

## ACADEMIC ARTICLE

# CUBAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND LEADER SUCCESSION: THE END OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY IN CUBA

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## Abstract

This article investigates the leadership succession in Cuba from Fidel Castro, who was widely perceived as a highly charismatic leader, to his younger brother Raúl Castro and then to the civilian President Miguel Díaz-Canel. This leadership succession provides us with an interesting and unusual case study of a successful transfer of authority from one type of leader to another. We examine the narratives of Cuban people through 32 semi-structured interviews, allowing us to draw insights into the Cuban people's views of their leaders and the leadership succession. We identify themes that may explain how a crisis-free succession was possible, despite Weberian arguments that this was highly unlikely to occur.

**Key words:** Charisma, charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, Cuba, Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, succession, critical perspectives

## Introduction

This study investigates the leadership succession of Raúl Castro from Fidel Castro within the political context of Cuba. Based on an analysis of narratives

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of Cuban people, we provide evidence on how a crisis-free succession took place from the charismatic leadership of Fidel Castro (Hoffman 2009) to Raúl Castro that successfully opened the way for a further transition to non-charismatic leadership under the civilian President Miguel Díaz-Canel.

Fidel Castro led Cuba for 52 years, the longest standing non-royal leader in history. In 2006, due to illness, he was forced to hand power to his younger brother Raúl. Because Fidel never fully recovered, Raúl Castro formally took on the presidency in 2008. Ten years later, in 2018, after instigating a substantial economic and political reform process, Raúl peacefully transferred the presidency to a younger man, Miguel Díaz-Canel. In 2019, Díaz-Canel presided over the formulation of a new constitution resulting in the election of a Prime Minister, and the separation of roles between the Head of State and the Head of the Government for the first time in Cuba since 1976. In 2021, in keeping with his promise made two years earlier, Raúl Castro stepped down as the General Secretary of the Communist Party and the post was taken by President Díaz-Canel. Thus, a complete succession from the generation that had fought the revolution in 1959 to a younger civilian leadership was completed (Grant 2021), and from a highly personal charismatic leadership to an organisational bureaucratic leadership without crises or conflict.

As Bert Hoffmann (2009 and 2016) has argued, in Weberian terms this is a remarkable and exceptional example of political transition. Weber combined the concept of “charismatic authority” (1968: 54–7) with an assessment of the problems that would arise with regards to the succession of such leaders. Weber identified three types of legitimate authority: bureaucratic-rational, traditional and charismatic. Fidel Castro was a textbook example of a charismatic leader (Hoffman 2009; Eckstein 1994). Weber considered bureaucratic-rational and charismatic authority antithetical in principle. He and others view charisma as being hostile to institutional hierarchies, regulations and rules (Andreas, 2007). For Weber, charismatic leaders are extraordinary individuals, finding themselves outside the normal order (Spoelstra, 2013). Weber had predicted that there would be a crisis of succession during a charismatic leader’s demise (Hoffman 2019). However, Weber (1968) also noted that a routinisation of charisma was indispensable in the continuance of charismatic authority. Such a routinisation of charisma involves transformation of innovations into continuous social organisation (Hoffman 2009). However, charisma is fragile (Bryman 1992) and succession dilemmas often prevent effective routinisation of charisma (Conger 1993).

As it is widely accepted that Fidel Castro was quintessentially a charismatic leader in Weber’s definition (Hoffman 2009), the passing of his rule would theoretically have presented a dilemma for the Cuban system. Indeed, in practical terms, in other cases of charismatic Communist leaders passing, such as that of

Mao in China or Tito in Yugoslavia, severe problems arose consequently. However, in the case of Cuba nothing similar has occurred. Rather than regime instability or a power struggle, after he could no longer entertain returning to power himself, Fidel Castro successfully handed over authority to his brother who, in turn, has successfully transferred authority to another figure who is bereft of the charismatic qualities of either of his predecessors. Furthermore, Díaz-Canel presides over a revised constitutional order that can be described as bureaucratic and rational. This runs contrary to Weberian assumptions that a clear designation of a successor would result in weak leadership, which would in turn lead to “destructive power struggles” (Burling 1974; Hoffman 2009: 230). It is in this way, therefore, that Cuba has presented itself to be an exceptional case in that it has successfully transitioned from a highly personalised and charismatic regime to a more constitutional and bureaucratic rational regime without violence or disruption.

As early as 2009, Hoffman argued that Cuba was an indeed an exceptional case and predicted that a crisis-free succession from Fidel to Raúl Castro would be possible. He did this through an analysis of Fidel’s speeches, but caveated this by acknowledging that the succession was still in the making at the time. Now that the crisis-free succession is complete, in this article we consider the Cuban people’s views to help us understand why Cuba is such an unusual case.

We begin by providing a background of the political context of Cuba, followed by a discussion of the leadership styles of the Castro brothers in the extant literature. Next, we outline the method followed in this study, present our findings, situate them within the literature in our discussion, and finally provide concluding remarks.

## **Political context**

The study of Cuba is highly politicised. This stems in part from of its position during the Cold War, but also because of the conflict between the largely anti-Communist émigré population in Florida and those who remain on the island. In addition, and possibly most significantly, controversy bedevils the study of Cuba because it challenges the hegemonies of both neoliberal ideology and the United States. Consequently, scholarship on Cuba is often polemical and tainted by ideological considerations (Kapcia 2008).

Thus evaluations of the Castros’ leadership display an array of views. At one extreme, Post (2004) argues that Fidel Castro was an impulsive narcissist who had “destructive charisma” and who projected the country’s problems onto an outside enemy (the United States). In this way he inspired a followership of slaves seeking idealised sources of strength. On the other hand, Kapcia (2014) rejects

such “Fidel-centrism” and centres his approach on the group dynamics of a collective leadership dedicated to what he identifies as shared identification with a nation-building project. In yet another approach, Western and Wilkinson (2010) use psychoanalysis. They explain Fidel Castro’s longevity by arguing that he was a “messianic” leader who avoided the fate of typical “messiahs” (such as Christ), who are overthrown by their disillusioned followers. Messiahs are toppled when they fail to fulfil their followers projected hopes. Western and Wilkinson argue that Castro’s followers’ projections were directed onto the already dead martyr figure of Che Guevara and he was therefore spared. These contradictory views of Fidel’s leadership underline an eye of the beholder perspective, which could explain such variations (Alvesson 2019). What is commonly accepted, however, in all of these analyses is that Fidel Castro possessed enormous charisma and that much of his authority was based upon his popular appeal. Raúl, on the other hand, is viewed as uncharismatic and more of an administrator, resembling Weberian bureaucratic authority (Hoffman 2009).

### **Charismatic leadership/charismatic-transformational leadership**

Max Weber was first to promulgate the concept of charismatic authority, although other psychological conceptualisations of charisma were widely adopted later (Andreas 2007). For Weber, charismatic leaders emerge when people seek security and become attracted to a strong, decisive and personalised leadership style (Trice and Beyer 1993 cited in Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013).

Weber defines ‘charisma’ as:

certain qualities of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with . . . at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as . . . exceptional, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (Weber 1968: 48).

Weber’s notion presents a dilemma. The less a polity is defined by constitutional provisions and bureaucratic traditions, such as religious rituals or competitive elections, the more difficult it is to resolve the issue of succession from one leader to another (Hoffman 2009: 229). Thus, when applying Weber’s concept of “charismatic authority” to Cuba an inevitable problem of succession is envisaged. Weber suggested several potential ways around the problem (1968: 54–7). Firstly, the charismatic leader may designate his own successor. In Cuba’s case, Raúl Castro was designated constitutionally as he was First Vice-President. Secondly, the authority could be passed down to a family member in a hereditary

manner. In Cuba's case, Raúl Castro was a sibling although his elder brother did not literally pass the authority down, as in the case of hereditary systems. Thirdly, the administrative staff of the leader may designate a successor. In Cuba's case, this did not occur, although the Council of State, a body elected from the National Assembly, approved the succession. However, in all these scenarios, the efficacy of the successor depends upon how far the "chosen one" is able to assume the role. Inevitable problems of legitimacy arise if the successor lacks the personal charisma of the leader they replace. This brings into relief the other important aspect of charismatic authority that Weber identifies – it relies upon those being led. Successors are not chosen due to their charismatic qualities, which cannot be taught or learned, but facilitated through an "administrative apparatus" aimed at pursuing the best interests of followers (Thanem 2013: 399). Therefore, what would be needed for secure regime survival is a transition to a new type of authority based upon what Weber terms as "rational" grounds, in which authority rests on "a belief in the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (Weber 1968: 46).

Hoffmann (2009, 2016) and Centeno (2017) have described this process and argue that Raúl's no less "heroic" participation in the revolutionary struggle that brought Fidel to power in 1959, and his membership in what is referred to as the "generación revolucionaria" [the revolutionary generation], allowed him the legitimacy to follow Fidel. Hoffmann's (2009) argument is that, in Weberian terms, Raúl was designated by his elder brother and, being a family member, inherited his charismatic authority. He then argues that Raúl has overseen a transformation into what he calls a "charismatic state socialist" system that is able to "routinise" Fidel's charismatic rule by institutionalising it. Similarly, Centeno (2017) argues that Raúl succeeded in using his succession to bring about the latter type of transition in Weber's list of solutions by establishing a collegiate leadership through the institutionalisation of the Communist Party. Following Raúl, the Party has successfully been able to confer authority on both a new constitution and leadership. In this way, the two scholars predicted that the older generation would smoothly surrender power to a younger leadership. In 2018, this happened in the guise of the civilian President, 58-year-old Miguel Díaz Canel.

Whilst highlighting the Weberian succession dilemma through the analysis of Fidel's speeches, Hoffmann's (2009) analysis points to Weber's relational emphasis of charisma, which is largely dependent on followers' views of the charismatic leader. This can be connected to a dramaturgical approach to charismatic leadership proposed by Gardner and Avolio (1998) demonstrating the performative aspect of charismatic leadership, using theatre as a metaphor

(see Goffman 1959). Extending this dramaturgical approach to charismatic leadership, Sharma and Grant (2011) highlight how a leader's narrative and storytelling skills play an important role in the construction of a leader's charismatic identity, such as the case of Fidel and his followers.

Cuba's case is unusual, as the Weberian prediction that a crisis-free succession from a charismatic leader would not be possible without a crisis does not hold. However, Weber argued that context played a role in charisma, and that the context and the leader influenced each other (Conger 1993), which might explain the Cuban exception. However, it is also important to consider the cultural context given the exceptionality of Cuba, as well as the context of the succession. Despite the Weberian prediction that the crisis-free succession would not be possible, the official transfer of power to Miguel Díaz-Canel indicates that a crisis-free succession is complete. In the following sections we present the views of Cubans collected in 2016–17, during the final years of Fidel Castro's life, at a point in time when the Cuban people had experienced a succession of sorts, but a semi-succession, as Fidel was still seen as someone to whom Raúl could turn to for advice.

## Method

We used semi-structured interviews aimed to elicit valid, deep, and meaningful feelings the participants felt about the leaderships of the Castro brothers. Data generation took the form of guided, content-generating questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). This allowed us to explore in depth the ways in which they perceived the two leaders and the differences between them. We then analysed the collected material, starting with an integral reading of the interviews one by one, followed by a codification of the various thematic segments and a horizontal comparison between the interviews. This allowed for their categorisation into key themes that related to the characteristics of leadership identified in the theoretical investigation. We then cross-referenced and collated them.

We made thirty-two semi-structured interviews. Twenty-five of the participants were residing in Cuba at the time, six in the UK and one in the US. Eight participants were female and 27 male. The ages ranged from 18 to the mid-70s. The mean age of the group was 35. They represented a broad range of professions and backgrounds and included an office worker, a manual worker, a university professor, a journalist and a student.

The research was undertaken between 2016 and 2017. Most interviewees were found by “snowballing” and contacted opportunistically. Twenty-six of the interviewees were sourced during a visit to the island in 2017 as opportunities arose to converse with citizens informally. For example, one interview took

place with a hitchhiker who was picked up on a journey, another was with people sitting out on the street. Others were found at social events while the remainder were found through snowballing from these initial contacts. A number of the interviews, with higher-level managers and small business owners, were captured as part of a research trip on Cuban business models in 2016. The interviews were anonymised, and the participants signed a disclaimer allowing for the use of their interview for research and publication purposes.

The politicised nature of Cuban discourse was a challenge because we found discussions about the leadership of the Castros tended to rapidly transit into discussions about the nature of democracy and the relative merits of socialism and capitalism. Therefore, the focus was to ask about the Castros in terms of their leadership style rather than whether or not the interviewees agreed or disagreed with policies or politics.

The interviews were carried out using five prompts derived from an opening question. Value judgements were avoided by using an adaptation of the critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954) through asking the open question: “Can you tell me any stories that typify Fidel/Raúl’s leadership style?” These were followed with prompts where needed. Participants were allowed to talk freely before being guided back to the prompts. The interviews averaged 45 minutes in length, ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

The aim was not to specifically explore the nature of the succession, however, the fact that some interviews were conducted at a time when Fidel’s health was failing while others took place shortly after his death meant that many respondents naturally chose to focus on their feelings about the succession of Fidel by Raúl.

### **Content-generating question and prompts**

Can you tell me any stories that typify Fidel/Raúl’s leadership style?

- a. How did you feel? How did others feel?
- b. How do you know of this – personal, second hand or via media?
- c. Any more stories that demonstrate a different aspect of Fidel/Raúl’s leadership?
- d. Did their leadership style change over time? Any examples?
- e. Any more to add about the leadership of Fidel or Raúl?

### **Data analysis**

Twenty-eight of the interviews were recorded and transcribed and four were noted by hand. Those that were conducted in Spanish were translated into

English by a Spanish speaker and then the translations were checked by one of the authors who is a native English speaker fluent in Cuban Spanish.

We followed the six phases recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) to carry out a systematic thematic framework analysis. These involved familiarising ourselves with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts. We then carried out the coding, adopting a framework analysis of the collected data and summarising the sentences into descriptive codes, before grouping into descriptive themes, eliminating those that were irrelevant to our research question.

## Findings

The findings have been organised into several themes: paternalism, heroism, exceptionality, the contrast between Fidel and Raúl, followership and succession.

### Paternalism

A repeated theme is the way in which Fidel Castro was seen as a father. Participant narratives revealed a view of Castro as a benevolent paternalist – a father figure who was firm but fair teacher and guardian. But not Raúl, who is seen as being managerial. Fidel is both distant and familiar, loved and feared. Some spoke of being a little scared of him, wanting to make him proud, feeling safe when he was around, learning from him, and trusting him to look after their interests. On the other hand, Raúl was widely understood as being an adept administrator.

In my opinion Fidel is a lawyer, an oratory profession; Raúl is an administrator. His father saw in the way of educating them to build a team: Fidel to protect the family, and Raúl to manage it.

I met Raúl Castro first and then I met Fidel Castro, and I remember writing my mother a letter saying: “Mummy, Fidel has the hands of my grandfather.” Immediately, I put Fidel in the symbolic position of my grandfather, who was the biggest thing in my family. He was warm, and I observed him as someone very big, someone that I can and need to learn from, someone that I admire.

A father who taught us life.

I am telling you from my very perception, my early youth, for someone that respected the leader by his knowledge, his way of approaching things, his way of sharing his way of thinking and telling you a lesson.

When I was a child I always had Fidel as this role model that you would like to follow in your life.



## Heroism

Many of the stories told about Fidel had a mythical quality. Several interviewees tell the story of Fidel fearlessly striding into an angry crowd and bringing it around through his presence and authority until in the end they chanted “Viva Fidel”.

He was brave . . . some citizens started an uprising and were throwing stones . . . and Fidel decided to go himself . . . he just stood right there and told the bodyguards to wait and not to interfere and he walked into the uprising . . . and all the people that were throwing stones stopped shouting and started to exclaim, “Fidel!” and clap for him and that is what I believe is one of the most historic events that shows what kind of leader he was.

. . . he went there to talk with the people who were angry and the people who were throwing stones and they could have hurt him, but he was confident enough that the people would listen to him. That’s the image of the Fidel I have in my mind.

That several interviews recounted this story indicates how specific incidents in this contemporary history are already mythologised. This does not imply that the stories are false, but the frequency with which they arise suggest that Cubans feel proud that Fidel was their leader and also that this reputation was cultivated.

For example, one interviewee related that about as child they were taught in school about Castro’s heroism:

. . . they have these dates and these commemorations . . . every day there were little things to remember, in history lessons . . . and again they would just put him everywhere. They made you see him as a hero since you were very little.

## Exceptionality

Several narratives are spiritual portraying Fidel as extremely exceptional. One participant fondly described the moment when a dove landed on his shoulder during a speech. Tales of how Fidel escaped assassination were also common – giving Castro super-heroic qualities. One interviewee saw him as omnipresent:

I met Fidel many times, he always appeared everywhere. Out of the blue, boom! He landed.

Another interviewee witnessed Fidel suddenly arriving at a school during a hurricane:

Fidel came because Fidel was at every problem. He would go there . . . [The interviewee gesticulated to indicated that Fidel swam across the water to get there] . . . and then he said, “What happened here?” and the farmer said, “The school is destroyed and is under the water!” and he [Fidel] said, “You have to build this school in the least time that you can!”

This quotation contains a number of recurrent themes that underline his exceptionalism: Fidel’s capacity to suddenly arrive at times of crisis; his prowess at dealing with obstacles (e.g. rivers); and how he inspired followers to work towards collective ends.

One interviewee was a journalist who witnessed Castro’s trial in 1953 where he made his iconic speech *La historia me absolverá* [History will absolve me]. She describes how he strode into the court:

He comes in elegantly like a knight. Blue suit, smoking, 26 years old, giving orders.

She then says Fidel winked at her before launching into the speech in which he defends himself by attacking the legitimacy of the Batista dictatorship.

Some commentators attributed him with an almost superhuman ability to see into the future, many mentioning he was the first leader to recognise the dangers of climate change:

He had this capacity, it was like he could go to the future and then come back and explain it to us, he saw the fall of the Soviet Union, he saw all these environmental crises that we are having right now.

Another recounted the same thing:

Raúl described Fidel as a man who can go to the future and come back and tell us about it.

## **Contrasts between Fidel and Raúl**

A striking theme is the way that the participants clearly understood and consciously processed the fact that the two leaders were very different.

One said:

We love Fidel with our [she points to her heart] but we respect Raul [laughs] we love him with our [she points to head].

This sums up neatly the key elements of difference that were expressed between the way participants viewed the two brothers. In a similar tone, another participant said:

Raul is more pragmatic and Fidel is a dreamer.

Another described how the two men differed in their working styles with a comment that suggested a preference for the more managerial style of Raúl:

Fidel might wake us up at 3am to call a meeting when he discovered an important finding . . . But Raúl sticks to working 9–5 day and [laughs] actually, we quite like that.

Another spoke of the difference in remarkably Weberian terms. Fidel as charismatic and Raúl as organisational:

Raul Castro . . . does not have the magnetism of Fidel. This is something that you have to be born with, it is an attraction. But he is respected by his army.

Another example:

Something Raul is well-known for is discipline . . . in Raúl's organisation, . . . you have underneath that structure, a very well prepared person that is committed to accountability to organisation. I think that Raúl also did administration at university, his degree was in administration.

One participant was very aware that a new style of leadership was necessary because times have changed:

Fidel had the role of educating masses through the speeches but we don't need that anymore, everybody knows for themselves what is what, people have learned to think by themselves and then Raúl came at the right time, where you don't need to spend too much time explaining things and telling them to understand things, you just need action.

Raúl is characterised as being less loquacious and more pragmatic than Fidel by a number of participants. This is a typical remark:

Raul is quieter but he is more pragmatic in the way he does things, he comes from the military, he would say “we need to go over this plan” even if it was centimetre by centimetre and then consolidate and then keep moving . . . Fidel was more charismatic. Raul is more serious . . . Fidel is Fidel, you cannot imitate him.

This participant used the term “Messiah” to describe the way his grandparents viewed Fidel, while pointing out that he did not think the same way, but he drew the same contrast between the two brothers as others did:

Fidel is a man of ideas, Raul is a man of “let’s get solutions on the ground”; he is much more pragmatic I think than Fidel would ever be, but he is also less of a leader, less of that charismatic, “Messiah” kind of person.

## Followership

Fidel is often singularly attributed to have been the defender of the collective well-being of the people and inspired obedience, whereas, as we have seen participants viewed Raúl as a different sort of inspiration.

Fidel is an idol for the whole world and fundamentally for Cuba, Fidel is loved even dead he is still in the world, because he always defended collective well-being.

Most interviewees mention Fidel’s capacity to make a good speech as key part of his success. Fidel’s charisma was largely performative and through the delivery of his speeches.

Fidel was a “words man” and every time he talked it was amazing, when you get a chance to go over all the speeches and to see how the rhetoric changes and how he adapts with it, it is amazing how he could have the people for three, four, six hours listening to him, it is amazing!

The excerpts from followers’ views of Fidel clearly show a charismatic leader, but despite this, they also show how Fidel aligned his own persona with the cause of the revolution and with the heroic struggle for equality, self-determination and justice for all humanity. Importantly they also show how these values were incorporated into Cuban revolutionary identity.

So that's the thing about Fidel, he is not a person, he is an idea. He's a process. He's a force, a political force. He's represented in each and every Cuban.

One reason why it is thought that succession from a charismatic leader would be problematic is based on the assumption that a charismatic leader leaves followers weak and disempowered. However, this assumption is not supported by many of the participants and may explain Cuba's exceptionalism. For example, Fidel's speeches were not short sound bites, but frank and open discussions about the issues faced, the problems, solutions and trade-offs and thinking behind them. This gave the population the sense that they were participants in the thought-processes behind decisions, and indeed, the political set up with revolutionary councils where policies were debated and feedback sought, and policies amended accordingly illustrates that the "dictatorship" in some ways is a model of participative democracy (Ludlam 2012).

You know Fidel is famous for these long speeches and in these speeches was the way to share the problem and to share the solution and to explain to the population in Cuba how we tackle this problem. The population are involved in Government. . . .

Several interviewees referenced the idea that different leadership styles were needed at different stages of the Cuban revolution. The following extract highlights how Fidel's leadership changed to reflect the needs of the Cuban people:

We have this Fidel of the first stance of the revolution that congregated with millions of people in the revolution square and exercised a direct democracy by asking the people if they agree with what the government was doing and then we have this Fidel of the 80s that we know for certain came here to the university every afternoon and talked to the students and put them on trucks and got them to the plantations.

And then there was the Fidel of the 90s, who had to be like a magician because the country was in a complicated and stressful moment and we didn't resign to any other principals, we continued with the process.

Then we have this Fidel of the new millennia that didn't change that much but he was more of a wise man, a more experienced man. More diplomatic in the way he opened [Cuba] to the world.

## Succession

Another reason for a crisis-free succession emerging from our interviews with the Cuban people is because of an awareness that the transition from Fidel Castro – charismatic leader to the uncharismatic civilian President Miguel Díaz-Canel proceeded via Raúl Castro, who by virtue of his filial relationship with Fidel and having fought by his side during the revolution provided legitimacy for him to complete an intermediate stage.

Raúl has been more public since he assumed the Head of State position, but his work also began before the revolution . . . And he proved himself, and he is where he is right now not because he is Fidel's brother but because he has this whole line of developments that led him there too, for example, in the assault to the Moncada fortress, he wasn't even a leader there he was simply a soldier . . . it was Raúl that took the weapons and said "this is what we've got to do!" and this was all at 22/23 years old, so he isn't there simply because he is Fidel's brother. He has done things.

Numerous quotes indicate that the population were mostly reassured by their relationship and that Raúl consulted Fidel on policies. This may have allowed the population to get used to a non-charismatic leader in stages.

He always was seen as the right hand of Fidel and the man that had legitimacy to follow Fidel in case Fidel couldn't continue as the person at the front of the government.

The people are not worried about Raúl, the people now are worried when they lose Fidel because now the people say "Now, Raúl is in front . . . but I know Fidel is not dead." I know when Raúl has a problem, he goes to ask Fidel but like I said the people are worrying when he is ill.

The previous extract was from an interview in 2016 shortly before Fidel died, but a later interview in 2017 expressed the sense that Fidel lives on, not just by virtue of his brother taking over the leadership but as an idea.

He didn't disappear, it's just physical; what is death? Your body functions stop working and that's it but if you have a legacy or an idea that can keep on living on whilst you're not alive, well, as long as there are people that follow those ideals, like continuing to build a better world, working for a better Cuba, the social conscience. If you continue this revolution that revolution is not simply an idea,

it's a process, it's everything. If you continue with it and you feel like you are a Cuban, then you are part of Fidel too.

Raúl shared the same values and he used his time as leader to institutionalise these values in political processes that gave more autonomy to the people, thus providing a crucial step from charismatic leader-centricism of Fidel to a more bureaucratised approach.

Raúl is more like a leader who gives autonomy to people; whereas Fidel used to be a magician who drives the people. Fidel was more emotional, he was magical. So, he used to say, "we have to stick together, we have to do this ..." and everybody would follow him but Raúl is more supporting in legal issues and political documents and political roles and things like this, it is more institutional.

This sense that the leaders both brought different attributes at different times to lead the population through the upheaval of the revolution comes through clearly.

Fidel had the role of educating masses through the speech but we don't need that anymore, everybody knows by themselves what is what, people learn to think by themselves and then Raúl came at the right time where you don't need to spend too much time explaining things and telling them to understand things you just need actions.

Together these accounts show that the process of transition was a gradual one – a charismatic leader when needed, followed by a leader with similar legitimacy to translate values into processes, leaving the population then ready for a non-charismatic civilian leader. Perhaps then, the claims of Weber can still stand in the face of Cuban exceptionalism? We can only speculate, but possibly instability would have occurred if the succession had gone straight from Fidel Castro to President Díaz-Canel, without that intervening stage with Raúl as leader.

## Discussion

We sought to investigate how a crisis-free succession had taken place from a charismatic leader to a non-charismatic leader. The findings bring to light and underline the effectiveness of the Cuban leaders, and particularly that of Fidel's charisma. We have shown through the narratives of Cuban people how a crisis-free succession from a charismatic leader was possible, Fidel had a designated successor who was related to him, so that a kind of dynastic type succession

could proceed. Crucially, however, the interviews show that Raúl Castro was viewed favourably as the successor and also significantly differently as being more pragmatic and less charismatic. Thus, followers were already prepared for a change in style of leader and type of authority. This supports Weber's (1968) theory on how a crisis of succession could be avoided (Hoffman 2009).

The interviews prove beyond doubt that Fidel was a charismatic leader. Some quotes present him almost as a superhero. Comments are made about his “magical” qualities, which is entirely in keeping with Weber's definition of charisma, but also have implications for the critique of leadership theorising (Alvesson 2019; Alvesson and Kärreman 2016; Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013; Ladkin 2006; Tourish and Pinnington 2002). These relate to hero-worship and seeing Fidel as a father figure (leader-centric approach).

Allowing oneself to be seen as heroic can backfire, as the population initially exalt a leader, putting him on a pedestal and attributing qualities to him that no human can live up to, and then punish him when he inevitably disappoints (Western and Wilkinson 2010). However, the heroic leadership bias did not lead to a downfall of Fidel and neither was it disempowering for his followers. Our research suggests that although his follower saw Castro as an exceptional hero, Fourie and Höhne's (2019) idea that hero-worship and the attributions of superhuman-like qualities disempowers followers does not hold in the case of Cuba. Only two interviewees expressed cynicism about Fidel's leadership. It is widely known that Fidel consciously avoided a cult of personality by refusing to allow himself to be represented in statues.

The bureaucratic routinisation of charisma could be observed in participants' narratives of Raúl's leadership, where he was viewed as being more disciplined and seen as an expert administrator. Weber viewed charisma as antithetical in principle to bureaucracy, and viewed charisma as being hostile to regulations, procedures and hierarchies (Andreas 2007). However, the succession from a charismatic leader to a more administrative leader did not diminish the power of the charismatic founder, Fidel. The narratives of the Cuban people indicated that a successful crisis-free succession did happen even though the routinisation of charisma is found to be rare (Conger 1993). The integration of revolutionary values into identity could explain the crisis-free succession, as when *Fidelismo* becomes part of Cuban self-identity then it will be more resilient against change in leadership. For instance, this is exemplified in one of the participant's quotes where Fidel is referred to as an idea, and a political force represented in every Cuban.

The differences between Fidel's and Raúl's leadership were indicated through participant narratives of the leaders' speeches. Fidel's speeches were performative and helped in forming a charismatic identity amongst his audiences, which reinforces the dramaturgical and performative aspects of charismatic leadership,



as well as the careful management of these performances (cf. Gardner and Avolio 1998; Sharma and Grant 2011).

## Conclusion

Through Cuban people's narratives, we have shown how a crisis-free succession was possible despite the hero-worship and the larger-than-life superhuman attributions to Fidel.

While ideology and hero-worship are often criticised in Western studies of leadership, we identify that these leader-centric aspects were instead constructive in the case of Cuba. Fidel was viewed as a father figure. Thus, hero-worship and over the top attributions of charisma to Fidel do not seem to have disempowered the majority of the Cuban people, or to have caused his downfall, or that of his successors. Hence, the Weberian prediction that a crisis-free succession from a charismatic to a non-charismatic leader would be extremely unlikely and only possible in extraordinary circumstances seems to have been provided with a case study in the unique context of Cuba.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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