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Bridging Worlds: A Relational Framework for Ethical Integration Across Coaching Epistemologies

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Abstract

Contemporary coaching is increasingly shaped by an epistemic divide between formal, psychology-informed practice and online coaching embedded in social media and digital culture. Although both aim to support human flourishing, they operate according to different assumptions about knowledge, legitimacy, and transformation, generating recurrent ethical tension and misunderstanding. This conceptual paper examines the philosophical roots of this divide and illustrates how epistemic misalignment can become ethically consequential in practice. Drawing on theories of epistemic injustice, recognition, and relational ethics, the paper introduces the Bridge Model, a relational framework for ethical integration across coaching ecosystems.

Keywords: coaching philosophy, online coaching, coaching psychology

Introduction

Once closely associated with organizational development, leadership, and psychology-informed practice, coaching has expanded into a broad cultural phenomenon encompassing wellbeing, entrepreneurship, lifestyle design, and social-media-based identity work. Distinct coaching ecosystems now coexist with limited shared language, assumptions, or ethical infrastructure.

Central to this fragmentation is the shifting meaning of the term coach itself. Within formal professional contexts – such as organizational consulting, healthcare-adjacent practice, and accredited coaching psychology – coaching typically signals structured training, supervision, adherence to ethical codes, and engagement with evidence-informed methods (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020; Grant, 2011; Hawkins & Turner, 2020). It is important to note that this category encompasses diverse traditions, including coaching psychology, systemic coaching, humanistic approaches, and organizational consulting, each with differing assumptions about change and evidence.

Within online and platform-mediated environments – particularly social media – coach often denotes something quite different. Here, authority is frequently grounded in lived experience, narrative identity, authenticity, and aspirational transformation rather than formal qualification. Digital culture rewards visibility, emotional resonance, and personal storytelling, elevating experiential knowledge and parasocial connection as markers of credibility (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Within this epistemic context, expertise is often understood as something one embodies rather than something one formally acquires. In this paper, 'online coaching' refers not to the use of digital delivery platforms such as Zoom *per se*, but to coaching practices embedded within social media and platform cultures, where legitimacy is primarily

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constructed through visibility, narrative identity, and aspirational branding rather than institutional affiliation. For instance, this may include Instagram-based business coaching programs, TikTok-led mindset coaching, or group containers delivered via platforms such as Kajabi or WhatsApp communities.

Both forms of coaching legitimacy are coherent within their respective cultural and philosophical frameworks. However, when these ecosystems intersect, they often misinterpret one another. Formal practitioners may view online coaching as ethically precarious, underqualified, or psychologically overreaching, while online practitioners may experience formal coaching discourse as elitist, exclusionary, or disconnected from lived reality. Public debates about “unregulated coaching,” “unlicensed healing,” or the “wild west” of online practice reflect genuine concerns about boundary violations and client harm, yet they also risk collapsing complex philosophical differences into moral binaries of ethical versus unethical, legitimate versus illegitimate (Illouz, 2007; BBC Worklife, 2024).

This paper is a conceptual paper, supported by illustrative examples drawn from a small qualitative dataset, reflecting on the many contemporary ethical tensions in coaching that are better understood as epistemic conflicts rather than solely as failures of individual conduct. Disagreements about safety, scope of practice, and professionalism are underpinned by deeper divergences in assumptions about what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is trusted, and how human change occurs. Formal coaching emphasizes reflective inquiry, professional boundaries, and evidence-informed dialogue; online coaching often foregrounds intuition, identity transformation, emotional intensity, and narrative re-authoring. Each operates according to its own internal logic, yet each tends to evaluate the other using standards that do not translate across epistemic contexts. While this paper discusses “formal” and “online” coaching as analytically distinct, in practice these exist on a continuum, with many practitioners drawing on elements of both.

Philosophical and sociocultural theories help illuminate why these tensions escalate so readily. Concepts such as testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007), situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), and recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) suggest that critiques of practice are easily experienced as challenges to identity, legitimacy, or moral worth rather than as professional feedback. Psychological theories – including reactance (Brehm, 1966), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and moral reframing (Feinberg & Willer, 2019) – further explain why attempts to impose ethical correction across epistemic divides often provoke defensiveness, polarization, and in-group consolidation rather than reflective change.

The aim of this paper is not to adjudicate which coaching epistemology is superior, nor to argue for the regulation or homogenization of a diverse field. Instead, it makes a philosophical contribution by examining how epistemic divergence itself generates ethical vulnerability, and by proposing an alternative approach to ethical development grounded in relational engagement rather than adversarial critique. Using conceptual analysis supported by illustrative qualitative data, the paper introduces the Bridge Model: a relational framework designed to support ethical integration across coaching ecosystems while preserving epistemic pluralism.

The qualitative data presented are drawn from a small, pre-existing dataset of client reflections (N = 18) relating to experiences of online coaching. These data are not analyzed

empirically nor used to make claims about prevalence. Rather, they are included illustratively to demonstrate how epistemic misalignment, blurred boundaries, and opaque authority can become ethically consequential in practice. By situating these experiences within a broader philosophical analysis, the paper seeks to move the conversation beyond individual blame toward a more systemic and relational understanding of ethical risk.

The paper is structured in four parts:

1. conceptualizing epistemic differences in coaching,
2. illustrating ethical tensions through client accounts,
3. examining why adversarial critique fails, and
4. introducing the Bridge Model.

Conceptualising the Divide: Two Epistemologies of Coaching

Debates about legitimacy, safety, and professionalism in coaching are frequently framed as ethical or regulatory disputes. However, such surface-level disagreements obscure a more fundamental philosophical issue.

The Formal Coaching Epistemology

The formal coaching epistemology is grounded in traditions of psychology, adult development, organizational learning, and reflective practice. Its norms are reinforced through universities, accreditation bodies, and professional associations, which emphasize competence, supervision, ethical accountability, and evidence-informed approaches (Grant, 2011; Hawkins & Turner, 2020). Within this epistemic framework, legitimacy is closely tied to justification: practitioners are expected to articulate the theoretical rationale for their methods, to situate their work within established knowledge traditions, and to engage in ongoing critical reflection.

Transformation is understood not as a singular moment of change, but as an emergent process co-created through dialogue, insight, and reflective inquiry. Professional boundaries are central, not merely as procedural safeguards, but as ethical commitments that protect clients from psychological overreach and clarify the limits of practitioner competence (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2020). Authority, in this context, is something earned and maintained through training, supervision, and ethical transparency rather than personal narrative alone.

The Online Coaching Epistemology

In contrast, the online coaching epistemology operates within a markedly different cultural and philosophical logic. Shaped by digital platforms, entrepreneurial identity, and economies of visibility, it privileges lived experience, narrative authority, and embodied insight as primary sources of knowledge. Rather than grounding legitimacy in formal credentials, authority is often derived from personal transformation stories, emotional resonance, and perceived authenticity.

Scholars of digital culture note that social media platforms reward visibility, certainty, and emotional intensity, elevating forms of knowledge that are immediate, personal, and affectively compelling (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2013). Within this epistemology, expertise is frequently

understood as something one is rather than something one formally acquires. Knowledge is validated through resonance – by whether it feels meaningful, motivating, or aligned – rather than by reference to external evidence or institutional standards.

This approach draws implicitly on philosophical traditions that emphasize situated and experiential knowledge (Haraway, 1988), narrative identity, and embodied understanding (Pols, 2014). Online coaching often frames accessibility as a moral value, positioning lived experience as a corrective to perceived elitism or gatekeeping within professionalized fields.

Divergent Conceptions of Transformation

These epistemic differences give rise to contrasting theories of human change. Formal coaching typically conceptualizes transformation as gradual, dialogical, and reflective – a process that unfolds through sustained inquiry and relational depth. Online coaching, by contrast, often frames transformation as decisive or identity-based: a moment of alignment, energetic shift, or narrative reorientation that promises rapid change.

Neither conception is inherently incoherent. However, problems arise when one epistemology evaluates the other using its own criteria. Formal practitioners may interpret decisive or emotionally charged transformation narratives as simplistic or unsafe, while online practitioners may experience reflective, process-oriented approaches as slow, inaccessible, or disempowering. Without recognizing these philosophical differences, critiques risk missing their target.

Cultural and Structural Drivers of Epistemic Divergence

Several broader cultural and structural forces intensify this epistemic divide. Therapeutic culture has normalized psychological language in everyday life, blurring distinctions between therapy, coaching, and self-help (Illouz, 2007; Cotter, 2019). Digital platforms destabilize traditional forms of expertise while elevating peer-based and experiential knowledge (Khamis et al., 2016; Bishop, 2021). Algorithmic incentives reward certainty, personal disclosure, and emotional intensity – qualities that do not easily align with formal ethical practice.

In addition, classed and structural barriers to education and accreditation mean that many practitioners enter coaching through lived experience rather than academic or professional pathways. These dynamics render online coaching simultaneously appealing and precarious: it offers community, identity, and accessibility, yet often lacks shared ethical infrastructure.

Recognizing these epistemic foundations is essential. Without doing so, ethical debates collapse into caricature – formal coaches are framed as rigid gatekeepers, while online coaches are cast as reckless or unqualified. Such binaries obscure the philosophical and cultural contexts that shape practice and prevent meaningful ethical dialogue (Fricker, 2007).

Philosophical Tensions and Epistemic Injustice

From the perspective of formal coaching, concerns about online practice frequently center on issues such as boundary violations, misuse of psychological language, lack of contracting, and inadequate supervision. These concerns are grounded in well-established ethical frameworks

designed to protect clients from harm. However, when these critiques are expressed without acknowledgement of epistemic difference, they can inadvertently reproduce forms of epistemic injustice.

Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice provides a useful lens here. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly deflated due to prejudice about their social identity or epistemic status. In the context of coaching, online practitioners may experience formal critiques as dismissive of lived experience, narrative authority, or embodied knowledge – forms of knowing that are highly valued within digital and entrepreneurial cultures. When experiential knowledge is treated as inherently inferior to institutionally validated knowledge, practitioners may feel not merely corrected, but silenced or delegitimized.

Alongside testimonial injustice sits hermeneutical injustice: a structural gap in shared interpretive resources that leaves individuals unable to make sense of their experiences or to have them properly understood. Many online coaching practitioners operate without access to the conceptual language used in formal ethical discourse – terms such as scope of practice, psychological safety, or informed consent may not map cleanly onto their epistemic frameworks. As a result, ethical expectations remain opaque, increasing the likelihood of unintentional misalignment rather than deliberate transgression.

Recognition theory further clarifies why these dynamics are experienced so acutely. Honneth (1995) argues that recognition is a fundamental human need, underpinning identity, self-respect, and moral agency. Ethical critique that fails to acknowledge a practitioner's values, intentions, or epistemic standpoint can be experienced as misrecognition: not simply disagreement, but denial of legitimacy. In such contexts, defensive responses are not irrational; they are predictable reactions to perceived moral injury.

These philosophical dynamics are intensified by the relational nature of online coaching itself. Authority within digital coaching ecosystems is often inseparable from personal identity, self-disclosure, and narrative coherence. Critiques of practice therefore risk being interpreted as critiques of personhood. What formal practitioners may intend as professional feedback can be received as an attack on authenticity, autonomy, or worth.

This helps explain why ethical debates in coaching so often escalate into polarization. Rather than fostering reflection, adversarial critique can reinforce in-group boundaries, deepen mistrust, and entrench epistemic silos. Online practitioners may retreat further into communities that affirm experiential authority, while formal practitioners may intensify calls for regulation or exclusion. Neither response addresses the underlying epistemic misalignment.

Importantly, epistemic injustice does not operate in a single direction. Clients, too, may experience injustice when they lack the interpretive resources needed to evaluate coaching practices critically. When psychological language is used ambiguously, metaphorically, or aspirationally, clients may struggle to discern whether a coach's authority is grounded in training, intuition, personal belief, or branding. This epistemic opacity can undermine informed consent and heighten vulnerability, particularly in emotionally or financially charged contexts.

Recognizing these dynamics reframes ethical tension in coaching as a relational and systemic problem rather than a series of isolated ethical failures. Harm may arise not only from overt misconduct, but from mismatched assumptions, unshared meanings, and the absence of common interpretive frameworks. Without attention to epistemic justice and recognition, well-intentioned efforts to improve ethics risk reproducing the very harms they seek to prevent.

Illustrating Ethical Tensions Insights from Client Data

To illustrate how the epistemic differences described above become ethically consequential in practice, this section draws on a small set of participant reflections (N = 18) from a pre-existing exploratory survey. Participants self-identified as having experienced negative coaching encounters with practitioners located primarily through social media. These accounts are not analyzed as empirical findings, nor are they used to estimate prevalence or causality. Rather, they function illustratively, offering concrete examples of how epistemic misalignment, blurred authority, and the absence of shared ethical infrastructure can generate vulnerability in real coaching contexts.

Blurred Boundaries, Psychological Overreach, and Epistemic Opacity

A recurring theme across participant accounts involved coaching practices drifting into territory commonly associated with therapy, trauma work, or psychological intervention, often without explicit clarification of scope or practitioner competence.

One participant observed:

> People throw word-salad like ‘trauma-informed’ when they clearly aren’t.

From a philosophical standpoint, this reflects epistemic opacity: clients lack the interpretive resources needed to discern whether psychological terminology is being used metaphorically, motivationally, or with reference to formal clinical frameworks. Within online coaching epistemologies, such language may function symbolically or aspirationally. However, clients may reasonably interpret it as signalling professional competence or psychological expertise, creating a misalignment of expectations.

Other participants described a related dynamic in which emotional intensity, personal disclosure, and aspirational identity blurred the boundaries. As one participant noted:

> It was all designed to sell a dream and keep you hooked on the adrenaline of her wins…

Here, authority appears grounded less in articulated method or training and more in narrative coherence and affective resonance. While such approaches can be motivating, they also complicate clients’ ability to evaluate expertise and limits.

High-Pressure Persuasion, Shame, and Moralized Choice

Several participants described experiences in which persuasion strategies produced feelings of shame, fear, or pressure. These accounts illustrate how epistemic vulnerability can become entangled with financial and emotional risk.

One participant recounted:

> In about month 3 of the 12-month coaching program I ran out of money and could no longer pay, the coach offered 2 jump on a 1-1 support call with me. She asked me personal details about my income and savings and partners income/savings… I didn't feel comfortable giving her all that information but I did because I felt pressure… In the end she did the numbers and said I still have money to pay her.

Another described a similar pattern:

> I was pressured to buy through shame then stay through shame when I attempted to cancel.

What is philosophically salient in these examples is not merely the presence of pressure, but the moral logic through which financial decisions were framed. Within many online coaching narratives, resistance or withdrawal is interpreted psychologically – as fear, self-sabotage, or a lack of alignment – rather than practically or relationally. Saying "no" is reframed as a failure of mindset or identity rather than a legitimate boundary.

From an epistemic perspective, this moralization of choice constrains client autonomy by narrowing the interpretive frames available to them. Financial decisions become psychological tests, and vulnerability is intensified by the implicit suggestion that opting out signifies personal deficiency rather than contextual constraint.

Lack of Contracting, Transparency, and Ethical Infrastructure

Contracting is widely recognized within formal coaching as a cornerstone of ethical practice, supporting informed consent, clarity of roles, and appropriate boundaries.

One participant shared:

> The coach I worked with supposedly was a trained psychologist. I thought I would be seeing her 1:1. Instead it was group calls and then I had a 'trained' coach for 1:1 sessions.

Another reflected on contractual clauses used to manage dissent:

> I regret the contract I signed says something along the lines about how I can't say anything disparaging about her or her business.

In formal coaching contexts, such practices would raise significant ethical concerns. In online coaching ecosystems, however, they are often normalized as necessary for brand protection or business sustainability.

Difficulties also arose around termination and closure. One participant wrote:

> She discontinued the meetings because she no longer enjoyed doing them but stopped abruptly and didn't offer to help us process the termination or find a replacement with another coach.

These experiences highlight how the lack of contracting norms and ethical safeguards can exacerbate harm, particularly when coaching relationships are emotionally intense or identity-relevant.

Identity-Based Authority and Testimonial Asymmetry

Several participants described feeling influenced not only by coaching content, but by the coach's lifestyle, worldview, or constructed persona. One reflected:

> The most negative aspect was the illusion presented by the coach and her community… until I realized that her successful clients replicated her exact model of flaunting a luxurious lifestyle.

In formal coaching epistemologies, authority is grounded in justification and accountability; in online contexts, it is often grounded in being rather than doing. When these logics are not made explicit, clients may over-attribute expertise and underestimate risk.

Systemic Vulnerabilities Rather Than Individual Malice

Importantly, not all participants reported wholly negative experiences. One noted:

> The rest of my experiences have been absolutely life changing.

This underscores a critical point: harm is not inherent to online coaching, nor universal among practitioners. Instead, the issues described reflect systemic vulnerabilities produced by a combination of epistemic misalignment, platform incentives, lack of supervision, and moralized narratives of transformation.

Several participants articulated this explicitly:

> She didn't know what she didn't know.

> I'm not sure [what would help]… perhaps more awareness of these types of coaches.

These reflections support a relational interpretation of harm. Ethical difficulties arise not solely from individual misconduct, but from environments in which epistemic clarity, shared norms, and accountability mechanisms are underdeveloped. Recognizing this distinction is essential for moving beyond blame toward more constructive responses.

From Critique to Integration: The Bridge Model

In response to ethical concerns within online coaching, formal practitioners and professional bodies often adopt an adversarial stance: publicly critiquing boundary violations, calling out misuse of psychological language, or emphasizing the absence of regulation and accreditation.

The argument advanced here is not that ethical concerns are misplaced, but that the mode through which they are communicated frequently undermines their intended effect.

Psychological Reactance and Threats to Autonomy

Reactance theory proposes that individuals experience motivational arousal when they perceive their autonomy to be threatened, leading them to resist or reject the source of the threat (Brehm, 1966). Within online coaching ecosystems, authority is often closely bound to personal identity, lived experience, and self-authored narratives of transformation. As a result, critiques

framed as corrections, prohibitions, or delegitimizations are likely to be experienced not as guidance, but as attempts to invalidate autonomy and selfhood.

In this context, ethical critique becomes existential. Rather than inviting reflection, it activates defensive responses designed to preserve identity, credibility, and perceived sovereignty. This helps explain why calls for tighter regulation or professional exclusion often provoke hostility rather than engagement among online practitioners.

Social Identity and In-Group Consolidation

Social identity theory further illuminates these dynamics. Individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, particularly when those groups are bound by shared values, language, and narratives (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Many online coaching communities function as identity-based collectives, offering belonging, affirmation, and shared meaning in addition to professional support.

When critiques are directed at individual practitioners, they are frequently interpreted as attacks on the group as a whole. This encourages in-group consolidation and out-group suspicion: formal practitioners are cast as elitist gatekeepers, while online communities close ranks to protect their epistemic and moral boundaries. In such conditions, critique strengthens precisely the dynamics it seeks to dismantle.

Moral Frameworks and Value Misalignment

Moral reframing research demonstrates that persuasive efforts are unlikely to succeed when they conflict with the moral values of their audience (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). Formal coaching ethics tend to prioritize safety, regulation, professional accountability, and psychological competence. Online coaching cultures, by contrast, often emphasize empowerment, authenticity, accessibility, and autonomy from institutions.

When ethical critiques are articulated primarily through the language of risk management and professional regulation, they may be experienced as oppressive or irrelevant by those whose moral framework centers on liberation and self-determination. The result is not ethical learning, but moral misalignment: each side speaks past the other, reinforcing the perception that ethical standards are culturally imposed rather than relationally negotiated.

Philosophical Implications: Ethics as Relational Practice

Taken together, these psychological mechanisms suggest that ethical development cannot be effectively imposed across epistemic boundaries through critique alone. Philosophically, this challenges models of ethics grounded primarily in compliance, correction, or boundary enforcement. Instead, it points toward a relational conception of ethical life – one in which moral understanding emerges through recognition, dialogue, and mutual intelligibility.

From a relational ethics perspective, ethical practice is not merely about adherence to rules, but about sustaining conditions of trust, transparency, and responsiveness within relationships. When critique undermines these conditions, it may paradoxically increase the likelihood of

ethical fragility by driving practices further underground or into ideologically homogeneous spaces.

From Critique to Connection

This analysis does not suggest abandoning ethical standards or tolerating harmful practice. Rather, it highlights the limitations of adversarial approaches when addressing ethically complex, culturally embedded practices. If ethical concerns are to be taken seriously across coaching ecosystems, they must be communicated in ways that preserve dignity, acknowledge epistemic differences, and invite rather than foreclose reflection.

These insights provide the rationale for the framework introduced in the following section. If ethical improvement cannot be achieved through attack, correction, or exclusion alone, alternative approaches are required – approaches that recognize epistemic pluralism while still foregrounding responsibility and care.

The Bridge Model: A Relational Framework for Ethical Integration

The preceding analysis suggests that ethical tensions in contemporary coaching cannot be adequately addressed through adversarial critique or boundary policing alone. Psychological reactance, social identity dynamics, and moral misalignment render corrective approaches ineffective across epistemic divides. At the same time, the illustrative client accounts demonstrate that the absence of shared ethical infrastructure can expose clients to real vulnerability. These conditions call for an alternative approach to ethical development – one that recognizes epistemic pluralism while maintaining a commitment to responsibility, care, and client safety.

In response, this paper proposes the Bridge Model: a relational framework designed to support ethical integration across coaching ecosystems without erasing differences or imposing uniform standards. The model conceptualizes ethical development not as compliance with external authority, but as a co-created relational practice grounded in mutual intelligibility, recognition, and shared responsibility.

The Bridge Model consists of four interdependent pillars: awareness, dialogue, partnership, and relational accountability.

Awareness: Ethics as Accessible Knowledge

The first pillar, awareness, reframes ethics as accessible knowledge rather than professional policing. Many online coaching practitioners express a desire to act ethically yet lack access to ethical education that is intelligible within their epistemic world. Codes of ethics are often written in formal or clinical language that presupposes familiarity with psychological training, supervision, and regulatory norms. When ethical knowledge is inaccessible, misalignment is more likely to arise from ignorance than intent.

This includes the development of plain-language explanations of boundaries, scope of practice, contracting, and referral, as well as transparent discussion of how psychological language can be responsibly used in coaching contexts. Awareness does not aim to enforce

conformity, but to expand practitioners' interpretive resources so that ethical considerations become thinkable, discussable, and actionable.

Dialogue: Encounter Across Epistemic Difference

The second pillar, dialogue, refers to facilitated encounters between practitioners from different coaching epistemologies that are explicitly designed to reduce defensiveness and misrecognition. In contrast to public critique or call-out culture, dialogue prioritizes psychological safety, curiosity, and mutual understanding.

Philosophically, this pillar draws on dialogical ethics and Buber's distinction between I–It and I–Thou relations. Dialogue requires encountering the other as a legitimate moral agent rather than an object of correction. Empirically, it is supported by Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which suggests that meaningful intergroup contact under appropriate conditions can reduce prejudice and polarization.

Within the Bridge Model, dialogue creates space for practitioners to articulate the assumptions that shape their practice, to hear how those assumptions are interpreted by others, and to explore points of ethical tension without collapsing into defensiveness. The goal is not consensus, but intelligibility: making epistemic differences visible so that ethical expectations are no longer implicit or misread.

Partnership: Co-Creating Ethical Competence

Dialogue alone is insufficient if it remains purely conversational. The third pillar, partnership, moves ethical engagement into shared practice. Partnership involves collaborative activities such as co-supervision, joint workshops, shared case-reflection spaces, or co-produced research that allow practitioners from different ecosystems to learn with one another rather than about one another.

This pillar draws on sociocultural theories of learning, including Vygotskian perspectives and communities of practice, which emphasize that competence develops relationally through participation. Within partnership, expertise is decentralized. Online practitioners contribute insight into narrative identity, community-building, and lived-experience wisdom, while formally trained coaches contribute frameworks for reflective practice, psychological literacy, and ethical reasoning.

Relational Accountability: Responsibility Without Punishment

The final pillar, relational accountability, reframes accountability away from punitive enforcement and toward shared responsibility grounded in care. Traditional regulatory approaches often rely on complaint-driven systems that operate after harm has occurred. While necessary, such mechanisms are ill-suited to preventing harm in rapidly evolving, platform-mediated coaching environments.

Drawing on care ethics and relational autonomy, relational accountability emphasizes transparency, responsiveness, and repair. Practitioners commit to being clear about their training, methods, and limits; clients are supported to make informed choices; and communities develop

culturally aligned mechanisms for naming, addressing, and learning from harm. Accountability, in this model, is not about fear of sanction, but about sustaining trust within relationships.

A Worked Example: Applying the Bridge Model in Practice

To illustrate how the Bridge Model can operate in practice, consider the following scenario.

An online business coach with a large social media following uses terms such as “trauma-informed.” A formally trained coaching psychologist publicly critiques the coach on social media, accusing them of psychological overreach and lack of qualifications. The coach responds defensively, framing the critique as elitist gatekeeping and rallying their community against “out-of-touch professionals.” Clients observing the exchange become confused about whom to trust and what the terms actually mean.

Awareness would involve accessible resources clarifying what “trauma-informed” practice entails within psychological and coaching contexts. Rather than accusation, the focus is on expanding shared understanding.

Dialogue could take the form of a facilitated conversation between the coach and a formally trained practitioner, designed to surface assumptions about language, authority, and responsibility.

Partnership might involve the online coach participating in reflective supervision or collaborative learning with a qualified practitioner to strengthen ethical discernment around scope, language, and referral.

Relational accountability would focus on transparent communication with clients: clarifying the coach’s training, explaining the intent behind psychological language, and offering avenues for feedback or repair where confusion or harm has occurred.

In this scenario, ethical improvement emerges not through exclusion or shaming, but through relational engagement that preserves dignity while increasing clarity and responsibility.

Positioning the Bridge Model

The Bridge Model does not seek to regulate or homogenize coaching practice. Nor does it claim that epistemic differences can or should be resolved. Instead, it offers a framework for meeting across differences in ways that reduce ethical fragility and support sustainable practice. By grounding ethical development in awareness, dialogue, partnership, and relational accountability, the model reframes ethics as a shared human endeavor rather than a contested jurisdiction.

Discussion: Situating the Bridge Model within Coaching Philosophy

The Bridge Model aligns with philosophical traditions that conceptualize ethics as fundamentally relational. Care ethics, dialogical philosophy, and relational autonomy all emphasize that ethical life is sustained through responsiveness, attentiveness, and mutual regard

rather than rule-following alone (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Buber, 1970). Within this tradition, ethical practice is not reducible to compliance with external standards but involves ongoing negotiation of responsibility within relationships.

By reframing ethics as a co-created relational practice, the Bridge Model challenges approaches that rely solely on regulation or sanction to address ethical risk. While formal accountability mechanisms remain necessary, they are insufficient in isolation – particularly within decentralized, platform-mediated coaching environments. The model instead foregrounds preventative ethics: cultivating the conditions under which ethical sensitivity, transparency, and repair are more likely to occur.

Contribution to Emerging Work on Adverse Coaching Outcomes

Recent discussions of harm in coaching have drawn attention to issues such as boundary violations, power imbalances, misaligned expectations, and inadequate contracting. The illustrative client accounts presented in this paper resonate strongly with these concerns. However, the Bridge Model offers a philosophical reframing, situating harm within broader epistemic and structural contexts rather than attributing it solely to individual practitioner failure.

From this perspective, harm is understood as a systemic and relational outcome, shaped by epistemic opacity, platform incentives, and the absence of shared ethical infrastructure. This framing shifts the ethical conversation from retrospective blame toward preventative engagement, highlighting the importance of shared understanding, dialogue, and relational accountability in reducing ethical vulnerability before harm occurs.

Summary of Philosophical Contribution

Taken together, the Bridge Model contributes to coaching philosophy by:

1. Advancing epistemic pluralism as a central ethical concern in contemporary coaching
2. Integrating epistemic justice and recognition theory into analyses of coaching ethics
3. Reframing ethical development as a relational, preventative practice rather than a punitive one
4. Offering a philosophically grounded framework for engaging ethical tension across coaching ecosystems.

In doing so, the model provides conceptual resources for understanding and responding to ethical complexity in a field increasingly shaped by digital culture, entrepreneurial identity, and contested forms of expertise.

Implications for Coaching Research

The Bridge Model opens several avenues for future research in coaching psychology and coaching philosophy. First, it highlights the need for co-produced research that explicitly examines epistemic differences across coaching ecosystems. Collaborative inquiry involving formally trained coaching psychologists and online or entrepreneurial practitioners could explore how key concepts – such as trauma-informed practice, embodiment, intuition, or alignment – are

understood, operationalized, and experienced within different epistemic frameworks. Such work would help clarify where misunderstandings arise and how ethical expectations diverge.

Second, the model suggests the value of developing new constructs and forms of measurement that better capture ethical experience across coaching contexts. Existing ethical frameworks often assume shared professional norms and training backgrounds. Constructs such as epistemic clarity, perceived ethical safety, relational accountability, or interpretive fit may offer more sensitive ways of understanding client experience in heterogeneous coaching environments. These constructs could complement existing approaches to evaluating coaching outcomes and adverse coaching experiences.

Finally, the model points to the importance of studying digital and platform-mediated contexts as ethically active environments rather than neutral delivery mechanisms. Research drawing on digital sociology, media studies, and feminist epistemology could deepen understanding of how visibility, parasocial relationships, algorithmic incentives, and identity performance shape ethical practice and practitioner authority in online coaching spaces.

Implications for Professional Bodies and Regulatory Organizations

Professional coaching bodies have historically centered forms of legitimacy grounded in formal training, accreditation, and institutional affiliation. While these remain vital for safeguarding client welfare, the growth of online coaching highlights the limitations of approaches that rely primarily on exclusion or boundary enforcement.

The Bridge Model suggests that professional bodies could complement existing regulatory mechanisms with preventative and relational strategies. Ethics education, for example, may be more effective when delivered in accessible, plain language that resonates with practitioners whose epistemic backgrounds are narrative, experiential, or entrepreneurial. Rather than assuming shared professional socialization, ethics training could explicitly address epistemic differences and provide guidance on how to communicate limits, scope, and referral clearly within diverse coaching contexts.

The model also supports innovation in supervision and reflective practice. Cross-ecosystem supervision arrangements – pairing formally trained coaches with online practitioners – could create reciprocal learning opportunities that strengthen ethical discernment while reducing stereotyping and mistrust. Such arrangements would require careful facilitation, but they align with the model’s emphasis on partnership and relational accountability.

Finally, professional bodies may wish to explore non-punitive accountability mechanisms alongside traditional complaints processes. Voluntary ethical circles, peer-led reflective communities, or facilitated dialogue spaces could provide forums for learning, repair, and ethical development before harm escalates. While not a substitute for formal regulation, such mechanisms may be better suited to addressing ethical complexity in decentralized, rapidly evolving coaching environments.

Implications for Coach Education and Training

Coach education programs are increasingly tasked with preparing practitioners for a coaching landscape shaped by digital culture, blurred professional boundaries, and contested forms of expertise. The Bridge Model suggests that training curricula would benefit from more explicit engagement with epistemology and ethics as relational practices, rather than as static rule sets.

Introducing trainee coaches to concepts such as epistemic pluralism, testimonial injustice, and recognition theory may enhance ethical sensitivity by helping practitioners recognize how their assumptions about knowledge and authority shape client interactions. Training that encourages reflexivity about identity, power, and legitimacy – particularly in online contexts – can support more nuanced ethical judgement.

In addition, training programs might incorporate practical skill-building around transparent communication of scope, limits, and competence, especially for coaches working in hybrid or online environments. Rather than positioning ethics as a compliance exercise, educators can frame ethical practice as an ongoing, relational commitment to clarity, care, and responsibility.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that many contemporary ethical tensions in coaching cannot be adequately understood through individualized accounts of misconduct or competence alone. Rather, they arise from deeper epistemic, relational, and cultural divergences between coaching ecosystems shaped by different assumptions about knowledge, legitimacy, identity, and transformation. Formal, psychology-informed coaching and online, entrepreneurial coaching both seek to support human flourishing, yet their differing epistemologies often render them mutually unintelligible.

Blurred boundaries, ambiguous use of psychological language, moralized narratives of choice, and the absence of shared ethical infrastructure can generate vulnerability for clients, even in the absence of malicious intent. These difficulties are amplified by digital platforms that reward visibility, certainty, and affective intensity, and by ethical discourses that fail to acknowledge epistemic difference.

Psychological reactance, social identity dynamics, and moral value misalignment mean that corrective approaches are often experienced as threats to identity and autonomy rather than invitations to reflection. As a result, well-intentioned efforts to promote ethical standards may inadvertently deepen polarization and defensiveness.

In response, this paper introduced the Bridge Model: a relational framework grounded in awareness, dialogue, partnership, and relational accountability. The model reframes ethical development not as compliance with external authority, but as a co-created relational practice shaped by mutual intelligibility, recognition, and shared responsibility. Rather than seeking to erase epistemic pluralism or impose uniform standards, the Bridge Model offers a way of engaging ethical difference constructively while maintaining a commitment to client safety and care.

By situating ethical tension within broader epistemic and cultural contexts, the paper shifts the focus from blame and exclusion toward preventative, relational approaches to ethical life. In doing so, it positions coaching philosophy – and coaching psychology more broadly – as well placed to lead nuanced conversations about ethics in an increasingly fragmented and digitally mediated field.

Ultimately, the argument advanced throughout this paper is simple but consequential: sustainable ethical progress in coaching is unlikely to be achieved through higher walls or sharper boundaries alone. It will be built through stronger bridges – between epistemic traditions, professional identities, and ways of knowing. When practitioners are able to encounter one another with curiosity, humility, and a willingness to engage across differences, coaching becomes not only safer, but richer, more inclusive, and more philosophically grounded as a human development practice.

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