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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Erek Ostrowski, PhD

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Demystifying The Role Of Culture In Coaching Relationships

Abstract

This capstone examines the role of culture and cross-cultural competence in coaching relationships. The business world is becoming increasingly globalized, with workers interacting across geographic and linguistic and cultural differences. In addition, many American companies are actively diversifying their leadership teams, which increases cultural differences in C-suites and beyond. These individuals need to develop significant cross-cultural competence in order to effectively engage with one another. Coaches working with these diverse and globalized companies need to both develop their own cultural competency and grow their expertise in coaching others to develop cultural competency. In this study I engaged in intensive coaching with two Asian–American women, reflected on each of the coaching sessions, and analyzed the content of the sessions as well as my reflections. My findings include the following: Aspects of a coach's culture influence how they perceive and engage with a client; aspects of a client's culture influence how they perceive and engage with a coach; clients and coaches make assumptions about each other based on a number of factors, including race; and the identities of coaches and clients are expressed and negotiated through stories. This capstone raises many interesting questions for future examination, including what strategies can be deployed beyond awareness of cultural differences and building more inclusive coaching models.

Comments

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Advisor: Erek Ostrowski, PhD

DEMYSTIFYING THE ROLE OF CULTURE
IN COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

by

Thalia J. Mangan

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2022

DEMYSTIFYING THE ROLE OF CULTURE
IN COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

Approved by:

Erek Ostrowski, PhD, Advisor

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ABSTRACT

This capstone examines the role of culture and cross-cultural competence in coaching relationships. The business world is becoming increasingly globalized, with workers interacting across geographic and linguistic and cultural differences. In addition, many American companies are actively diversifying their leadership teams, which increases cultural differences in C-suites and beyond. These individuals need to develop significant cross-cultural competence in order to effectively engage with one another. Coaches working with these diverse and globalized companies need to both develop their own cultural competency and grow their expertise in coaching others to develop cultural competency. In this study I engaged in intensive coaching with two Asian–American women, reflected on each of the coaching sessions, and analyzed the content of the sessions as well as my reflections. My findings include the following: Aspects of a coach's culture influence how they perceive and engage with a client; aspects of a client's culture influence how they perceive and engage with a coach; clients and coaches make assumptions about each other based on a number of factors, including race; and the identities of coaches and clients are expressed and negotiated through stories. This capstone raises many interesting questions for future examination, including what strategies can be deployed beyond awareness of cultural differences and building more inclusive coaching models.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I speak as a person, from a context of personal experience and personal learnings.

Carl Rogers (1961)

The world has become increasingly globalized, and the world's workforce is changing in many new and unexpected ways. The United States currently has five generations of workers interacting in the workplace, each with its own set of experiences and expectations. The number of women in leadership roles is increasing, but still has a long way to go: According to McKinsey, from 2015 to 2019 "...the number of women in senior vice-president positions increased from 23 to 28 percent and the number of women in C-suites increased from 17 to 21 percent" (Jablonska, 2021, p. 1). In the workplace, coaching traditionally has been reserved for C-suite executives and other top talent. As the world and the workforce change, the need for coaching has changed as well as the needs of the clients for whom the coaches serve.

The purpose of this capstone study was to explore the role of culture and cross-cultural competence in coaching and to make the case that with an increasingly diverse workforce we must develop a diverse set of approaches to coaching. Furthermore, I highlight the need for culturally competent coaches by examining two case studies from my own coaching experience in the Leadership Coaching Cohort (LCC) master's concentration at the University of Pennsylvania. These cases offer an opportunity to pause and consider the role of culture in the coaching arena.

Background and Context

As the world continues to change, the coaching field needs to change as well. Culture and cross-cultural competence are important factors to consider in coaching. Coaches need to be prepared to work with clients who do not look like them, and many clients would benefit from working with coaches who do not look like them. Coaches need to be ready to not only hold space for clients but be equipped to enter their clients' worlds. The need for cross-cultural readiness for coaches is great because organizations are trying to diversify their leadership so that it reflects society at large (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). Many leaders and emerging leaders are fully capable even though they never had access to coaching. Even if coaching is available, they may not take advantage of it or benefit from it because client readiness can affect the coaching relationship. Coaches must be prepared for a new demand: coaching a diverse set of clients and clients who are new to coaching. These two factors can cause coaches to stretch in new ways as they prepare themselves to be cross-culturally competent.

The coaching field has yet to determine how much culture matters. A review of the literature reveals no clear agreement on the most productive approaches in addressing cultural concerns in the coaching arena. This capstone project can contribute to the literature on culture and coaching in a novel way, examining cross-cultural coaching through the experiences of a newly minted coach and by tracking the arc of my engagement with two separate clients.

I used the nine-step Wilkinsky (2006) method and drew from other coaching theories to inform my practice. I use aspects of Drake and colleague's (2008) narrative theory and existential theory (Cox et al., 2014) to guide my approach and to better

understand the dynamics of the coach–client relationship. This exploration focuses on my development as a coach as I strengthened my skills and expanded my coaching toolkit. I collected qualitative data during my field placement, using the exchanges with my advisor to guide my approach to coaching and to inform my analysis of the data. I highlight salient moments in my clients’ development and identify the coaching strategies that most effectively supported that development.

Strategies were different because I was serving clients different from me. So any level of awareness of one’s own culture as the coach and the culture of the client without stereotyping can be one way to start a new dynamic method of coaching.¹

Personal Reflection

I would never have guessed that when coaching another human, the one doing the coaching would also be coached about themselves. As I approach the end of a learning journey and am becoming an organizational and leadership coach, I want to pause to make a case for coaching—specifically, for equity in the coaching field. Attention to identity is central in my coaching practice; I am a woman who identifies as a Black American with West Indian roots, as well as a finance professional turned consultant and now a novice coach. I am learning to plumb and dissect the personal experiences I have had as a coach and share my wonders, challenges, and thoughts with the organizational dynamics community.

My Experience as a Client

Each of us can benefit greatly from opportunities to process our professional

¹ The language used to define and describe coaching is from a Western perspective and may not translate to non-Western places.

dilemmas with an objective party (Drake et al., 2008; Wildflower & Brennan, 2011).

I have had the privilege of receiving coaching at various stages of my career so I know firsthand that it can be transformative. As a recipient of coaching, I learned to tap into my inner competence and confidence and to utilize tools to navigate complex situations. As a consequence of coaching, I recognized I was overqualified for a position I occupied in higher education. Also, I was able to identify that the typical career progression working with one of my employers was slower than I was willing to sustain. My coach helped me tap into my inner dialogue and analyze my thoughts, beliefs, and fears so I was able to muster the courage to make necessary career changes.

Because of coaching, I gained perspectives and clarity around my career aspirations. I have learned to approach situations as opportunities for inquiry and opportunities for design. I would not have gotten to this place had I not believed that my coach at the time understood the lens through which I viewed my life. I assessed that my coach was culturally competent, though of a different race and significantly older than me. I did not have to spend a lot of time explaining why I thought what I did. She was aware, and that awareness enabled us to spend the majority of our time creating and exploring career options. Because of this life-changing coaching experience, I began to wonder: “Who has access to coaching? Who utilizes coaching? What are the perceived benefits of coaching?” I did an informal poll with close friends and family to test their knowledge of the discipline of coaching. Very few of them knew what coaching was, and the few who did know had heard about it from me in previous conversations. Imagine the lack of awareness in a corporate workplace setting, where most coaching has been reserved for high level executives.

Questions About Equity and Accessibility

Who is to say who gets development and who does not? It is in an organization's best interest to develop their people so everyone is producing more high-quality work. Since coaching can play a critical role in framing, guiding, and accelerating development, it is essential this resource be accessible more broadly. Coaching is a particularly effective way to develop talent. Other approaches include training programs, peer coaching, and rotational programs that cross-train—each of which is effective under certain circumstances and for specific desired outcomes. Coaching is especially useful for supporting a client's personal goals, as well as for addressing the associated challenges in interacting with others in the organization. One's personal and organizational culture play central roles in the dynamics that are discussed in coaching engagements.

In this capstone I use my field placement experience as a case study of the role of culture in coaching and how attention to culture is beneficial for the client and for the organization. Providing coaching to people of color is one way for firms to engage in “diversity management as a business strategy,” which strengthens an organization's competitive edge (Stout-Rostron, 2017, p. 249). The research on diversity in the workplace serves as a foundation for my focus on culture and the role culture plays in coaching relationships. Furthermore, the literature on coaching across cultures informed the planning for and analysis of my cross-cultural coaching experiences. My clients benefited from my understanding of our respective cultures, and they developed much more rapidly than if I had taken a more cookie-cutter approach.

People never stop developing; development is not a stage that has a definitive end or something that stops when you arrive at a certain level (Rogers, 1961). Development occurs continually for the remainder of our days. Now, who is to say who gets development and who does not? Since coaching can play a critical role in framing, guiding, and accelerating our development, it is essential this resource be accessible more broadly.

This capstone highlights how all coaches can take part in leveling the playing field and making this world more equitable for all who inhabit it.

Assumptions

As I explored this topic, I began with several assumptions. The first assumption was that the pool of those who describe themselves as coaches is not as diverse as this country along the dimensions of gender, race, sexual orientation, and education background (de Haan, 2019). Furthermore, the pool of people receiving coaching (the clients) does not reflect the diversity of the workforce, specifically regarding race (Roche, 2021). Another assumption I am making is that a client who is not a white person may need special readiness to receive the coaching and therefore may be underprepared for a coaching relationship (Stout-Rostron, 2017). Lastly, culture plays a role in a client's receptiveness to coaching and the strength of the coach–client relationship.

Capstone Structure

This capstone is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 describes my rationale for studying culture in coaching, laying the foundation for what is to come. I make the case for coaching, provide the background and history of coaching, discuss the relevance of coaching, outline my interests, and list the assumptions I take into consideration. Chapter

2 reviews the literature, including the theoretical constructs I used during my coaching engagements. I explore theoretical and empirical research regarding coaching, especially coaching in communities of color, equitable access to coaching, and coaching for equity. The work of Carl Rogers, David Drake, Aaron Beck, and other scholars serve as touchstones when I discuss the relevance of my topic, its relationship to the coaching literature in general, and the gaps in the existing literature. Chapter 3 presents an overview of my field placement experiences and discusses my approach to this qualitative case study. I describe how I prepared for each coaching session, what I captured after each session, and what I discussed with my field placement advisor regarding each session. Finally, I discuss the process of collecting and analyzing the data. Chapter 4 presents data from my field placements and examines the data as they relate to the larger issue of coaching people of color. Lastly, Chapter 5 offers my final reflections on my coaching engagements, applies some of the analytical tools and theories, and describes various ways to expand upon my findings, setting the stage for future research and practice in this area, as well as my own continued development as a coach.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CULTURE IN COACHING

We live in a world where people regularly engage with individuals of other nationalities, other cultures, other races, and other traditions. Now, more than ever, people are interacting across geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders—thanks to the globalization of commerce and the technological ease of communicating across distances (Gerhardt et al., 2022). As American companies (slowly) broaden the range of people in their C-suites, we are beginning to have a more diverse set of global leaders today. Many of these leaders receive executive coaching to round out their leadership skills so they can optimize the performance of the entire organization (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020). However, coaching is not very common for individuals in the rank and file of an organization.

Since corporate leadership in the United States and elsewhere is increasingly diverse and because many corporations engage with partners, vendors, and customers around the globe, corporate leaders' attention to cultural differences is essential. Leadership coaches must therefore develop their ability to coach in this dynamic environment, adopting novel approaches for coaching individuals and teams that hail from different cultures—what Filsinger (2021) calls coaching *in* diversity. Coaches also must attend to cultural elements when discussing clients' development of and engagement with a diverse workforce and customer base—coaching *for* diversity, as per Filsinger (2021). Coaches always face the challenge of approaching clients from an objective point of view and meeting them where they are emotionally, mentally, and

physically (Rogers, 2016). A coach's task becomes even more complicated when you add the need to understand and coach around cultural issues.

In this chapter I lay a theoretical foundation for my capstone study and discuss the particular lenses I use to gather and interpret my data. I draw from three relevant areas of the literature: (1) evidence-based approaches to coaching; (2) studies of how culture is perceived and valued by coaches; and (3) recommendations for the incorporation of cultural and cross-cultural perspectives into coaching. In addition, I define key terms that I use throughout the paper.

I examine the literature addressing areas such as the coaching process, the coach–client relationship, the coaching readiness of clients at different career stages, and coaching across cultures. I have identified various concepts and data from the literature relevant to my research question about the role of culture in coaching relationships and other literature, which caused me to pause and consider exploring other avenues.

History of Coaching

Before discussing current approaches, I would be remiss not to touch on the historical foundations of coaching. The modern practice of coaching has its roots in psychology and therapy, in which leaders who emerged after the Freudian era, such as Carl Rogers, Fritz and Laura Perls, Abraham Maslow, and David Drake, greatly influenced the discipline (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011). Rogers (1951), a clinical psychologist, contributed to a major change in the coaching field by reorienting therapy to client-centered or nondirective approaches. The Perls founded Gestalt therapy in the 1940s (Perls et al., 1951)² and approached clients holistically, not as a collection of parts

² *Gestalt* translates from the German as “form” (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011).

to be treated separately. Maslow (1943) contributed his hierarchy of needs and introduced the idea of self-actualization. Building on the work of his forebears, Rogers (1957) coined the term *unconditional positive regard*, which is a nonjudgmental orientation coaches should have toward clients. Lastly, Drake developed narrative coaching, an approach in which clients explore their stories to provide themselves, "...greater awareness, authorship, agility, and accountability." (Drake, 2008, p. 271). These approaches, when combined, form a substantial foundation for coaches as they facilitate change for clients.

Coaching: A Panoply of Approaches

Coaching is a designing process. Stober (2010) defines coaching as "a process focused on working with a person's needs, wants, goals, or vision for where they want to go, and then designing steps for getting there" (p. 18). Whereas therapy and the therapeutic approaches are used to delve deeper and make sense of people's pasts, coaching focuses on the present and the future—a more creative process rather than an unpacking process.

Coaching is practiced by individuals from a wide range of backgrounds who work across almost every industry (Wycherley & Cox, 2008). A client's background, goals, and circumstances influence the approach a coach adopts during the initial sessions. Over time a coach may shift their approach significantly as they gain more information about their client, the client's goals, and the client's context (Critchley, 2010). A coach is not required to engage in any training or receive specific certification; while most coaches define coaching as a learning activity, the aims vary considerably (Cox, 2015).

Consequently, no consistent nor codified core set of coaching practices exist. This reality contrasts with my learnings at the University of Pennsylvania in two ways. We were taught and practiced the nine-step Wilkinsky model (see Appendix B), which consists of 10 hour-long coaching sessions built around a 360-degree feedback report on the client. In the Wilkinsky model, coaches activate the designing process by using powerful questioning. Also, as practitioners, we exposed ourselves to a variety of coaching approaches as well as foundational theories as we built our toolkits. We developed a nimbleness, responding to client needs during coaching sessions and pivoting as needed.

Approaches to Coaching

Coaches use a variety of approaches in their practice because no one-size-fits-all strategy exists for coaching diverse populations. For coaches to effectively guide clients through major milestones, according to Burrus (2011), “Coaches should facilitate understanding of different types of culture” (p. 231). An expert coach quickly builds a client’s trust, helps the client identify key goals, and selects from a range of tools and processes, such as the GROW model (Brown & Grant, 2010) and appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2012), which have been shown to support a client’s steady growth. Typical coaching goals include enhancing executive presence, learning to respond appropriately under pressure, and exploring different careers while unemployed. Such goals are common across the career spectrum; although coaching is usually concentrated in the executive class, which in the United States is predominantly white and male. Thus, many of the benefits of coaching are not realized in communities of color.

During the formative stages of a coaching relationship, if the coach and client have shared experiences, they may form a bond relatively quickly (Cox et al., 2014). Harrison and colleagues (1998) encourage coaches to distinguish between surface level diversity (e.g., race, gender, age) and deep level diversity (e.g., values, beliefs, and attitudes) when considering matching. Wycherley and Cox (2008) assert that matching on surface level features might accelerate the development of rapport, but “mismatched” coaches can still build rapport quickly if they are trained to be aware of their own culture and cultural biases. In the current cultural climate, some people believe that making a racial and cultural match is essential for effective coaching (Roth, 2017), although others disagree (Cox et al., 2014). Wycherley and Cox (2008) find the literature on matching via deep-level features, such as values and personality, is limited and contradictory. They highlight the importance of trust, which may not depend on being matched according to traditional criteria. Additionally, they discuss the value of diverse perspectives, which a coach can offer if they are from a different cultural background than their client.

I want to examine this view that a well-rounded and culturally competent coach who approaches the work holistically can effectively support a wide range of clients. Most of the literature on coaching has been written by white men, which does not reflect the plurality of society. It is easy to conclude that shared experiences are not essential if a coach wants to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to a client. However, culture can operate at different levels, which I will expand on later in this chapter.

Who Receives Coaching?

Coaching within an organization is often limited to senior leadership and/or employees who are struggling. I contend that coaching can play an important role for

people at all stages of their careers. Various professional stages are described in the workforce; one common framework is organized in terms of early career, mid-career, and senior career. Increasingly, people with nontraditional work backgrounds can be found in many organizations; for example, an older employee may have switched fields and still be early in their career in their current profession. Organizations often offer a range of learning and development opportunities for their employees. For example, some organizations have a new joiner academy for people entering the organization. Some organizations have rotation programs for early career individuals to familiarize them with a range of functions in a particular area, such as human resources, operations, or finance (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017).

Executive coaching is usually a leadership development program reserved for individuals who are senior in the organization or are identified as high performers. On the contrary, I believe everyone—no matter their level—can benefit from coaching. Why undo poor behavior in a senior leader when we can cultivate good behavior from the start? Why make a development program exclusive to senior managers when more junior people—often people of color—do not have the skills or support to make it to the senior levels? This reality is what makes my inquiry important. If coaching was more equitable, it could change organizations and their employees for the better.

Coaching is an underutilized approach to professional development, especially for people of color (Roche & Passmore, 2021). This approach is underutilized for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of knowledge of the discipline of coaching, a lack of availability of coaching in organizations, and a lack of people of color on the executive level in which most coaching services are offered. When coaching is used, a beautiful exchange

occurs when you connect with someone who is in your corner, who is committed to your success, and with whom you share common experiences.

Empirical Research on Coaching

The empirical literature on the effectiveness of specific coaching approaches is relatively thin so coaches often rely on their experience when determining which approaches to employ (Minzlaff, 2019; Roth, 2017). Numerous books endeavor to fill this gap, offering syntheses of the literature, theoretical support, and analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of different models (e.g., Cox, 2015; Cox et al., 2014). Other books propose or expand upon specific models such as the GROW model (Brown & Grant, 2010), cognitive behavioral therapy (Beck, 2005), and appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2012). These practitioner textbooks, while sometimes advocating a particular approach, also note that a coach's approach is contingent on many factors related to the client and the coaching context (Day, 2010).

One example of a specific approach is solution-focused coaching, which was described and elaborated on by Grant and O'Connor (2018). They designed an experiment to test the effectiveness of four different approaches to coaching, as measured by the clients' perceived progress toward goal attainment. They used a web-based intervention that exposed subjects to four different conditions and then assessed their perception of progress toward their goals. The four conditions were: (1) problem-focused, (2) solution-focused, (3) problem affect, and (4) solution-focused plus problem affect. They found that subjects who received coaching in the solution-focused plus problem affect condition reported the greatest change overall in efficacy and action steps taken.

One of the strengths of the Grant and O'Connor (2018) study is that they designed and conducted an experiment that enabled them to institute significant controls and to consequently claim a causal relationship between their intervention and the outcome. They applied several statistical manipulations to establish the magnitude and test the significance of their findings.

Because the study conducted by Grant and O'Connor (2018) involved undergraduates who received credit for participating, a sampling bias exists that limits interpretation of the results. In addition, since the coaching was simulated through routines delivered electronically, the findings may not transfer to real-life situations.

Culture: Do We Know It When We See It?

Although culture is a word used in everyday conversations, everyone does not share the same definition (Burrus, 2011). Most every country or city or neighborhood or community has a dominant culture yet residents do not have a monolithic experience because they intersect with multiple cultures across time and space (O'Neal et al., 2021). In addition, people are embedded in systems, such as those associated with their family, church, and professions (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011). These systems interact as people connect with each other. For example, in a family in which women are not empowered to speak up, a woman from that family may work in a profession in which women are encouraged to speak up. This woman might receive feedback from her mentor or her manager encouraging her to speak up more, which can cause dissonance since it conflicts with her family culture. This example shows how two different systems are interacting. Even though a person may look as if they belong to a particular region of the world, their culture is what is influencing them to be who is standing in front of you (comparing

surface-level and deep-level) (Wycherley & Cox, 2008). For the purpose of this capstone project, culture is defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1999).

Authors such as Roth (2017), Milner (2013), Stout-Rostron (2017), and Roche (2021) have explored if culture is a point of distinction in the coaching arena. Roth (2017) interviewed 11 executive coaches, some from Anglo backgrounds from the United States, Canada, or Great Britain and some from Chinese backgrounds, specifically, Hong Kong or Mainland China. Roth was curious to know if these coaches shared a common description of culture and the role of culture in coaching. She found the coaches’ definitions of culture varied, as did their perception of the importance of considering culture in the coaching context.

Roth offered some preliminary explanations for the lack of a more defined answer. Such coaching relationships are complex so coaches use their individual lens to interpret a client’s culture, which makes defining culture subjective, not objective (Roth, 2017). Milner and colleagues (2013) have concluded that culture is complex; coaches must receive their clients as individuals. Milner does, in fact, take the stance that culture does matter in coaching relationships and even encourages coaches to consider their culture and observe it within the coaching relationship in which they are engaging. Milner, however, did not have a culture definition for coach practitioners to utilize; he does raise the need for cultural awareness for cross-cultural coaching to be successful. However, Stout-Rostron does not provide a definition of culture but emphasizes the importance of having a definition. Instead, Stout-Rostron shares Rosinski’s difference between cultures such as professional and national culture.

Because these established authors contributed to defining culture and have not agreed on an industry wide definition of culture, my capstone furthers the exploration of culture as the foundation of a coaching relationship. This study highlights the lack of an industry wide definition of culture, which makes coaching more difficult and complex. Because we live in a globalized world, we need to have coaches who are culturally competent, organizations that are culturally competent, and a coaching industry that answers the call to apply a more integrative and inclusive culturally appropriate approach.

A Fine Line Between Cultural Competency and Stereotyping

Roth (2017) also describes the fine line between ascribing characteristics to a client's culture and stereotyping a client. In the coaching arena, coaches characterize clients through the lens of their own experiences, their training, and the work they have done with similar clients. Coaches can characterize clients by perusing notes from previous clients who they've coached, as well as using models from their coach trainings to all clients, not tailoring their approach to the client who is sitting across from them. This approach signifies the subjectivity in coaching and the coaching relationship.

Given the general subjectivity of the coaching relationship, along with concerns about stereotyping, the actions taken by coaches could potentially blur the line between useful characterizations and stereotyping. One example of when a coach adopts the perspective that white women are friendly and bubbly but encounters a female client who is not friendly and bubbly. The coach's assumption that the client's friendliness would make her volunteer more information in the coaching sessions is not a useful characterization of their client; this assumption, in fact, is a harmful stereotype of the

client and could affect the relationship negatively because the coach is attempting to make the client fit the description in their mind, which is ultimately a stereotype.

Roth's (2017) study has several strengths. She uses a constructivist grounded theory approach, recognizing that humans are meaning makers, although she does not test her theory in practice. Roth highlights four situations in which coaches might use a cultural lens: selecting a client, assessing a client, interpreting client behaviors, and adapting their coaching style to best support the client. Roth also discusses the natural variability that exists in coach–client relationships and encourages coaches not to take a one-size-fits-all approach. At the same time she challenges the reader to wonder why coaches hold such disparate views on the role of culture in their engagement with clients.

Roth's (2017) study is limited by several factors. The sample was relatively small and included only individuals who coach in Hong Kong. Even though she discusses the difference between Hong Kong and mainland cultures, the study only involved coaches from Hong Kong. Thus, while her findings raise many important questions about the role of culture in the coaching sphere, they are not necessarily salient in other settings. In my work, I plan to highlight the role of coaching is, in fact, necessary in other settings, especially in coaching relationships. Each client we meet is so different, and coaches are different as well, depending on the life stages they are in. All these factors must be considered in the relationship, which the coaching case studies in this capstone study explore.

Culture in Systems

Roth's (2017) work relates to my capstone inquiry in several ways. We belong to systems. Our clients are embedded in systems. As coaches, we are outsiders, observing

our clients as they zoom out and take a critical look at the systems to which they belong, such as their family, church, and profession. Various ideas, characteristics, and behaviors of a client may be due to cultural factors, but as coaches we do not know for sure because we do not want to reduce a client's culture to unidimensional characteristics based on stereotypes.

As coaches, we can find it tough to differentiate whether the dominant culture is in play or a combination of the dominant culture and other systems the client belongs to, but it is worth noting and being vigilant for where cultural issues are likely to emerge. In business settings leaders are embedded in systems; they are not influenced by only one corporate culture or one local culture—a benefit of living in a globalized world. We have global leaders who are born in one place, educated in another, and work and live in another place. Each of those places has its set of cultural values and norms that the leader encounters along their journey. In this study I worked with clients who traversed several cultures, which enabled me to pay attention to where these cultures impacted their progress.

Cross-Cultural Coaching

When a coach's primary culture is different from that of the client or when the various cultures experienced by the coach and client are different, challenges can arise in several areas. One challenge is that getting to know the client requires more inquiry since the coach cannot assume certain cultural characteristics (Cox, 2014). Physical characteristics, communication styles, and language are examples of cultural characteristics that coaches can observe of a client. A second challenge is that the vocabulary used by the client can be different when transferred in other settings (Wilson,

2013). In other words, a word such as “accountability” used by one group of people can have an entirely different meaning if the same word is used in another setting with a different group of people. A third challenge is that some of the assumptions a coach makes about the coach–client relationship may not be assumed by the client (Milner et al., 2013). Thus, raising awareness of the active role that culture plays in a coach–client relationship increases the coach’s cultural competency. Coaching diverse populations is more than holding space but leaning in with inquiry to learn more about the person across from you.

Milner and colleagues (2013) examined cultural factors that influence coaching effectiveness. They interviewed 15 German coaches who, in total, worked with clients from at least 15 countries. They examined critical incidents in which culture was implicated, drawing on the idea of critical incidents developed by Flanagan (1954).

Milner and her colleagues (2013) described cross-cultural coaching as when a coach and a client come from different national backgrounds. They assert that knowledge of cultural patterns helps coaches understand their clients’ behaviors, norms, values, and beliefs. In addition, the coach–client relationship is enhanced when the coach is aware of their own cultural norms, values, and beliefs. Milner and her colleagues (2013) employ Hofstede and colleagues’ (2010) five dimensions of cultural significance to frame their understanding of coaches’ approaches: (1) power distance, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism versus collectivism, (4) masculinity versus femininity, and (5) short-term versus long-term orientation in terms of life goals. They caution against oversimplifying the role of culture and note that clients who work for global companies may have traversed multiple cultures so may be more adaptable to coaching across cultures. The

relevance of Hofstede's model is that it gives coaches some language to make sense of clients different from themselves. In addition, this model illustrates how cultures change over time, which can explain behavioral patterns of clients in a coaching relationship (Burrus, 2011, p. 232).

The critical incidents in Milner and colleagues' (2013) study are sorted into four categories: communication, coach-client relationship, coaching setting, and role understanding. One example of a communication incident is when a client is uncommunicative, making the coach's job difficult as they seek to understand the client. Another common occurrence is when a client loses face during an exchange when the coach points out mistakes or shortcomings of the client. Similarly, when relational expectations—explicit or implicit (e.g., cultural)—are unclear, the client may desire a more informal friendship or a more formal business relationship, based on their resident culture. Expectations of outcomes from coaching also can vary, with some clients wanting straightforward advice and others wanting therapy sessions. These examples highlight the need to understand a client's culture to have fruitful coaching engagements.

One of the strengths of the critical incidents study (Milner et al., 2013) is the thoughtful application of Hofstede and colleagues' (2010) well-established framework. They compare this framework to three others to both establish its credibility and to locate it in the field of cultural studies. The incidents they describe are vivid and help concretize the relevant conditions.

However, the study by Milner and colleagues (2013) has several limitations. Similar to other qualitative studies, it has a relatively small sample size, and all the subjects come from a similar cultural background (German). This study enabled in-depth

interviews and the elucidation of nuanced features of cross-cultural coaching. But their findings cannot be generalized beyond their sample. In addition, the coaches in this study varied significantly by age and experience, which makes it difficult to discern if any patterns are related to specific coach demographics or characteristics. Another shortcoming of this study involves the use of Hofstede and colleagues' (2010) dimensions. Three of the five dimensions are set up as binaries; however, in fact, most cultures are located somewhere along a continuum. When they return to Hofstede in the discussion, the authors use the dimensions to make uncritical generalizations; for example, Germans avoid uncertainty and are short-term oriented.

Milner and her colleagues' (2013) work provide more context to the topic of coaching across cultures. It is important for coaches to be culturally competent—regarding their own culture and their clients'—without stereotyping. Furthermore, they highlight the fact that the language used to describe coaching is from a Western perspective; that perspective may not translate well to other non-Western places. The study clearly presented some of the challenges coaches could run into while engaging in cross-cultural coaching.

Roche and Passmore (2011) conducted a study on coaches of color. Their claim is that the coaching field has a blind spot as it relates to race. Related professions have begun to study the effects of race, but coaching has not focused on these effects. Their study is based on four focus groups, in which the comments highlight the need for more research in this area; if not, the field will be reinforcing a systemic problem around the globe. The study comprised four focus groups of coaches of color located in the United Kingdom, United States, Kenya and South Africa, and New Zealand (Māori). Roche and

Passmore sought to gain a global perspective on how structural racism shows up in the coaching field in these locations. Their findings were that even though the coaches are from different places there were common themes. Racial identity was very important to all participants in the focus groups. With not enough research about race and its role in coaching relationships, the authors concluded there is ample room to explore. Their recommendations are for all stakeholders: coaching community, educational providers, professional organizations, and coaches. Their respective roles each have a part to play to creating a more inclusive coaching environment.

The coaching literature overwhelmingly has been a white space; naturally, the field has made inadequate efforts toward exploring culture. The silence and lack of research put the field in a position of neutrality, which perpetuates racist behavior and denies the identities of people of color—coaches and clients alike (Roche & Passmore, 2011).

Conclusion

Cultural issues permeate coaching conversations, even if the coach and client are from the same general culture (e.g., both white male Americans). When a coach and a client are from different cultural backgrounds, the coach needs to pay particular attention to signals of cultural concordance and conflict.

The research on coaching has yet to provide a definitive answer to the question of how much culture matters, although substantial evidence exists to show cultural issues do influence the coach–client relationship and that culture should be considered when contemplating which coaching approaches to employ (Milner et al., 2013; Roth, 2017;

Wycherley & Cox, 2008). The intersection of culture and coaching is a ripe area for research. As more scholars contribute to this field, practitioners can better develop and implement strategies based on this research. One aim of this paper was to better understand the role of culture in coaching so that I and others can refine our practice to effectively serve the needs of a diverse set of clients.

Several practitioners have suggested strategies in addressing culture in coaching engagements, but no consensus has been reached so far on the most productive approaches (Cox et al. 2014; Milner et al., 2013; Roche, 2021). A danger exists in having a set definition of or approach to cultural issues since different cultures characterize issues differently. Since a coach's approach is influenced by their own meaning-making around culture, I had the opportunity to observe this process in myself as a coach.

This firsthand perspective contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, I thoroughly dissect my two coaching engagements: I analyze the design for each coaching session, follow the design through the session itself, and reflect on my subsequent debrief with my advisor. Second, I got to know my clients very well and was able to assess when particular coaching steps had an impact and when they were off target. Third, as a Black woman coaching two Asian American professionals, I provide insights into this particular cultural dynamic.

The next chapter outlines my approach in designing and collecting data on my coaching engagements. I present my findings in Chapter 4. Finally, I use the literature in Chapter 5 to explain aspects of my findings and offer implications for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS FOR EXAMINING CULTURE

This chapter describes the theories and principles that undergird the coaching approach I used for the two coaching case examples discussed in this capstone. I also describe how I planned for, organized, and conducted the coaching engagements. I then discuss the methods I used to capture and analyze my data. Finally, I provide information about my clients, their positionality, and how our respective positions influenced our engagement.

Clients' Background

I had the privilege of coaching two Asian American women as part of the field placement in the Leadership Coaching Cohort (LCC) program at the University of Pennsylvania. Both clients were assigned by the supervising faculty of the LCC program. Each coaching engagement included 10 hour-long coaching sessions and a 360-degree feedback session. The second engagement is still ongoing, at the time of publishing this capstone, with four sessions and a 360-degree feedback meeting completed. My clients' names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The first client, Lana, is in her mid-30s and belongs to an Asian American community. She has had a dynamic career, mostly dedicated to her work in philanthropy and the nonprofit sectors. She has a bachelor's degree and was unemployed during the entirety of our coaching engagement. Lana pursued coaching because she wanted to forge

a new career path for herself. Moreover, she wanted a space to process some traumatic work experiences she had encountered prior to engaging me as a coach.

I am currently coaching my second client, Blaire, who is in her late-20s. She has significant business development experience with a majority of her career in the higher education field. Although this experience was her first time entering a coaching relationship, she has participated in coaching 360-degree feedback interviews for colleagues over the years. She is loosely familiar with the coaching process and open to what the process has to offer. In particular, she is interested in taking time to reassess at what point she is in her career and what possibilities are open based on the skill set she has acquired and her personal values.

These two clients come from similar cultural backgrounds yet followed different career paths. They are also in different stages of their careers, thus providing rich data to examine their experiences.

Coaching Engagement Case Study

The Coaching Process

Quality coaching requires intentional preparation prior to each session, careful attention to the client and context during the session, and sustained reflection after each session. To provide scaffolding around the coaching engagement, I prepared thoroughly for my coaching sessions, drawing from experience and the lessons learned in my courses. After each session I reflected individually and in conjunction with my supervisor, Dr. Ostrowski. As you read on, you will see how I set up my data collection for analysis and chose thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) instead of other methods such as a quantitative approach.

Before Engaging With a Client

In preparation for my field placement, I discussed the rules of engagement with Dr. Ostrowski. In addition, we reviewed all communications and documents together. Moreover, I designed a template for recording my notes that included pre-session reflection questions, session notes, and post-session reflection questions (see Appendix A). This format enabled me to capture relevant information about the coaching engagement.

Before each meeting with my client, I answered a set of pre-session questions. Three of the categories were questions on assumptions I am making, tools I plan to use, and relevant theory and research to be harnessed in the session. These questions facilitated an internal dialogue as I prepared for each session. Checking my assumptions at the metaphorical door before each session helped me become aware of any biases I may have had about my client and any fortune-telling I might have done. This internal dialogue prompted an identification of exercises that I anticipated I would do with my client during the session, such as force field analysis (Lewin, 1951) or GROW (Whitmore, 2009). I would incorporate into each session the ideas that arose in my post-session debriefs with Dr. Ostrowski. The debriefs would help me gain perspective about my coaching engagement and about my coaching abilities as they relate to my client. Thus, I entered these sessions with more context, confidence, and preparation. As a novice coach, I found having some of the tools of my toolkit nearby was helpful to reground in the sessions.

While Engaging With a Client

I met with Lana for a total of 10 hour-long coaching sessions over 4 months. These sessions lasted approximately 1 hour and were conducted via Zoom. On two occasions Lana postponed a session; while the reasons were legitimate, the delay affected the flow of our work. We had time constraints so missing sessions when we had much to work through posed a challenge.

During the coaching sessions I took notes related to Lana's concerns as well as notes on any items that might have needed follow-up. For instance, if she had an assignment she wanted to work on in between the sessions, I took note of it. I also noted important concepts, turning points, and actions that needed to be taken by either of us. This tracking helped me focus the sessions and track our work to see if progress was made in the coaching journey.

During each session I took copious notes related to Lana, her issues, and her areas of growth. During the sessions I focused on her needs; my notes reflected highlights and phrases that were repeated because I found the patterns important to note to get to know Lana intimately.

After Engaging With a Client

After each of my coaching sessions I recorded field notes including my recollections of key moments during the session and my reflections on these moments. In these field notes I also referenced relevant theories I used in that session, comparing what I thought I might use in the session and what I did utilize. Reflecting on these insights helped ground me in where I felt I was with Lana. This reflection on theories in terms of cognitive behavioral theory (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011), narrative theory (Drake et

al., 2008), or subject object theory (Ludwig, 2017) served as a check and balance. Did I force Lana to *be* these theories so I can use them, or did the conversation lend itself organically so I was able to locate where Lana was in the process in the coaching engagement?

Lastly, I would answer post-session reflection questions, which enabled me to explore my coaching strengths and weaknesses, draw connections between the session and theory, and pose questions I was left with after the session. These reflections really helped me locate where I am as a coach as I relate within the coaching relationship. I would take these reflections to Dr. Ostrowski, and together we would debrief the session and make connections between what was happening in the coaching relationship and my academic learnings. As Lana and I continued to meet in more sessions, I, naturally, gathered more data to review.

Another phase in thematic analysis was to identify key features of the data, which I was able to do by having a section in my coaching tracker of highlights and important concepts/turning points in coaching sessions. I then would use those moments, along with my detailed notes, to identify noteworthy patterns. I reviewed the key points of data with Dr. Ostrowski to see if these themes resonated with him. Once the themes were in alignment, I analyzed and wrote about the themes, which I discuss more in Chapter 4. The overarching theme is that cultural factors play a role in the coaching relationship.

Theoretical Influences on Coaching Choices

I drew from several coaching theories as I devised the methods by which I was to engage with my client. I primarily relied on narrative theory by Drake and colleagues (2008). The foundation to my approach in coaching is the humanistic perspective, coined

by Rogers (1957). It was important to me that I co-created with Lana to help her see she had agency to design a career exploration experience. I often feel as a minority that when I have concerns and others want to help, they have preconceived solutions without consulting me as an individual having to live with the decisions made. From a narrative perspective, I am left feeling as if I have no agency in my story, which is not the case. Since I had prior experience with unhelpful coaching sessions, I wanted to be different and co-create in the narrative when Lana said she was experiencing disillusionment. In this conversation, she told me she was not able to see a future in the field she is very passionate about. She also felt the system was set up against her. We spent time exploring the narrative of her thought process in this story. In this coaching conversation, I invited Lana to co-create with me two rooms illustrating her thought process, creating a visual representation of what her mind does when she is trapped in her thoughts. We identified something in her thought process was preventing her from moving forward. Narrative work requires creating a space safe for the client to share their story and explore the story with the coach as witness (Drake et al., 2008).

After this powerful coaching conversation, I collected my notes and shared them with Dr. Ostrowski, who unpacked them with me and noted my approach was an example of narrative work. The connection helped me recognize my strength with narrative work in my coaching toolkit. Narrative work is important for coaches who work with people of color because people of color tend to believe they have no control over their stories (Drake et al., 2008). Stories are central to people's identities (Bruner, 1986; 1997). Even though in coaching the coach and the client work on a professional goal, clients bring their entire selves into the coaching relationship. Therefore, coaches touch on identity

work as well. I revisit narrative work with an example of a coaching conversation in Chapter 4.

I utilized cognitive behavioral theory with Lana (Beck, 1976). Separately, she was in the beginning of a therapeutic journey with a counselor. At times during our sessions, she could not articulate options for her future because her language limited her. She would minimize the contributions she made to her organization; for example, when I asked her about her process of onboarding, she would respond, “I don’t know.” But later she would provide a detailed explanation of how she onboarded to organizations as a new employee; she does more than what is given by human resources. I addressed this contradiction by pausing and setting a ground rule: In the sessions she was not to use “I don’t know.” This rule gave Lana the awareness she needed to pause and correct herself when using self-limiting and self-defeating phrases. Cognitive behavior theory helped me highlight the disconnection she was experiencing in our coaching conversations. I was nimble around the use of exercises; sometimes we used the exercises I had identified ahead of time, and other times I needed to pivot in service of the direction the conversation was going. I was able to identify relevant theories as the conversations progressed, and I selected exercises accordingly.

Data Analysis

As stated above, I collected two types of data from my coaching engagements: 360 feedback data and session notes, which included personal reflections. These data provided a robust perspective on the completed coaching engagement with Lana as well as Blaire’s coaching engagement, which was partially completed at the time of writing. A qualitative approach to data analysis permits me to draw out themes that reflect the

importance of culture in coaching relationships. Culture is not to be denied in these engagements; in fact, it underpins all relationships (Burrus, 2011). My approach drew from both case study methodology (Yin, 2018) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Now, at this point one is probably curious about using case studies to highlight how culture plays a role in coaching engagements evolved for me. For starters, having two people I coached at the time of producing this capstone led me to the conclusion that a quantitative approach to this capstone would not be appropriate because the sample size is too small. According to Yin (2018), case study methodology lends itself to exploring questions such as “how” and “why.” My capstone was focused on how culture plays a role in the coaching relationship if it even matters at all. Because of the type of questions I am asking, other methods would not be appropriate. I am not inquiring about who, what, where, how many, and how much of any culture. I want to know if culture underpins and influences coaching relationships. So I chose to conduct a qualitative case study because it enabled me to explore, close up, the dynamics of a coaching relationship in context. I am interested in the “how” and the “why” of my interactions with these clients, sharing what I discover with others, and ultimately applying my learning to my own practice.

Because my data are derived from a series of actual coaching sessions, I had no control over the variables associated with the clients nor those that arose during the coaching sessions; case study methods account for this uncertainty (Yin, 2018). I also had a tiny sample—two clients—so a quantitative approach such as using a scalable survey would not yield reliable data. Since this study draws from data collected in the recent

past, it does not lend itself to historical analyses that could be conducted on an extensive longitudinal data set (Yin, 2018).

Although I did not intend my results to be generalizable, they do illuminate relationships among the client, coach, and context that can be useful to other coaches and may inform future research. In addition, my own reflections on the coaching sessions serve as examples for other coaches as they seek to improve their practice.

I used thematic analysis to examine my findings (Braun & Clark, 2006). This approach is based on their six phases of thematic analysis: (1) I familiarized myself with the data, (2) I identified key features of the data, (3) I searched for themes, (4) I reviewed the themes, (5) I defined and named the themes, and (6) I wrote about the themes. This approach enabled me to organize my data in a systematic manner and identify important themes within my data. These themes reflect consistent patterns in the data, though each theme was not present in every coaching interaction. The themes I identified are not necessarily the most prevalent ones either, but they describe important aspects of the coaching dynamic that I am exploring. I identified themes in an inductive manner, not relying on theory to frame my approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). However, the themes do relate to the theories that informed my coaching and provide insights into the intersection of theory and practice.

This approach was an iterative process wherein I returned to previous steps at several points in the analysis as I began solidifying the themes. I developed a thematic map to organize the relationships among my themes. Scrutinizing the map caused me to focus on some themes that were more central than I initially suspected, and I abandoned other themes that were less common in the data and/or less related to my central

questions. I applied Braun and Clark's (2006) 15-point checklist to assess the quality of the analysis (see Appendix D).

In this chapter I have outlined my coaching approach, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis I used. In the next chapter I describe my findings.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN COACHING: FINDINGS

This project involved coaching two clients across multiple sessions; reflecting on my coaching practice, individually and with my supervisor; and then modifying my practice, based on my reflections. My two clients were Lana, an unemployed Asian American woman, and Blaire, an Asian American woman working in the learning and development space. The coaching sessions had a significant impact on my clients, according to their comments and based on my observations of their growth. In addition, the sessions enabled me to grow as a coach as I critically reflected on my coaching practice and improved my approach based on these reflections. In the following sections I highlight the major themes identified in the data, provide examples from my coaching sessions, and offer potential explanations for these themes through a cultural lens. As a coach of color coaching clients of color, I focus on the significant role culture plays in coaching relationships.

Sometimes I Want to “Fix” the Client

One theme I identified was my urge to “fix” the client. I recognize that as a coach I should resist this urge and design the coaching process in conjunction with the client, yet I had occasions when I offered advice instead of guidance.

In one of the earlier sessions with Lana, when we were still figuring out her coaching goals and before I had collected all the 360-degree feedback, I spent most of the session providing advice. Lana arrived at the coaching session unprepared, anxious, and feeling guilty. At the beginning of the session, she said she was burned out and asked me

what I thought about her career path and her choices in general. In the session I gave her my career story and explained how I would approach her situation if I were in a similar situation. She took in what I said and needed time to process.

When we arrived in the next session, I had planned a total reset with Lana. I was going to sit and be present with her, not resort to advising her as I had in our previous session. While no coaching goals were identified in this session, we discovered Lana was beginning a therapeutic journey with a counselor, recently had adopted a dog, and was ready to enter the exploration phase of her career journey. We discovered she had an abundance of information and did not know how to act on it. Finally, we discovered she often shifts her priorities based on the perspectives of other people.

I can identify several likely reasons why I sometimes tried to fix Lana. I often think that as a Black woman in America I do not have the luxury to sit and ponder problems. Small problems, in my experience, frequently grow into larger problems and can become costly. So I found it often frustrating when I see a relatively obvious (to me) direction to take, but the client does not see it. One reason may be that in my culture more immediate concerns often take precedence over a more deliberate process of thoroughly understanding an issue before requesting or providing guidance. Thus, I would spring into problem-solving and action mode.

However, that was not my client's immediate need during these sessions. She needed someone to listen to her sort out her numerous thoughts and feelings. Because Lana was unemployed, I assumed she needed to make changes quickly so I spent less time on probing her issues and more time on problem-solving. At the time I thought,

“What are we sitting here talking about feelings for? You ain’t got no money coming in.” It was evident we were approaching the same concern differently.

As I continue to reflect, the advice I provided in that particular coaching session is an example of directiveness, as described by Stober (2010). It is not a good practice for a coach to direct the content for the client; instead, the coach should direct the process forward by interacting with the client. This approach is appropriate because clients are the experts on their lives, not their coaches. One of the foundational theories I utilized is adult development theory in which clients are approached as adults and adults decide the best time for change, often when there is a disorienting dilemma. I was frustrated because I let my position and experience rise to the fore instead of meeting Lana where she was, causing myself much frustration.

As I engage with my newest client, Blaire, I find I am having the opposite concern: I have a client who does not need fixing. Thus far, Blaire and I only have had three coaching sessions. In the first coaching session, we got to know each other a bit and discussed the process and what she was hoping to get out of coaching. At that meeting Blaire shared that she was open to seeing where coaching can take her and that she did not have an agenda at the moment. The next time we met, Blaire shared that she started her search for new employment. Immediately, I was surprised because I thought if we did not have a concern to address and she did not need me, what was the point of coaching? In the next session Blaire had already secured a new position so I thought there really was no need to continue coaching. I am used to leading people but now I found myself in a new space where I might be needed for something other than problem-solving. From my cultural perspective, this position seemed like a luxury since I cannot spend too much

time or energy designing the life I want because the focus is on survival. These are salient examples from my experience that illustrate being aware that culture is important in navigating and developing a coaching relationship.

Was Race a Factor in My Preparation?

At the beginning of our first session, I was greeted by a deep sigh of relief when my camera turned on and my physical representation was revealed to Lana. What she saw was a Black woman. I giggled uncomfortably and asked her what the relief was for, to which she replied, “I am so glad that you are a woman of color. I requested a person of color but was not sure if I would get one.”

This was my first coaching engagement, and I was shocked by her reaction. I was unsure how I felt about her reaction and asked myself questions about why the color of my skin mattered to an Asian American woman. The biggest question I had was whether she thought I would apply less pressure toward her growth, or if she thought that I would apply more pressure, perhaps wanting her to succeed more than she did? Either way, what was it about my being a person of color that would impact our coaching relationship?

In my reflections after the first session, I still wondered about the significance of a person of color coaching another person of color. What are the expectations of coaches who are people of color? Does race matter in coaching relationships? Should people of color only coach clients who identify as people of color? What about specific racial or ethnic matching?

I think Lana wanted us to relate to each other regarding how we navigate a society in which systems are constructed that add challenges to our lives. It was important to

Lana that I understand why she was deeply disappointed with the field she was working in, believing that the system was a farce. The people she had worked for did not care for the mission as deeply as she did. Race was not much of a factor for me in entering the engagement as a coach, but it was for Lana. I wondered about this relief when she saw me and, if I had the opportunity, I wanted to interview her to inquire more deeply about the meaning behind her initial reaction. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to collect this data.

Does My Anger Serve a Purpose?

In the third session Lana came unprepared for our session. The conversation went sort of like this:

Coach: So Lana, how are you? Have you given any thought about your coaching goals and your process for decision making?

Lana: Truthfully, I did not give any thought since we last spoke. I did not want to cancel again, so sorry.

Coach: No worries. Is there something you'd like to discuss today?

Lana: Not in particular. Do I have to come to sessions with an agenda?

Coach: The clients are typically in the driver's seat and steer the conversation.

Lana: OH! I wasn't clear that I was supposed to drive the sessions.

[silence]

Lana: Well, I am unprepared, and I feel bad because I want you to get value out of this, too. Well, I do have something else on my mind I would like to discuss.

Coach: Do not worry about me. This is not entertainment. What is on your mind?

I was fuming internally with Lana because I did explain our roles in the very first session. I felt the brunt of her blame but felt that was due to her unpreparedness. When it was our fourth session, I was still angry with Lana: I approached the session assuming Lana was not committed to the coaching process because she had not done her preparatory work, though she did not want to cancel again even though she lacked preparation. This session was still powerful because even though I was angry, I channeled this anger by giving Lana "tough love." I sat with Lana as she faced herself.

I did not let her run in circles in the session due to unpreparedness. We had a significant amount of silence, and she had to sit and think about her commitment to herself.

My anger was surely creating an obstacle because it was hard for me to see Lana with unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961), as we have been trained in the Leadership Coaching Cohort. I felt triggered; in previous experiences I found I was often more invested in the clients' goals and dreams than the clients themselves were. This tension does not sit well for me, and I work very hard to actively not take control of situations and give advice, solicited or unsolicited. Here I felt Lana did not care enough about herself to want to face what was going on with her. I was annoyed with the fact she had a coach in front of her, willing to uncover and explore with her, and it was a wasted opportunity. All I could think about were the people who desired to be coached and did not have the access; their hypothetical spot was taken by someone who was wavering in her commitment.

As I contemplated whether Lana would benefit from my coaching, I began thinking about access to coaching generally. Access is a big word for the Black community. We have less access to many opportunities, and what we have access to tends to be outdated and of subpar quality in comparison to our white peers. Thus, I sat there, frustrated. I am a privileged Black woman, a second-generation American who is obtaining her master's degree at an Ivy League university. Yet, my client was resisting my coaching expertise. I got distracted, wondering what did she say that convinced my program she was a worthy enough coaching candidate? Was there someone out there who may not have put their hand up but desperately needed the coaching and did not have the access?

This anger diminished my trust in Lana. From the fourth session onward, it was hard to see my client the way I saw her in our first session. I had to actively work on reestablishing trust and unconditional positive regard for Lana. I tried staying in the moment and taking what Lana said at face value, not drawing my own conclusions. I debriefed with my supervisor, Dr. Ostrowski, to ensure my perspective was a healthy one and to identify any blind spots in my perspective. Dr. Ostrowski and I explored the question, how important is empathy? Does race place a role in the amount of empathy we give?

These questions are powerful to consider as I think about my experience and how much I was projecting onto my client. I was not in a space to receive empathy when I encountered challenges in my life so I believed that empathy was not necessary for moving forward in situations in which people needed to be able to see a situation clearly and logically from all angles and consider well-informed options so they can navigate the road ahead. However, Lana required empathy for her situation, so I was able to see she needed someone to sit beside her, not someone to problem-solve. If I had not reflected on why I got angry, I would not have considered whether empathy and culture could be explored together.

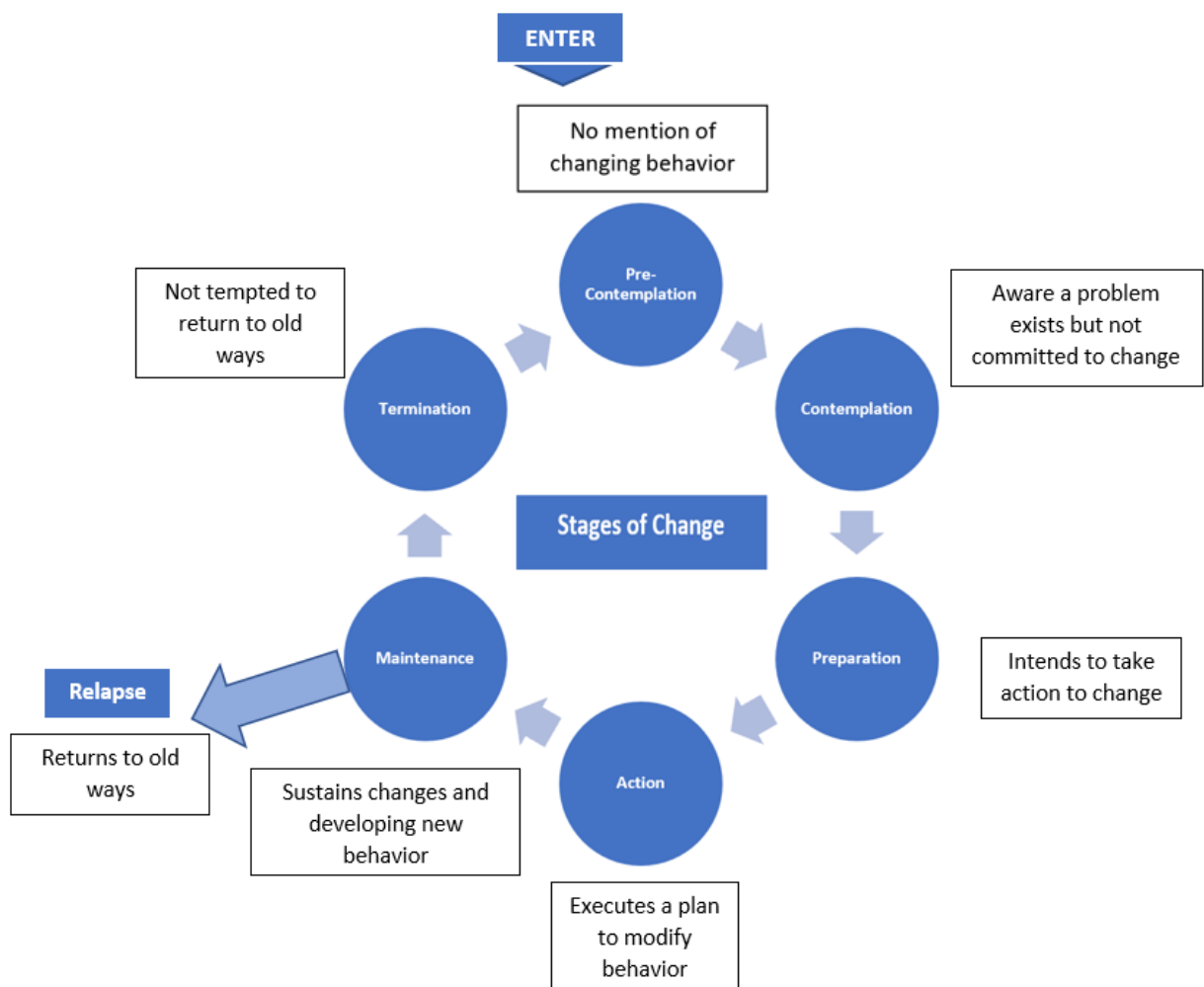
Additional Observations

The coaching theories I used depended on several factors, including the clients' background, their goals, and the stage of the coaching process. For example, narrative and cognitive behavioral therapy worked well for clients in the precontemplation stage. As defined in Chapter 2, narrative coaching is an approach to assist people as they shift

their perspectives about their stories of themselves and others (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011).

I drew from the transtheoretical change model (Adapted from Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), which consists of five stages: (1) precontemplation, (2) contemplation, (3) preparation, (4) action, and (5) maintenance. This model illustrates the process through which people change (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Stages of Change (Adapted from Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983)



Based on our conversations in the first few sessions, I inferred Lana was in the action stage and ready to change her behavior. The action stage is when clients are aware

of their behavior and are taking steps to make the changes they want to see (Norcross et al., 2011). Thus, for the fifth session I prepared to use the GROW model (Whitmore, 2009), which would have allowed us to address her burnout and disillusionment and to plan for her career exploration. The GROW model is an activity used by coaches to assist clients to approach goal setting with clarity. The focus is on forward movement and bypassing obstacles preventing a client from achieving the goal such as self-limiting beliefs. G in GROW represents goal setting; R is reality; O is for options; W is for what will be done, by when, and by whom. This activity is known for tricking the brain into achievement because our brains cannot tell the difference between fact and fiction so this activity helps people see their achievements before ever doing anything.

In conversations with Dr. Ostrowski, he helped me see Lana was in the precontemplation stage so I pivoted to using a narrative approach and resisted the urge to move her to action. The conversation went something like this:

Dr. Ostrowski: Hey T, are you familiar with the transtheoretical model of change?

Thalia: No!

Dr. Ostrowski: No worries! Might be a useful theory for thinking about Lana and your experience coaching her so far.

[sends an image of figure 4.1]

Dr. Ostrowski: Stages of change. What stage is Lana in? What stage are you operating from? Food for thought!

Thalia: Fascinating. She's in precontemplation. I'm operating from preparation and action. Thanks for the food for thought.

Dr. Ostrowski: Excellent!!! Yes, that's what I think, too.

To effectively use the narrative approach, I consulted the transtheoretical model, locating Lana in the precontemplation stage (Norcross et al., 2011), which is when clients are not trying to change their behavior; most times the clients are unaware their behavior needs change.

During the fifth session Lana and I focused our conversation on her hesitation around choosing a new career. I was curious about her thought process and asked her to illustrate it for me. The conversation went something like this:

Lana: I am really disillusioned right now as it relates to my career.

Coach: Why do you say that?

Lana: Well, the field I am in now is the only field I've ever known, yet it is a deeply messed up field. The people who are working in the field mostly do not care about the people they are serving—to them it is a job. Something where they can clock in and clock out. Whereas I am living and breathing the concerns of the community we are serving.

Coach: Tell me more.

Lana: I really do not want to be in the field anymore because it is so hard to implement change. There are gatekeepers and the work environments are toxic. That is why I left so many jobs within a short period of time. This decision reminds me of when I was in college, and I had to choose a major.

Coach: Hmm.

Lana: And I couldn't choose. So I ended up changing many times before landing on something.

[Pause]

Coach: I would like for you to describe for me your inner thought world.

[Pause]

Coach: Imagine that you have a room that represents your inner thought world. Describe for me what that room looks like.

Lana: So one room is organized. There are two chairs and a coffee table. There are books neatly in bookcases. The room feels cozy, organized, tidy, and I know where everything is located.

Coach: Thanks for sharing the description of this room. What can we call this room?

Lana: Ha! We can call the room the ruminating room?

Coach: You are in the driver seat. Is this how you would want to label this room?

Lana: Yes

Coach: Great. Now what is on the other side of that door? What is in the other room?

Lana: Great question. It is messy. There are things everywhere, piles of clothes and junk in various corners of the room. It is really organized chaos.

Coach: Thanks for sharing the description of this room. What can we call this room?

Lana: Uncertainty room. There are so many unknowns.

Coach: Thank you for sharing, Lana. You sure know much about a room you've never been in before.

Lana: That is a good point. I guess I have not been in the uncertainty room to really know what it looks like. I am going off what I think it may be.

Coach: What if you walked away from the rooms? What would you walk towards?

Lana: That is a great question. I do not have an answer right now, but I will write the question down to reflect on as my homework.

[Pause]

Lana: I just feel like if I am not fixing anything then I have no sense of meaning for my life for my waking hours.

This exchange exemplifies my using narrative work to create a new story for the client. In this conversation I was guiding Lana to define the words she chose to describe her situation. When clients are in a place where they show no intention to change, the coach has to be willing to sit with the client with unconditional positive regard and help raise awareness to whatever is unknown to the client (Rogers, 1961). Precontemplation is a great space for narrative work because there is opportunity to locate the client in their story. Stories are central to people's identities, so taking the time to see the client from their point of view is a great foundational step at the precontemplation stage.

Was Race a Factor in the Sessions?

A person's upbringing and socialization influence how we view change. Because of the way I was raised, my definition of change is set one way and is not the same as everyone else. When I find myself in an uncomfortable situation, I do not settle into the precontemplation stage for too long. I am too uncomfortable to feel as if I have the time to mull something over so I spring into action quickly and am ready to act before most others who might be involved in the decision-making process. I see that I have the power to change my situation within the limitations placed on me from society.

On the other hand, Lana's view of change was substantially different than mine. Lana did not see herself as an active agent in her story. I was able to draw that conclusion by the self-defeating language she used in our conversations. These comments did not

reconcile with the success she has described in our conversations but from her perspective that life was done to her. Lana communicated to me that she felt tapped out and wanted someone to make decisions for her. So when she came to coaching sessions, she relied heavily on me to lead her to conclusions. But that is not an effective process. In coaching a client must lead the way, whether they are exploring or creating an action plan (Stober, 2010). The client must feel they have agency in their narrative. They must see they have an active role in the changes they need to make in their lives. People of color often do not feel as if they have any agency in their lives; many believe that life is done to them. This approach to life is a result of years of messaging that life is out of their control so they spend a majority of their time trying to survive instead of thriving.

Narrative work is a great place to start with clients of color, giving them an opportunity to be in the precontemplation stage as they identify and consider their different options.

The Dynamics of the Novice Client and the Novice Coach

Everyone starts somewhere. As a novice coach with my only experience being practice rounds from the classroom, I entered my first coaching relationship nervous and excited. I was nervous because I was beginning a relationship with someone I did not know, and someone who is from a different background than me. As I was prepping for the first session with Lana, I wondered how I could coach someone who is older than me. I was wondering what my role as coach would be and how much of the onus of coaching Lana to become employable was on me. Further spiraling, I was scared the session would turn into a therapy session because she presented nothing relating to her profession to discuss. On the other hand, I was excited to support someone and test out my newfound

skills. Moreover, the ability to make an impact on another human was exciting to think about. I was curious about all the learnings that would emerge from our differences.

Since I was acutely aware that this engagement was my first, I often found myself, as I would like to say, “pulling back the veil” and letting Lana know what to expect as the process unfolded. I gave reasons behind why I asked what I asked, as if I was in the classroom explaining my logic to my professor. I used this tactic to establish credibility and demonstrate I had learned something valuable in my program.

From my perspective, Black women are taught they have to be the best—it is an all or nothing mentality with very little room to be a conscientious learner, even though we all must start somewhere. This insight was prevalent in my mind when I was coaching for the first time ever because I had yet to fully master the coaching skills I had been developing. With this mentality, I discovered imposter syndrome sneaked into my practice, and I began to use crutches such as the GROW model and sticking to a script instead of being present with my client and following my client’s lead. Being aware of how culture influences one’s perspective as a coach is valuable for understanding the client and assists with navigating the relationship with the client (Rogers, 1957).

Lana was a novice client, and I found out it was hard for her to be in the driver’s seat. Plenty of times in the beginning of our relationship she would show up to a session woefully unprepared. In those moments I felt pressure to not let the session feel like a total waste so I ended up driving some of the content. Culturally, that is something I am used to doing: being the one to come in and save everyone from themselves when they have made a choice that led to an outcome they did not want. Lana had an incredibly difficult time narrowing down what she wanted to work on during our coaching

engagement. Each session stood apart from the others, due to the nature of the ever-changing coaching goal.

Conclusion

The vignettes shared in this chapter illustrate themes in my data and support the conclusion that it is wise to consider the role culture plays in a coaching relationship. Culture is not the only factor influencing the relationship between the coach and the client; however, culture has a significant impact on our identities, perspectives, and the world.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT'S THE MEANING OF ALL OF THIS?

This capstone study investigated the role of culture in coaching relationships. Culture plays a significant role in all relationships, yet it is an underexamined component of coaching experiences, especially in the corporate realm (Filsinger, 2021; Roth, 2017). Many corporations are making efforts to diversify their leadership; therefore, the coaching field should likewise diversify its practice to better serve our increasingly diverse population (Stout-Rostron, 2017).

I explore the implications of this diversification by reviewing the foundational theorists who have influenced the coaching practice over the past century, applying what I have learned from the literature and from my coursework as well as analyzing the data from two of my coaching engagements. I have discovered cultural dynamics influence all aspects of a coaching engagement: planning for the coaching sessions, the relationship that develops during the sessions, and the coach's and the client's reflections on the sessions.

In this chapter I provide reflections on my coaching engagements and discuss the major takeaways from my findings, including how culture matters in coaching relationships. I also discuss my findings and the increasingly complex work environment mean for coaches who want to coach cross-culturally. This discussion by no means serves as the definitive answer to my questions on the role of culture but is a starting point for all coaches and scholars who are interested in paving a culturally attuned path forward.

Culture Matters in Coaching

After analyzing my coaching engagements with two Asian American women, I have concluded that culture does matter in coaching relationships. Therefore, coaches need to be cognizant of the cultural implications to effectively bring their full selves into the coaching arena. I also found the way in which people narrate their identities changes depending on the context, one major aspect of which is their culture and the cultures they encounter. As you continue to read on, I expand more on these ideas regarding culture and the coach–client relationship.

Many of the experiences I had while coaching reflect what is described in the literature on cross-cultural coaching. My findings suggest the culture of the coach and the culture of the client, as well as the intersection of these two cultures, matter in a coaching relationship. I discuss the following three examples in detail.

Wanting to Fix the Client

When Lana was dillydallying around addressing her major issues, I had an urge to jump in and address them for her—I wanted to fix her. From my cultural perspective, I believe people don't have the luxury of taking time to mull over problems. As a Black woman, I have an impulse to act quickly when presented with a problem so that small issues don't have time to become big issues. I projected this orientation onto Lana, assuming she wanted to move rapidly toward her goals. When she was not responding to my expression of urgency, I jumped in and started problem-solving for her.

This disconnect between the client's orientation and the coach's expectation is not unusual in the nascent stages of a coaching relationship (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011). Critchley (2010) provides insight into this dynamic by pointing out that coaches and

clients engage in a process of mutual growth, not only learning about each other but also creating, testing, and modifying a unique coaching relationship. One of Critchley's (2010) recommendations is that the coach "declare their experience" (p. 858). In my case, declaring would have meant naming my frustration and discussing its roots as I worked with the client to build a shared relational identity.

If a coach is experiencing urges to fix their client, they must keep in mind how cultural differences may be influencing their view. Moreover, simply being aware can help regulate the climate of a meeting because this awareness eliminates the coach's assumptions about their client. As for organizations that hire coaches and use coaching as a development tool, hiring coaches who have a desire to fix raises the question of the purpose of coaching. We need to train coaches to lean on their awareness first so assumptions can be reduced.

Recognizing the Role of Race

I assumed Lana would be a high achiever simply because she is Asian American. Images of high-achieving Asian Americans are common on TV, in social media, and in my conversations with friends and colleagues. These types of stereotypes can have a pernicious impact on a coaching relationship, especially since clients who might be stereotyped by a coach likely are subject to stereotypes in other relationships (Roche & Passmore, 2021).

Paradoxically, while I assumed Lana was a high achiever, I also assumed she would struggle with workplace relationships. This assumption was based on my experience with an Asian American friend who faced several challenges in professional

settings. Somehow, I was able to hold these two conflicting stereotypes in tension: Lana as the overachiever and Lana as one who is awkward at work.

Assumptions can harm a relationship without one realizing what is happening. I was placing pressure on my client because I assumed she welcomed pressure as a high-functioning Asian American woman. However, because of my cultural assumption and my worldview, I pushed my client to act before she was ready.

Coaches make all sorts of assumptions about their clients when they are first getting to know them. Our initial assumptions are based on what Harrison and colleagues (1998) call surface-level diversity; although as coaches get to know their clients better, they begin to encounter, and make assumptions about, deep-level diversity. Assumptions that involve cultural issues are not uncommon when coaching someone from a different racial or ethnic group, something that Filsinger (2021) calls coaching *in* diversity. These types of assumptions can sometimes be difficult to notice, which was the case with Lana. When assumptions are identified, many coaches do not have the expertise to ameliorate them.

Another example in which culture entered my relationship with Lana was when she expressed relief that she had a Black woman as her coach. I continue to wonder about why she reacted like this: Was she expecting I would have low expectations of her—that the sessions would be easy for her? I also wondered: Did she expect me to have lower expectations for her because I was Black? Or did she think I would provide her with lower quality coaching because I was Black? Did she see me as someone who represented her and therefore could relate to her? Sitting with these questions affected my approach to coaching Lana. Cultural values and practices on both sides of a coaching

relationship influence a variety of factors, such as communication styles, interpretations, and orientations to action (Milner et al., 2013).

These findings demonstrate that representation matters to some clients. As coaches, we must accept this reality and recommend the right coach to fit the clients' needs and preferences (Wycherley & Cox, 2008). Organizations that operate in the coaching space must ensure they can provide enough coaches of varying cultural backgrounds so they can serve a diverse set of clients. Furthermore, organizations should ensure all coaches are equipped with inclusive and integrative approaches so clients are receiving the best care in their coaching relationships. Enough room exists for all coaches to have the capacity to coach cross-culturally; it is a matter of equipping everyone with the best tools for a successful coaching relationship.

Identities Interact Through Stories

My findings suggest the importance of stories in our identities. Coaches and clients carry their identities into the coaching relationship. These identities are also subtly and sometimes profoundly impacted by the coaching process (Cerni et al., 2010; McGoldrick & Carter, 2001). However, coaches are not always aware of how their stories impact the coaching relationship.

It takes deliberate efforts to develop a strong awareness of self (Goleman, 2001). This insight is valuable for coaches, both as a foundation for effective storytelling and as a model for what they are nurturing in their clients. My clients' stories were central to locating themselves within their world. In addition, my ability to locate my identity in relation to the world gives me a stronger awareness of who I am as a coach. I helped each of my clients locate who they are by using narrative (Drake et al., 2008) and appreciative

inquiry (Bushe, 2012) techniques because I have found these approaches to work for me as a person of color. Because of an increased demand for authenticity in workplaces (Kouchaki, 2019), a client with a strong sense of identity and awareness of how they show up in organizational spaces is helpful for coaches. With these clients, coaches can assist with locating their client in their embedded systems. Authenticity shows up when people engage in honest conversations, share personal stories, and bring their full selves to work. Largely, this push for authenticity is driven by the great diversity now present in many workplaces (Kouchaki, 2019).

To zoom out, clients of color generally experience reservations about bringing their full selves into the workplace. As coaches encounter an increasingly diverse set of clients, carefully using narrative work in a way that matches the client can unlock previously hidden selves. The Johari window is one tool used to reveal hidden selves; it is a communication heuristic device that explains communication styles through which humans relate to each other (Beck, 1994; Luft, 1982).

If clients of color are experiencing trouble showing up authentically in the coaching arena as well as in their organization, coaches should take a moment to explore what underpins this hesitation. Coaches should lean into the inquiry about how the client assumes they are perceived in their workplace. Coaches should also begin to question what hidden parts of the client's self do not feel welcomed in the coaching sessions, a place where they are encouraged and supported to show up authentically. Narrative work can uncover the clients' reservations and lead to enhanced outcomes, such as a deeper understanding of communication expectations of the client and the organization.

While listening to clients, coaches should question what story is not being told and look at the story that is being told from different angles. Coaching is a client-centered practice so clients' stories should be central to the engagement: Clients are the experts on their own lives. The life stories clients share provide the content needed to explore obstacles and to give coaches insight in helping to bridge the gaps clients are experiencing (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015)

Organizations periodically shift their norms and practices—sometimes abruptly, sometimes slowly—to cater to market exigencies and their shifting population of employees. Coaches should be aware of this dynamic and address the needs of clients who are not yet comfortable with new workplace norms.

Given these findings, it is evident that navigating any space with humans is nuanced. Humans are idiosyncratic and inconsistent, and our relationships tend to reflect that nature. We bring our cultures, assumptions, identities, and more to coaching relationships. I coached two people with the same surface-level cultural background yet they were not the same at all. I tried to fix one of my clients; instead, she fixed me, reminding me of my responsibility to focus on a client's needs. I learned about my clients through the messy and time-consuming process of storytelling.

Implications for Coaches and Researchers

All of these lessons learned raise a few questions: How can culture and coaching be further researched? What strategies can we deploy beyond being aware of our cultural differences? Most importantly, what does this all mean for coaches?

Although I've asked thought-provoking questions of the industry—many of which cannot be fully addressed without further research—I do have some initial

thoughts on the questions. It would be beneficial for the field to deploy researchers to interview coaches of color and have these coaches encourage their portfolio of clients to share their experiences. The interviews can uncover experiences that may not be well known to the broader coaching industry. The findings could reveal new issues around which people in the industry could put their heads together and develop strategies to improve the coaching experience for clients and coaches who identify as people of color. Similarly, researching clients who are immigrants to the United States can illuminate perspectives that are not well known.

Research should also explore what it looks like to build new coaching models inclusive of all. The new coaching models can be tailored to racial experiences and speak to the clients who may not have felt heard in previous integrative and inclusive coaching models. Strategies for integrating cultural awareness might include coach training for organizations integrating cultural awareness into every module, not having a stand-alone module to check a box. Moreover, organizations should regularly emphasize coaching as client-centered so that adjusting one's approach to attend to culture can obtain the best results for the client. These two strategies on a broader scale can influence the industry and lead to positive change for everyone involved.

What sets coaches apart is the heightened awareness they bring to the coaching relationship. Coaches view their clients through multiple lenses and reflect back to them their often-disordered ideas. Our responsibility as coaches is to ensure we include among our tools a cultural lens, as well as curiosity about the cultural influences on each coaching interaction.

To take it one step further, what does this mean for coaching clients of color? Since we each come from a unique background, we never really know someone until we become curious about them and let them tell us their stories, revealing their deep-level diversity. Coaches working with clients of color have a particular obligation to understand their clients' cultures and should become curious about how their clients' cultures impact the coaching engagements. For example, why does a client of color opt to seek coaching? Why does a client of color choose to narrate their story a certain way? What is important to a client of color and why?

Limitations

This capstone study has several limitations. The first limitation is I have a small sample. I collected data on two coach–client engagements; I therefore cannot make any claims to generalizability. My sample size was not large enough to administer a survey or any other quantitative measure, which is partially why I used the case study method (Yin, 2018). Moreover, my research question explored the “how” and the “why” so quantifiability was not called for. Lastly, I did not have a control condition so I was not able to assess the impact of my coaching compared with someone who did not have coaching.

I initially approached this study as a general case of coach–client interactions. When I reflected on the engagement with my first client, I noticed issues related to culture kept coming up. Consequently, I refined my research question to focus on the role of culture in coaching relationships. However, I collected most of my data on the coaching sessions from a more generic perspective, applying a lens of culture after the

fact. Because of this approach, I likely did not capture all the salient cultural components of my interactions with these clients.

Another limitation is I am a relatively new coach so the coaching moves I employed were not as sophisticated as those used by a more seasoned coach. Being a new coach, I do not have the experience yet to decipher some of the subtler cues that arise in a coaching engagement. The data I collected were filtered through the experience of a novice, which is beneficial in some instances since I have few preconceptions, although my naïveté likely caused me to miss some key aspects.

Last, but not least, I was the main subject of my study so I continually toggled between two roles: the coach being studied by the researcher and the researcher studying the coach. Since I did the coaching, I was invested in the results as a metric for my success. I also wanted to demonstrate I was actively making progress each time I debriefed with Dr. Ostrowski. Since I was measuring my progress based on discussions in each debrief, I would sometimes force myself to offer ideas or try questions I otherwise would have left alone. This approach reflected and enhanced my growth as a reflective coach, though I wondered did I sometimes emphasize growth where little actually occurred?

I came to the coaching engagements with several assumptions. One assumption was Asian American women have it all together, are high achieving, and are not especially emotional. I also have prior experience with an Asian American friend and sometimes projected my opinions of my friend onto my clients. For example, my friend faced a number of professional challenges, which I found frustrating—I transferred some of this frustration to my client Lana. These two assumptions—Asian Americans as highly

competent and Asian Americans as organizationally challenged—added tension, particularly in our initial sessions. Consequently, I was somewhat blind to who Lana truly was, which impacted my effectiveness as a coach and my impartiality as a researcher.

Another assumption I had was coaching an employed client would be a richer and easier experience than coaching an unemployed client. If a client has a job, they typically seek coaching to assist with something concerning their job. Absent a job, a client may seek coaching to assist with personal issues, which are beyond the scope of executive coaching. Coaching is not therapy (Stober, 2010). My client Lana was unemployed so I was concerned throughout our work about crossing ethical boundaries and entering into the realm of therapy. In the end we discussed some personal issues but always through a professional lens and always in service of her employment goals.

Now What? Looking Ahead

I have been coaching as a volunteer for most of my adult life, learning through trial and error and through generous and gentle feedback from friends and colleagues. Thanks to the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania, I have accelerated my development as a coach, both through the coursework on coaching and numerous opportunities to coach my peers. The experience of coaching actual clients—the subject of this capstone—has challenged me to develop my coaching expertise in manifold and unanticipated ways.

As I look to the years ahead, I have set several goals. First, I want to research further the role of culture in coaching relationships by conducting a longitudinal study, which can include designing and launching a survey. I also want to return to the program at the University of Pennsylvania and assist the faculty in supporting future coaches in

the Leadership Coaching Cohort. I want to partner with others, including my classmate and friend Timothy Mahoney, to open a coaching practice in which we work with individuals who traditionally have not had access to coaching while also continuing to develop ourselves as coaches.

Overall, this capstone project has enriched my understanding of the world of coaching and has inspired me to continue learning about the role of culture in coaching as I apply my learning to everyday practice.

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APPENDIX A

Thalia's Coaching Tracker

Pre-session Reflections		
Assumptions I am making		
Questions I have		
Tools I will use/relevant theory and research		
Coaching goals		
Session goals		
Session Notes		
Items for follow-up		
Important concepts/turning points		
Actions		
Post-session Reflections		
How did you draw on your strengths in your coaching today?		
What do you want to work on or improve about your coaching going forward?		
What theories did you draw from today, and how did you apply them?		
What questions(s) did this coaching session leave you pondering?		

APPENDIX B

The Wilkinsky Coaching Model, developed by William S. Wilkinsky, Ph.D., Former Director, Coaching Curriculum, Organizational Dynamics, University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences, has set the standard for effective coaching relationships for over 40 years and has been used in coaching engagements in global profit and not for profit organizations, governmental agencies, and educational institutions.

Wilkinsky 9-Step Process of Coaching – Process Map & Progress Tracking Tool

	Step	Notes on Progress
<i>Getting Started</i>	1. First meeting	
	2. Getting to know the client's strengths	
	3. Client sets preliminary goals. Important to narrow focus to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One behavioral goal OR • An action-oriented change 	
<i>Data Management</i>	4. Establish the Data Plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach & client work together to establish the plan based on the preliminary goal 	
	5. Gather data. Analyze data & create the Feedback Report for the client	
	6. Coach provides Feedback Report to client. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan • Deliver • Reactions 	
<i>Results</i>	7. Client creates the Action Plan	
	8. Implement/Support Role for Coach	
	9. Begin to Disengage/Closure	

NOTE: This process is for the client and the client will dictate the progress. There is no too fast/slow. We anticipate varying speeds of progress depending on client and schedule. These steps can be used to indicate your progress in a general sense. Sharing it with the client, they can make notes on their progress. You can gauge whether this tool is appropriate with the client.

APPENDIX C

360 Feedback Report Interview Questions

The coach and client should collaboratively choose six to eight questions (including the required questions) which are used for all interviews. The order of the questions may be determined by the coach, or the client and coach collaboratively.

1. Describe your experience of working with this client.
2. How have his/her strengths come to the fore in moments of crisis? What can he/she focus on through such times?
3. How would you describe this person's effectiveness as a leader in his/her current role? What can he/she do more or less of?
4. How can this person be more effective as a team manager? What can he/she do more or less of?
5. What advice would you have for this person as he/she continues her journey here at _____?
6. Is there a question I (coach) should have asked, and didn't? What is that question?
7. How would you like to partner with this person after the 360 study is done?
8. Describe the client, his/her working style, the experience of working with his/her.
9. **What are the three strengths that the person currently has, that he/she must maintain?**
10. **What are the top three things/words that come to your mind when you see this person walking towards you?**
11. What are some of the challenges in front of the client as you see them?
12. **What several pieces of advice do you believe this person needs to hear, which others for whatever reason, might be reluctant to tell her?**
13. Can you describe a time when you saw this person in crisis or under severe stress? In what ways, if any, did this person's behavior change as a result?

APPENDIX D

**A 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good Thematic Analysis
Process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 37)**

Transcription	1.	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2.	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3.	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach) but, instead, the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4.	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5.	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6.	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7.	Data have been analysed rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8.	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9.	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10.	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11.	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12.	The assumptions about ThA are clearly explicated.
	13.	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14.	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15.	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.