

Towards Greater Cultural Understanding in Coaching

Jenny Plaister-Ten, 10 Consulting Ltd., Oxfordshire OX14 4FB
Email contact: jenny.plaister@btinternet.com

Abstract

This study investigated the experience of coaching in an executive or business cross-cultural coaching context. A phenomenological approach explored the possibility that the coach can facilitate the understanding of cultural worldviews in the cross-cultural coaching relationship. By means of semi-structured interviews, key factors were identified that contribute to greater cross-cultural awareness, adaptability, understanding and effectiveness. The findings highlight: the diverse meanings of cross-cultural coaching; an exploration of the background, experience and qualities of cross-cultural coaches; the building of key cross-cultural coaching competencies; and the facilitation of cultural understanding in the cross-cultural relationship. The study also highlights the need to recognise that the concept of 'self' varies across cultures and that divergent psychological constructs reflect differing values with differing definitions of success. Consequently, amongst the conclusions is a call for a culturally sensitive approach to coaching.

Keywords: Cross-cultural coaching; cultural worldviews; cross-cultural understanding; psychological constructs; cultural sensitivity; cultural self

Introduction

Cross-cultural coaching has the potential to be sought as a route to cross-cultural effectiveness in the workplace and was declared 'one of the hottest trends' by the Association for Coaching in June 2008. It can facilitate the efficacy of global executives, multi-cultural teams, international mergers and acquisitions and expatriate postings. Yet, coaching has emerged from a Western perspective that may not be appropriate across cultures, given the forces of globalisation and the multi-cultural nature of societies and workplaces today.

According to Abbott *et al* (2006) expatriate failures are largely due to the inability to adapt to a new culture. Moreover, approximately 50% of overseas mergers and acquisitions produce negative returns to shareholders due to cultural clashes (Shelton *et al*, 2003). Furthermore, there appears to be a basic unease about how to deal with cultural differences culminating in questions such as, "How do I coach a German?" featured on a UK chat forum, 2008.

My own interest in this research stemmed from a career spanning 25 years in international marketing and business development (USA, Asia and Holland). On each posting overseas I received no training, coaching or mentoring, yet in Asia I worked with 15 nationalities and had responsibility for 10 diverse marketplaces. I have also noticed when coaching in organisations, that cultural misunderstandings can be discovered at the root cause of an issue.

The purpose of this enquiry is to contribute to the current gap in the body of knowledge pertaining to cross-cultural coaching. There is little information concerning the attitudes, skills and knowledge required to practice cross-culturally and therefore little sharing of best practice; resulting in a lack of confidence and skills for coaching practice. Therefore, this paper examines the determining factors of cultural understanding in the coaching relationship and considers whether the individual choice and goal emphasis of Western coaching processes are applicable to those cultures who are more collectivist or fatalistic in orientation.

This approach has been guided by the following research question and definition of worldview:

...is it preferable, even necessary, for a coach to have an understanding of the worldview of a client from a different cultural background?

A worldview definition is offered as: “a basic set of beliefs that guide action,” (Guba 1990, cited in Creswell 2007, p.19). This approach has necessitated the contemplation of a culturally construed self-concept, represented by sub-consciously held beliefs and values.

Literature Review

The word ‘culture’ originates from the Latin verb, *colere*; to cultivate the soil. However, the German word, *Kultur*, means education (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p.21). This potentially indicates that culture is learned and it perhaps follows that it may be ‘unlearned’. Yet, according to Hofstede (2003, p.4) “unlearning is more difficult than learning for the first time.” Hall (1959, p.37) on the other hand, suggests “culture is acquired,” not taught. Such is the diverse and often conflicting nature of the culture debate which appears to be creating a problem for the coaching profession.

A values elicitation is often a good place to begin in coaching, therefore the literature search began with studies of values and value systems: (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961); (Inkeles & Levinson, 1963); (Rokeach, 1973); (Schwartz, 1995); (Ingelhart *et al* 1998); Bond *et al* (2004). Thereafter, the review widened to draw upon multi-disciplinary sources from interculturalists, counselling, management, training, diverse streams of psychology, and subjective culture (Triandis, 1972). The relatively new field of cultural intelligence (CQ), (Earley and Ang, 2003) was explored, along with the Cultural Intelligence Questionnaire (CQS, 2005); a tool designed to measure individual cultural quotients (CQ). However, during the study, only one of the participants referred to the need to be ‘Culturally Intelligent’, suggesting that its influence upon the profession has so far been limited.

Cross-cultural coaching literature is largely dominated by Rosinski (2003). His contribution appears to have raised the culture concept to the collective consciousness of the coaching profession, despite the fact that his approach has seemingly not been widely adopted in practice. The Association for Coaching (2009) offers a useful collection of case studies for coaching ‘in’ country thereby taking social factors into account, but somewhat less guidance to coaching people ‘from’ different cultures; regardless of who resides where. Significantly, it appears to remain the case that relatively little understanding exists pertaining to the

internalisation of culture and the meanings attributed by individuals to cultural values and beliefs (Gilbert and Rosinski, 2008).

Exploring the internalisation of culture has demanded the contemplation of a cultural self; or selves (Triandis, 1989), possibly distinct from personality or comprising a part of it and formed by values. This cultural self could be brought to awareness in the coaching relationship. Yet, self concepts differ across cultures (Cousins, 1989), (Hsu, 1971), (Markus and Kitayama, 1999), (Triandis, 1989) with the Western self-concept generally thought of as independent and autonomous whereas the Eastern view is typically interdependent. There is evidence to suggest that there are differences in cognition patterns between East and West (Nisbett, 2005) with different psychological constructs, such as self-esteem; choice; responsibility and control reflecting different values (Fisher, 1998). Acquiescence for example, may be construed as a sign of weakness in one culture and a reflection of self-control in another. Furthermore, Lopez *et al* (2002, p.707) state that diverse culturally-bound protective attributions, projections and distancing strategies may be utilised to guard the cultural self. Whilst according to Sue and Sue (2008), talking interventions and self-disclosure may conflict with certain cultural values.

Perspectives on the impact of the culture in the coaching relationship varied widely in the literature with some (Peterson, 2007) viewing it as irrelevant, others viewing it as destined to become mainstream (Cook and Rosinski, 2008) and still others viewing it as an ethical obligation (Corey, 2005). Both Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) point to the need to have experienced prolonged overseas experiences in order to understand the impact of culture, whilst Abbott *et al* (2006) suggest that expatriate executive coaching should be informed by experience.

To date, the majority of enquiries into the culture concept have been ethnographies conducted by cultural and social anthropologists such as (Hall, 1959,1966,1976,1983) or attempts to describe culture using large-scale quantitative studies of national values (Hofstede, 2001, 2003), (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). Whilst these studies have contributed positively to understandings of cultural norms, they have contributed negatively to generalisations about individuals within groups.

Methodology

Mason (2002, p.15) suggests that an enquiry into “understandings” is well-suited to a qualitative research methodology. Whilst quantitative methodologies capture a “snapshot” at a moment in time, they do not appear to provide for the subtlety and complexity of the cultural landscape. Schneider and Barsoux (2003, p.22) suggest that “when exploring culture the search for meaning calls for an interpretive approach.” An interpretivist paradigm therefore seemed best suited to exploration of the cultural domain and a phenomenological approach was judged to be appropriate for describing the nuances of internally-held cultural values, beliefs and perceptions as it looks for the essence of shared experiences, whilst acknowledging diverse meanings amongst individuals. It also provided a framework from within which I could contemplate whether we are masters of our own cultural conditioning or pre-determined by it; I concluded it was both, and that coaching could potentially make a

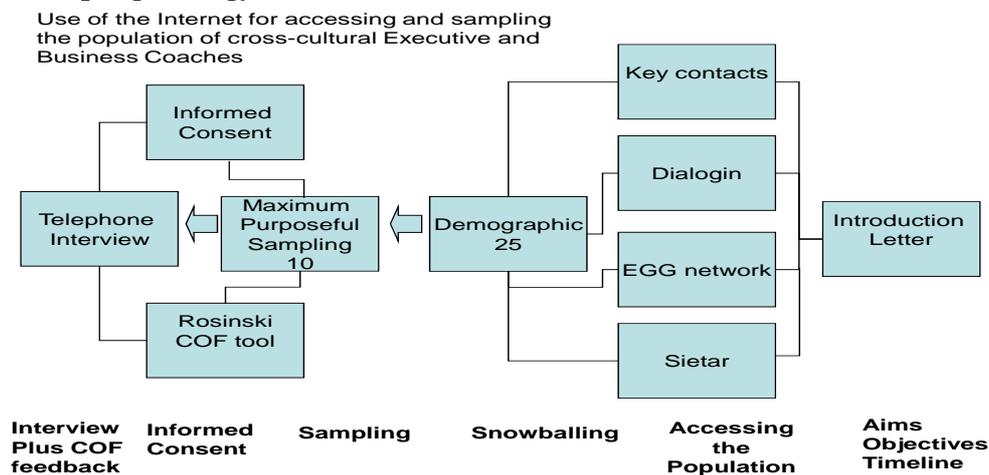
difference when the coachee becomes aware of the *extent* to which his values, beliefs and actions are culturally determined.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Eatough, 2007) recognises that the standpoint of the researcher has a bearing on interpretations and therefore, because of my own background, an IPA approach was eventually selected. According to Smith and Eatough (2007, p.35), the aim of IPA is “to explore in detail individual personal and lived experience and to examine how sense is made of personal and social worlds.” IPA is an idiographic mode of enquiry treating each stakeholder thoroughly and specifically in an attempt to understand their own unique experience. This compares with a nomethetic enquiry that makes general claims about the tendencies of groups or populations. As discussed, the limitations of previous studies of culture are in part due to their nomethetic treatment.

Sampling, semi-structured interview process, data analysis and collection

By posting invitations on websites known to represent international practitioners (<http://www.dialogin.com> and <http://www.sietar.org>) and utilising networks of international coaches, 25 respondents were solicited. A demographic form delivered an objective method of sampling according to a maximal purposeful sampling strategy that “maximises differences at the beginning of the study, and increases the likelihood that findings will reflect different perspectives – an ideal in qualitative research,” (Creswell, 2007, p.126). Informed consent was emailed providing participants with my background and interest in the study and assurance that participation was voluntary, confidential and anonymous.

Figure 1: Sampling strategy



An interview guide was built on Seidman’s three-stage interview process (1998, p.69) with the purposes of: setting the context and background; providing details of the experience; and reflecting on meanings. Seidman (1998, p.11) states, “people’s behaviour becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their own lives.” Therefore, he suggests that a “grand tour” question solicits a broad description of participants’ work and a “mini-tour” question reconstructs a typical cross-cultural coaching session. Additionally,

Lopez and Willis (2004) suggest that an interpretive phenomenologist should be concerned with descriptions of practice, interventions, models and interactions. Questions such as, “what does that mean for you?” or “how does that meaning impact on your practice?” were intended to gain insight into how participants worked to develop an understanding of their clients’ worldview. Furthermore, Mason (2002) recommends a critical scrutiny of early attempts to practice skills. A pilot study was conducted and amendments made to the interview guide to include questions related to sessions that did not go well; to learn from a perspective of what could be done differently.

WorldWork (2006) found “active listening”, i.e. listening for the energy, tone, emphasis, silence and emotion beyond words, to be the primary success factor for international competencies and is a fundamental coaching competency, according to the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC, 2007). It was therefore considered that my listening abilities, as well as the coach participants’ skills, would be highly competent and that this would compensate for any loss of non-verbal cues during interviews over the telephone. This approach worked well, in all but two cases where there were linguistic misunderstandings. I suspected a cultural issue (loss of ‘face’) prevented one of the participants from expressing a lack of understanding of the questions. I in turn had to use my reflective skills to prevent myself from transferring my interpretations upon meanings. On the occasions where there was no direct translation, I learned to use the participants’ own words in their own language: such as *Cariño* (loosely meaning love for another) and *Fachkompetenz* (used at the time in the context of how German people derive trust). Nevertheless, at a practical level, telephone interviewing saves time and money compared with travelling to meet face-to-face. However, perhaps the most important consideration was the need to accommodate multiple geographical time zones. In one day alone participants from Hong Kong, Brazil and Nepal were interviewed.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with coaches, each of whom had more than five years of cross-cultural coaching experience. Despite the limitation of the small sample size, collectively they had lived in 25 countries and had coached 38 different nationalities representing almost 27,000 coaching hours (See Table 1 for participant demographics). In order to provide for triangulation, “the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena,” (Bryman 2004, p.275) participants were asked to complete the Cultural Orientations Framework (COF™) assessment tool by Rosinski and Company. It transpired that whilst the overwhelming majority of the participants did not use this tool in their practice, it served as a useful vehicle to raise their consciousness to the cultural domain prior to conducting the interviews.

The data analysis method of IPA suggested by Smith and Eatough (2007) calls for a thorough and rigorous treatment of each stakeholder; which was provided for by the iterative use of individual mindmaps (Buzan, 1995) and tables that were sent to each participant to validate. An overall mindmap provided a method of synthesising all the responses and formed the basis for the findings.

Nevertheless, despite the rigorous approach, a limitation pertaining to this study is that it has been composed with a Western mindset. Although I have had extensive experience of

working and living overseas and am married inter- racially, I am a Caucasian woman and my approach is likely to have been influenced by my socialisation in the West and the English cultural heritage of the 1960s.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	Residing in	Country of birth /nationality	Has lived in	Nationalities of clients	Current Profession	Coach Training
1	France	French	Mexico, Italy, Quebec, Japan, Germany, HK	Spanish, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Argentinean, Venezuelan	Business & Life Coach & Coach Trainer	Coach University (Coach U)
2	UK	S.African	Zimbabwe, S.Africa, USA, UK, Denmark	American, Dutch, Australian Argentinean, British, Colombian, Mexican, Canadian, German, Norwegian, Danish, French, Spanish, Macedonian, Ukrainian, Russian, Turkish, Indian, Singaporean, Chinese, Korean, Indonesian,	Business Coach	Coaching Academy Business Coaching
3	France	German	Germany, Finland, Austria	French, German, Dutch, American, English, Russian, Vietnamese	Business Coach	LKB School Coaching, NLP, Systemics, Constellations, Approach of Karl Rodgers
4	Hong Kong	Hong Kong Chinese	Only Hong Kong	Mainland Chinese, HK Chinese	Coach and Finance Director	Phd Sydney University Part completed International Association for Coaching
5	USA/ Florida	American	Spain, France, Mexico, Puerto Rico	Japanese. South American, Korean, Mexican	Senior Human Resources Professional (SPHR) & coach	Bachelors & Masters, Certificate in labor relations, none specific to coaching
6	Hong Kong	UK/Canadian	Canada, Thailand, England	Hong-Kong-ese, British, French, German, Brazilian, American, Australian, Canadian, Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, Singaporean, Indonesian, N.Zealander, Philippino, Indian, Spanish, Italian, Swiss, Swedish, Dutch,	Career Change Coach	Coach U, NLP
7	Nepal	American	UK, Japan	Japanese, Australian, English Chinese, Mexican, German,	Coach and Teacher	Psycho-Synthesis, NLP, Trained with Whitmore, Hemmery, Lambeth, Alexander in early 90s
8	Brazil	Austrian	China, New Zealand, Canada	Chinese, American, Singaporean, Dutch, German, Austrian, N.Zealander, Swedish, Brazilian	Global Executive Coach and Trainer	Coach U - Asia, Advantara global executive coaching
9	Germany	British	France	German, Americans, British	Coach, Consultant and Trainer	Coaches Training Institute, Renwick & Rosinski seminars, Centre for Creative Leadership training
10	France	New Zealander /French	Australia, Iran, UK	French, English, American, Dutch, German, Brazilian, South African, Belge, Italian	Founder of School of Coaching & School of Team Coaching, Master Coach with ICF and ICF assessor	Master Credentialed Coach (MCC) with International Coaching Federation (ICF).

Findings

The findings fall into four categories: meanings and definitions; background, experiences and qualities; building cross-cultural competencies; and the cross-cultural relationship.

1. *Meanings and definitions*

‘Cross-cultural coaching’ and ‘worldview’ held unique and individual meanings for each participant. It eventually became apparent that the perceptual landscape ranged from denial that culture was important to a lack of awareness of engagement in a cross-cultural coaching relationship, to a belief that everything is cultural. Furthermore, it was almost impossible to identify what actually constituted cross-cultural coaching.

The following represents a snapshot of ten divergent views, indicating that meaning is wide and varied:

- 1 “working outside of the coachee’s cultural comfort zone”
- 2 “working with difficulties arising from difference”
- 3 “an understanding of cultural complexities brought by the coach into the relationship as value-add”
- 4 “working with differences perceived as challenges”
- 5 “bridge building”
- 6 “working with clients of different nationalities”
- 7 “understanding the emotional states behind the cultural norm”
- 8 “global executive coaching that is more than executive coaching”
- 9 “pragmatic humanism” (Rosinski 2003, p.3)
- 10 “when the client lives or works in a multi-cultural environment”

Similarly, it was necessary for each participant to reflect upon their own meaning of what actually constituted a cross-cultural coaching situation. It was seen as the presenting issue; the context; the nationality of the coach compared with the coachee; or the nationality of the coachee compared with the organisation or the host country. Where there was any consensus it was concerning cross-cultural communication and cultural differences.

Participant 9 was the only interviewee who called for a definition:

“It’s often not really clear what’s meant when people talk about cross-cultural coaching, it’s maybe just coaching in an international environment. Sometimes it’s more narrowly defined as coaching people to deal with culture shock; otherwise it just seems to be adding an international dimension to

normal executive coaching practices. I would say it's probably more than that because obviously culture is much more than nationality. Perhaps the next level is thinking of all the other cultural differences that there are, be it generational or organisational or regional or other mindsets; other collective softwares that exist."

Participant 1 seemed to suggest that the complexities stemming from difference were at the core of cross-cultural coaching:

"The essence of cross-cultural coaching is the situations at the centre of the difficulties identifying what you don't know. Like when (Japanese) clients say to me, "I never would have guessed there was a pitfall or minefield there."

Whereas participant 10 did not see culture as taking a central role at all:

"It only becomes interesting if he works and lives in a multi-cultural environment. Culture is just not the most important piece."

It was generally acknowledged that beliefs and values are held sub-consciously. According to Hall (1959, p.29) "culture hides more than it reveals and what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants." This acknowledgement can provide the coach with fertile ground for exploration, expressed as such by participant 2:

"I will raise those issues. I think a lot of people shy away from this because it seems to be non politically-correct to talk about differences. Whereas I think it's very smart to be talking about differences; it doesn't mean the differences are good or bad, it just means they are differences. It helps to understand that."

2. Background, experience and qualities of the coaches.

The participants in the study had experienced diverse international careers prior to becoming coaches. Each reflected on their own cultural self-awareness. This awareness included the impact of mixed marriages, or the experience of political unrest or social injustice, or the need to come to terms with the history of their country of origin in cases of oppression; such as South Africa or Nazi Germany. They are comfortable with change and operating outside of their comfort zone, although participant 3 explained the need for cultural boundaries as he described 'losing himself' in a new culture. Several saw it as an advantage to be of a different culture to the coachee. Cross-cultural coaches enjoy a multi-cultural lifestyle and had often been raised as "global citizens". All of these factors seemed to encapsulate a way-of-being that sometimes found it hard to function in a mono-cultural environment.

Moreover, they had learned from their own cross-cultural mistakes and this had provided them with an accumulated cross-cultural skillset:

“I made all the mistakes and got all the scars myself. I had my cross-cultural battles. I now support people on all the mistakes I made.” Participant 2

It would seem that the key aptitudes of cross-cultural coaches include: challenging their own assumptions; cultural self-awareness; remaining open and a tolerance for ambiguity.

- challenging their own assumptions

“I think in cross-cultural coaching, the biggest mistake is to assume you understand the other person’s experiences more quickly than you should. If I’m not careful I will assume that I know exactly what they mean when actually I don’t.” Participant 7

Participant 1 explained how ‘being candid’ could be used as a tool for challenging assumptions:

“It’s about being extremely candid – asking for clarification, even using an excuse that I was not born and raised in their culture. Asking... Can you educate me as to why this is important to you or impacts you so much” I may not have the understanding.”

- cultural self-awareness

“Living overseas allows me to create distance from myself and my culture because then I can see it as a separate thing. Every time you step into a different culture, you have to re-analyse everything - you become aware of yourself and all these background beliefs, decisions and choices which you’d never have considered before, until you suddenly find out there’s a whole country where people don’t think of it that way.” Participant 6

Participant 8 saw cultural self-awareness as fundamental to her development:

“Part of our jobs as coaches is our own development and raising our own awareness. I do catch myself while working with the client, realising where I stand on something and that part of it may be personality but another part is simply my culture and how my parents raised me.”

- remaining open

“There’s something in us that wants to question, so for example as a child attending Catholic school in Queens, New York, right on our same block there were Jewish people and my very good friend was Jewish. My brother told me that Jews don’t believe in the Catholic church, and the nuns at school told us that Catholics would be going to heaven and at the time they were kinda saying no-one else was. I thought, “why isn’t my friend going there, she needs to go there too, I can’t be going there without her?” So it predisposed me to maybe understanding a different point of view.” Participant 5

Participant 7 explained “remaining true to the state of curiosity.” She described this state-of-being as objective and ego-free; somewhat like a meta-position.

- a tolerance for ambiguity

“Tolerance and intolerance - from my upbringing, my brother had a disability and other children were very cruel. I was horrified at the way they behaved, and angry. Why would they be this way to him? Maybe it’s a good thing if early on you have noticed that people are not like you and that some bad things are happening as a result. Maybe the worst thing is in societies where everyone seems to be raised the same; there’s a tremendous strength in that, but maybe it predisposes you to be intolerant of others.” Participant 5

It would seem that cross-cultural coaches need to develop a tolerance of ambiguity. To be open it seems necessary to experience closed mindedness; to be tolerant it seems necessary to confront intolerance and to understand difference it seems necessary to confront universality.

“We have to think in terms of ‘no difference’ between nations, but at the same time we say ‘respect the difference’.” Participant 3

3. Building cross-cultural competencies.

Working with awareness in the coaching relationship seems to be the crossroads where psychology and culture meet. Hofstede (2003, p.230) asserts, “awareness is where it all starts.” From awareness, meaning may be explored and was considered to be a core competency, with interventions including: gestalt techniques; raising differences; formulating a cultural hypothesis and the use of training tools, such as the international profiler (TIP) from WorldWork.

“I have in my mind a hypothesis about which cultures have which values in common.” Participant 2

Moral, Abbott and Darmouni (2009, p.12) refer to the need to ‘mix and match’; “to synthesize different approaches into an intervention that works for the client in the context.” Techniques ‘beyond language’ cited in the study included: clean language (Grove, 1989); symbolic modelling or the use of metaphor (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000); drawing; art and music. Furthermore, Darmouni and Krigbaum (2009, p.119) suggest “any real cross-cultural initiative must start by understanding the science, art and importance of human emotion”. Indeed, the study emerged that working at the emotional level with cultural self-identity can help to identify cultural mandates:

“It’s only by expressing their feelings that the person will understand their cultural self-identity. So we explore the way she sees herself and the links with emotion.” Participant 3

Throughout the study it was implied that extra patience and a willingness to work with complexity are required to work cross-culturally.

“I spend a lot of time using different angles to explain things. You need a lot of patience.” Participant 4

In order to accommodate differing meanings attributed to ‘responsibility’ cross-cultural coaches are required to work creatively to reframe culturally-mandated issues. This means that the change and action-oriented processes typically associated with an individualistic culture might become “*modifying awareness*” or “*taking a stronger part*” in more fatalistic or collectivist cultures, according to participant 1:

I worked with sub-consciously held beliefs and values with a Spanish client, teacher, single, 50, living with her mother and finding herself challenged (stressed) by the unruly behaviours of the school-children. She identified a strong need that every day on the way home from school she would go and sit in front of Blessed Sacrament to pray or to place herself in the hands of God, or cuddle into the love of God. Spain being incredibly Catholic and given the scepticism that rules in France over religion, I sensed as a coach that she had an opportunity to take a little bit more the reins of her life than just cuddle in the love of God. I asked her to describe her emotions and what she was getting out of this cuddle in the arms of God. I suggested an exercise of an active dialogue with God, what would she be asking from God, what would she be trying to acquire – which would be more dynamic than just cuddling in the arms of God. This was a difficult cross-cultural and more than cross-cultural, cross-religion exercise (a form of cross-cultural).

Conflicting values were said to be a repercussion of globalisation as people experience differing cultural influences during the course of the lifespan; a person born in one country, may be educated in another, work in several others and have family residing in still others, as the following coaching story from participant 6 illustrates:

I had a client in Taiwan. He was involved in a family business related to his wife’s family; there was a hierarchy in the family and huge expectations for him to enter that business. He had an internal struggle about whether that was really what he wanted. I’m realising now that I would have been acting as a counterpoint – because he was educated in the US, he really valued Western thinking, about independence and he knew that there was a difference in his culture and the way he was educated and so there was some conflicting values for him. It was probably useful for him to be able to talk with someone like me because I would easily understand those values, whereas he’s living in Taiwan surrounded by people who don’t understand those values so well and would have expectations about him with regards to his duty to his family.

Nevertheless, this story also highlighted the danger that Western may become synonymous with ‘international’:

“It’s a higher status to have a Western coach than a Chinese one, but at the same time it might be more challenging. They really value Western culture, so they don’t care if it’s Australian or German or British or anything, just that it’s Western.”

At times a more directional approach was called for:

“The American (non-directional) coaching culture is about not giving away a lot of information about yourself; I have found that this doesn’t work well in other cultures.” Participant 8

Similarly, the coach’s use of the self-as-an-instrument (Shapiro, 1967) can contribute towards the building of trust and understanding in the coaching relationship:

“The mainland Chinese people - they are more relationship based. Chinese people just want to listen, so you feel like a God, they tend to need more direction from us.” Participant 4

Burr (2003, p.3) suggests that “the ways in which we commonly understand the world, are historically and culturally specific.” A systems approach to coaching (Cavanagh, 2006) takes into consideration the multiple influences impacting the coaching relationship such as economics, politics, cultural norms, education systems, history as well as cultural theories. It can help to identify the norms in society such as the degree of choice or self-determinism that a person from a particular culture may have, or the social structures impacting them; such as the shame culture of the East or the guilt culture of the West. It may also help to evaluate how trust is built into the culture, for example *Fach Kompetenz* in Germany, or an inherent lack of trust in the Brazilian culture.

“You need to understand the norms, otherwise you can’t coach across cultures, you may not understand all the language or the nuances, but you need to understand the norms otherwise its very difficult.” Participant 7

Examining the economic or political structure of a country may provide an indication as to the opportunities or constraints an individual is likely to have within it:

“Until a few years ago the economy was so uncertain and inflation so high at 200%, you could simply not plan the way.” Participant 8

Examining education systems can provide some clues as to the degree of flexibility of thought an individual might exhibit:

“In mainland China I think that the techniques really have to change to be effective there; people seem to be at a different stage of learning. It’s about life concepts and ways of thinking - actually teaching people how to think about things.” Participant 6

Examining history brings with it multiple opportunities to understand the fabric of society that the person originates from:

“In Brazil there is a history of being the biggest importer of Africans into slavery in the world, so if you’re a slave, would you like to work hard for your master?” Participant 8

Drawing on theory can assist with understanding the tendencies of certain cultures to behave in certain ways:

“It is not only ‘power-distance’ that creates a trust issue but also the ‘uncertainty-avoidance’ (Hofstede, 2001, 2003) creates a challenge.”
Participant 4

4. The cross-cultural coaching relationship.

When addressing the personally-held meanings that coachees attribute to membership of a cultural group; be it national, societal, organizational or team, most cultures appear to have a need to be safe and not to be judged or stereotyped according to history, tradition or perception. Cross-cultural coaches saw it necessary to create a safe space in the relationship, as a pre-requisite for a successful coaching outcome. Nevertheless, ways of creating this varied. Examples of techniques utilised are:

... ‘a neutral space’:

“I go to a session with the knowledge of different cultural meanings whilst holding them in a ‘neutral space’.” Participant 2

... ‘holding different values lightly’:

“I bring a neutral and bigger picture understanding or perspective on choices by ‘holding different cultural values lightly’. That can help to expand people’s horizons in terms of cultures.” Participant 6

...and ‘suspended belief’:

“I refrain from letting my instincts run wild by ‘suspending belief’: holding my instincts at bay and allowing myself to be receptive to what was happening.”
Participant 5

There is some basis for suggesting that trust and understanding reside in the energies in the coaching relationship, delivered by means of a higher meaning and purpose:

“Working with a mix of humility, respect, listening and trust - so the energies come closer together. To understand him, to understand diversity - not to judge, or have negative feelings about diversity.” Participant 3

And in the case of participant 2, by a linking of values:

“I have articulated a lot of values that were linked – I hadn’t put them all together before - partly the political stuff, partly the cross-cultural stuff. Cross-cultural is second nature, because it is part of something bigger. What I know is that it feels like an integral part of me. The cultural thing is a part of a bigger whole – different religions and different political views. It feels meaningful for the times.”

At times, an altruistic desire to contribute to the greater good seemed to prevail, described as the breaking down of social injustices and prejudices and the building of bridges.

“I like to see it as playing a role to break through prejudice and intolerance which is founded on pure lack of understanding or experience or exposure.” Participant 9

Conclusion

This study has identified unique and sometimes competing perspectives relative to the integration of the culture-concept into the coaching relationship. It is possible that the coaching profession may never agree upon a common definition and multi-disciplinary literature does little to provide clarity. For this reason it is incumbent upon each coach practicing in a multi-cultural context to clearly outline their approach. However, those definitions that are grounded in research are likely to have more standing and for this reason I suggest the following definition, building on the work of Whitmore (2002) and Lao-tzu (604 BC-531 BC): *“Cross-cultural coaching is working with awareness of cultural differences and facilitating culturally-determined steps.”*

Cross-cultural coaching appears to be primarily about raising awareness to the meanings we attribute to our cultural self-identity and the degree to which our values, beliefs and actions are determined by our cultural self and the multiple influences of culture. Culturally-determined steps are based upon the *extent* to which culture enables or restricts the coachee and the degree to which it determines the actions of the coachee. As with all coaching it is up to the coachee to determine this, but the study suggests that the coach may be instrumental in recognising and highlighting the possible impact of culture upon the issue. The use of the self-as-an-instrument and a more directional style of coaching were considered to be appropriate at times. Furthermore, it would seem that coaching has the potential to work with the unlearning of cultural responses that no longer make sense for the coachee.

Consequently, in a national culture bound by religious or societal mandates, the coachee is likely to be less inclined to take personal responsibility and the coach will need to cultivate a relationship that does not threaten their cultural self-identity. An appreciation that Western

theories and techniques are not applicable to all cultures is a requirement for those coaches interacting with people from the East. It is suggested that the Western approaches to action, goals, choice and change inherent within an achievement oriented, individualistic culture may not be appropriate in collectivist cultures that value harmony and relationships. This may require some creative reframing by the coach, perhaps working more with the modification of awareness and goals that are step-by-step or 'emergent' (Clutterbuck, 2008). There is a danger that international becomes synonymous with Western, potentially limiting possibilities for the fusion of Eastern and Western perspectives in the future.

It would seem that if we appreciate that different cultures have different values, degrees of fatalism, self-determination and choice reflecting differing psychological constructs, then it is necessary to identify ways of working that are appropriate to the coachee's culturally-determined sensibilities. This may require working with culture-as-meaning at the emotional level in order to understand divergent emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses and to understand the *influence* of culture upon the individual that comes from multiple levels (societal, team, organisational, family, religion, etc) that the coach can work with in a culturally sensitive manner.

Whilst there is no one ideal model that cross-cultural coaches draw upon, a systems approach appeared to accommodate the multiple external influences and cultural norms that the coach needs to be aware of. Working cross-culturally takes time, drawing on the flexibility and creativity of the coach to facilitate unique solutions when working with differing concepts of self, differing cultural values and sometimes opposing cultural mandates. Working with awareness of differences also means that a keen adherence to the boundaries associated with self and other is required. Indeed as Armstrong (2009, p.35) suggests, global executives need both insight and 'outsight'; "the ability to observe and read others". Gestalt techniques were found to be useful in this respect. Extended tenures overseas appear to be a desirable credential for the cross-cultural coach and upon which he bases his intuition.

There appear to be key qualities that a cross-cultural coach draws on including: challenging assumptions; remaining open; cultural self-awareness; and coping with ambiguity. These techniques and qualities contribute to a cross-cultural toolkit and the cross-cultural wisdom that is likely to be demanded by global organizations and of global executive coaching. It is incumbent upon the cross-cultural coach to be aware of and comfortable with their own cultural self-identity in order to remove any bias. Whilst the study did not identify any new reflective practices in this respect, further research may reveal this.

Significantly, it would seem that the answer to the research question depends largely upon how the coach views the impact of culture. The answer may be plotted on a gradient ranging from optional to imperative. Construed as an ethical obligation, working towards understanding diverse worldviews will likely emerge as mainstream practice. If on the other hand culture is viewed as a collective 'bigger picture' construct not affecting personality or the cultural-self, then it might be viewed as optional. If tenures overseas are considered to be a pre-requisite for global executive practice then it may emerge as a specialist stream of coaching.

Moreover, as globalisation persists there will be a pull based on the need to interact in an increasing number of multi-cultural teams and with ever increasing multi-cultural populations. These influences are likely to alter the cultural profile of those presenting for coaching in generations to come, and cross-cultural coaches would be well advised to equip themselves with the necessary skills. Nevertheless, further research is required to further understand the impact of culture in the coaching relationship; particularly from the perspective of the coachee.

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Jenny Plaister-Ten is Director of 10 Consulting Ltd., a coaching and consulting practice and an experienced business professional. She has worked in UK, USA, Asia and mainland Europe for multinationals such as Fujitsu/ICL and HP/Compaq in marketing and business development capacities. She founded High-Tech Associates Pte. Ltd, Singapore.