. (1998). *Changing their minds: Traditions and politics in contemporary Fiji and Tonga*. Christchurch, NZ: MacMillan Brown Center for Pacific Studies.

Finin, G., & Wesley-Smith, T. (2001). More than ethnicity behind Fiji's unrest [Electronic version]. *Population Today, 29*, 10.

Fliestra, R. (2002). World religions seek peace through science. *Research News & Opportunities in Science and Theology, 3*, 1, 28.

Friedman, H. (1983). The Self-Expansiveness Level Form: A conceptualization and measurement of a transpersonal construct. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, *15*, 37-50.

Friedman, H. (2002). Transpersonal psychology as a scientific field. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 21*, 175-187.

Friedman, H., Glover, G., & Avegalio, F. (2002). The burdens of other people's models: A cultural perspective on the current Fiji crisis. *Harvard Asia Pacific Review, 6,* 86-90.

Friedman, H., & MacDonald, D. (Eds.). (2002). *Transpersonal measurement and assessment*. San Francisco: The Transpersonal Institute, 2002.

Glover, G., Friedman, H., & Jones, G. (2002). Adaptive leadership: When change is not enough—Part One. *Organizational Development Journal, 20*, 15-31.

Grof, S. (1992). *The Holotropic mind: The three levels of human consciousness and how they shape our minds*. New York: Harper.

Haley, J. (1973). *Uncommon therapy: The psychiatric techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* New York: Norton.

Katz, R. (1999). *The straight path of the spirit: Ancestral wisdom and the healing tradition in Fiji*. Rochester, VT: Park Street.

Lajoie, D., & Shapiro, S. (1992). Definitions of transpersonal psychology: The first twenty-three years. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, *24*, 79-98.

Lewin, K. (1951). Frontiers in group dynamics. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Field Theory in Social Science* (pp. 188-237). New York: Harper.

MacDonald, D., & Friedman, H. (2002). Assessment of transpersonal and spiritual constructs: State of the science. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 42*,102-125.

MacDonald, D., Gagnier, J., & Friedman, H. (2000). Transpersonal self-concept and the five-factor model of personality: Evidence for a sixth stable dimension of personality. *Psychological Reports, 86,* 707-726.

Norton, R. (2000). Reconciling ethnicity and nation: Contending discourses in Fiji's constitutional reform [Electronic version]. *The Contemporary Pacific, 12,* 83-122.

Segal, L. (2001). Brief psychotherapy. In Corsini, R. (Ed.), *Handbook of innovative therapy* (pp. 86-94). New York: Wiley.

Vallacher, R., & Wegner, D. (1985). *A theory of action identification.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Van Deusen, C., Mueller, C., Jones, G., & Friedman, H. (2002). A cross-cultural comparison of problem solving beliefs and behaviors: Helping managers understand country differences. *International Journal of Management and Decision Making, 3,* 52-66.

Walsh, R., & Vaughan, F. (1993). On transpersonal definitions. ***Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 25,*** 199-207.

Williksen-Bakker, S. (2002). Fijian business—a bone of contention. Was it one of the factors leading to the political crisis of 2000? [Electronic version]. *Australian Journal of Anthropology, 13,* 72-87.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to the author at harrisfriedman@floraglades.org.