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Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership: A Cross-Cultural Philosophical Reframing

Abhijit Bhattacharya
Hyderabad, India

Abstract

Partnership lies at the ethical and ontological heart of coaching, yet its dominant interpretation remains grounded in liberal-humanist ideals of equality and reciprocity. While these values have shaped coaching's professionalism, they risk universalizing one moral grammar and obscuring the dynamics of power, hierarchy, and cultural contingency. This paper reconceptualizes partnership through a hermeneutic and philosophical lens, proposing the Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model. Drawing on dialogical philosophy, care ethics, and decolonial and intercultural scholarship, RPCP frames partnership as a plural, ethically responsive field of relationship. It integrates three interdependent dimensions – Ontological Encounter, Cultural–Ethical Situatedness, and Systemic Relational Ecology – that together illuminate how partnership unfolds as co-becoming within multiple moral worlds. Central to the model is the coach as a philosophical translator, a reflexive practitioner who interprets meaning and ethics across difference while holding the tensions of asymmetry and power. By situating coaching as a living philosophical practice rather than a neutral technique, this paper advances a framework for cultural–ethical reflexivity that expands coaching's theoretical foundations and professional integrity in an interconnected, plural world.

Keywords: coaching, partnership, cross-culture, ontology, relational plurality

Introduction

This paper examines a central philosophical tension in coaching: the prevailing assumption that partnership is best enacted through equality of status and reciprocal exchange between coach and client. It questions whether these ideals – often expressed through shared authority, mutual disclosure, and individual autonomy – adequately account for how partnership is experienced across diverse moral, cultural, and institutional contexts. Accordingly, it asks: to what extent does egalitarian reciprocity constitute the philosophical basis of partnership in coaching, and to what extent might partnership take multiple legitimate forms shaped by differing relational worlds? The analysis focuses on three interrelated axes – parity (authority and status), mutual exchange (disclosure and co-authorship), and agency (individual autonomy) – which together define the dominant egalitarian-reciprocal model under examination.

Across executive, developmental, and transformative paradigms, the quality of the coach–client relationship is consistently identified as a primary predictor of coaching outcomes (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). Yet, despite its centrality, the concept of partnership remains philosophically under-theorized. Coaching literature typically treats partnership as a functional alliance characterized by collaboration, trust, and goal alignment (Palmer & McDowall, 2010), while leaving largely implicit the ethical and ontological assumptions that sustain these qualities. Contemporary competency frameworks and professional standards across dominant global coaching bodies similarly operationalize partnership through the language of co-creation, shared

responsibility, and mutual agency. Taken together, these discourses reflect a tacit relational model grounded in parity of authority, reciprocal exchange, and the primacy of individual autonomy.

Historically, this model can be traced to Enlightenment-era conceptions of the person as a rational, self-determining moral agent and to orientations that elevate equality as a central ethical good (Israel, 2011; Darwall, 2006). Within such a framework, partnership is understood as a voluntary collaboration between independent equals co-authoring meaning through dialogue and mutual disclosure. The working alliance model (Bordin, 1979), later adapted for coaching (de Haan, 2008), operationalizes this moral orientation through its emphasis on shared goals, agreed tasks, and relational bond, thereby positioning symmetry and reciprocity as implicit benchmarks of relational integrity.

This orientation has provided important ethical safeguards for coaching practice, particularly in distinguishing it from directive and hierarchical helping relationships. However, it also embeds a particular moral grammar that is often treated as universal rather than historically and philosophically situated. As coaching expands across global and intercultural contexts, the limits of this assumption become more visible. In many cultural settings, relationships are organized not through egalitarian collaboration but through role-based responsibility and collective obligation (Rosinski, 2011; Yu, 2013). In such contexts, deference, discretion, and duty may constitute ethical partnership. When egalitarian reciprocity is treated as a global norm, diverse moral grammars risk being subsumed and treated as deficient within a dominant interpretive frame shaped by liberal-humanist assumptions of autonomy and symmetry, leading to epistemic assimilation and the misrecognition of diverse legitimate relational orders (Taylor & Burgess, 2019).

From a sociological perspective, coaching is not a neutral interpersonal exchange but a social process situated within broader systems of power, culture, and discourse (Cox, 2013). Partnership, therefore, cannot be reduced to dyadic equality alone; it must be understood as an ongoing negotiation of meaning, responsibility, and authority within diverse moral ecologies. This calls for not only cultural awareness but also philosophical humility – an acknowledgment that no single relational ideal can exhaust the range of human ways of being-with others.

The relational turn in coaching scholarship has already begun to extend this understanding beyond performance-oriented alliance. Relational and dialogical approaches (Whitworth et al., 2007; Stelter, 2014; Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018) emphasize presence, mutual recognition, and the co-creation of meaning, positioning partnership as a dialogical encounter between subjects rather than a transactional agreement between roles. Yet, even within these approaches, parity and reciprocity often remain implicit ethical baselines. Intercultural scholarship challenges this universality (Rosinski, 2011; Yu, 2013) but remains only partially integrated into mainstream coaching theory.

More recent developments in coaching education signal a movement toward greater reflexivity and ethical awareness. Calls for cultivating moral imagination (Cox et al., 2020) and for engaging the morally situated "self of the coach" (Bachkirova, 2016) highlight the need for practitioners to recognize their own cultural and ethical positioning. Together, these developments point toward the need for a more philosophically grounded and plural

understanding of partnership – one that can engage diverse relational worlds while maintaining ethical coherence.

In response to this conceptual gap, this paper proposes the Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model as a hermeneutic framework for reimagining partnership. RPCP synthesizes insights from dialogical philosophy, feminist ethics of care, systems theory, and intercultural scholarship to conceptualize partnership as a plural and ethically situated field of relationship. The model integrates three interdependent dimensions: Ontological Encounter, Cultural–Ethical Situatedness, and Systemic Relational Ecology. Central to this model is the development of the coach's interpretive capability – the capacity to translate relational meaning across differing ethical contexts while holding the tensions of asymmetry and power.

This paper does not reject relational virtues such as trust, confidentiality, or empathy; rather, it challenges the implicit ordering that treats parity and individual autonomy as the sole or default ethical criteria for partnership. It contributes conceptually by clarifying that the association between partnership and equality reflects a particular philosophical inheritance rather than a universal ethical necessity. By positioning partnership as a contextually constituted ethical process rather than a universally fixed relational ideal, RPCP extends coaching's theoretical foundations and offers a basis for engaging relational diversity while retaining ethical coherence. This reframing allows coaching to retain its commitment to partnership while engaging more fully with the plurality of relational worlds in which it is practiced.

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual and hermeneutic methodology to explore and reframe the notion of partnership in coaching. Conceptual scholarship seeks to clarify and reinterpret key constructs through critical engagement with existing theoretical and philosophical traditions rather than through empirical aggregation (Torraco, 2016; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). The hermeneutic dimension of this inquiry lies in its focus on interpretation: understanding how relational meanings are shaped by historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts (Gadamer, 1989). The aim is not to measure partnership as a variable but to examine the philosophical assumptions that underlie its dominant formulations.

The inquiry proceeds through reflexive interpretation, drawing on the hermeneutic circle, where understanding emerges through an iterative movement between part and whole, theory and practice, and the familiar and unfamiliar (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant to coaching, where practitioner-researchers operate within the very relational systems they seek to understand.

The conceptual synthesis was informed by purposive engagement with three clusters of literature. First, foundational coaching scholarship on partnership and alliance (e.g., Bordin, 1979; de Haan, 2008; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015) was examined to identify the assumptions embedded in prevailing relational models. Second, relational and dialogical perspectives within coaching (e.g., Stelter, 2014; Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018) were engaged to trace the evolution of partnership beyond instrumental collaboration. Third, philosophical and intercultural sources – including dialogical philosophy, ethics of care, systems thinking, and cross-cultural relational

scholarship – were examined for their potential to illuminate alternative moral grammars of relationship.

Selection of these texts was guided by three criteria: their influence within coaching discourse, their relevance to relational ethics, and their capacity to foreground asymmetry, interdependence, or contextual relationality. Rather than treating these sources as convergent, the analysis attended to tensions between them – particularly those between autonomy and responsibility, parity and authority, and universality and plurality.

The development of the Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model followed an abductive logic (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Through iterative reading and theoretical comparison, patterns of relational diversity became visible, suggesting the need for a framework capable of holding multiple ethical logics without collapsing them into a single norm. The resulting model therefore represents an interpretive synthesis rather than a hypothesis-driven construct.

This conceptual inquiry uses purposive selection and hermeneutic interpretation; it does not present empirical generalizations. The model invites empirical testing across varied cultural and organizational contexts.

The author writes from a scholar-practitioner standpoint shaped by engagement in coaching across culturally diverse organizational settings. This positionality necessitated ongoing reflexive awareness of how professional experience informs interpretive judgment. Rather than seeking neutrality, the inquiry aimed for coherence between philosophical insight and lived relational practice. In this sense, the methodology situates coaching not as an object of detached analysis but as a relational practice whose ethical contours are revealed through interpretive engagement.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Partnership in Coaching: Moving Beyond Relational Equality

The idea of partnership has long been central to coaching, serving as the conceptual cornerstone for theories of change, learning, and professional development. In early coaching psychology, partnership was primarily defined through the concept of the working alliance, a framework adapted from Bordin's (1979) model in psychotherapy. According to this model, a successful helping relationship depends on agreement across three dimensions: goals, tasks, and bond. When applied to coaching, this triadic structure was hailed for its clarity and predictive power, with empirical studies linking a strong working alliance to positive coaching outcomes (de Haan, 2008; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015).

However, the strength of this model lies precisely in what also limits it. The working alliance implicitly assumes that partnership is optimally enacted through collaboration between autonomous individuals engaged in voluntary mutual exchange. In doing so, it reflects broader liberal-humanist assumptions about agency, equality, and reciprocity (Taylor, 1991). Within this orientation, partnership becomes synonymous with symmetry, combining parity of authority, mutual exchange through disclosure, and the primacy of individual autonomy.

In response to the limitations of transactional or performance-oriented models, coaching scholarship has undergone the "relational turn" in Third Generation Coaching (Stelter, 2014). This shift reframed coaching as a dialogical, co-creative process that extends beyond goal attainment and performance improvement. Relational Coaching (Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018) and Co-Active Coaching (Whitworth et al., 2007) exemplify this evolution, grounding partnership in mutual authenticity, presence, and emotional attunement. The relationship itself, rather than the achievement of external goals, became the site of transformation. Yet, even within these relational developments, equality often remains the implicit ethical baseline against which partnership is understood.

This orientation has provided important ethical safeguards for coaching practice, particularly in distinguishing coaching from directive or expert-led helping relationships. However, it also embeds a particular moral grammar that is frequently treated as universal, reflecting Enlightenment-derived values of autonomy and agency, which are experienced differently across cultures and shaped by power, gender, and class (Hofstede, 2001).

Cross-cultural scholarship in coaching has begun to challenge the assumption that relational equality is a universal ideal. Yu's (2013) comparative research revealed that in East Asian contexts, moral relationships are often defined not by autonomy but by role-based obligations and harmony. Additionally, Rosinski's (2011) Cultural Orientations Framework demonstrates how cultural dimensions such as Hierarchy–Equality, Control–Harmony–Humility, and Individualism–Collectivism shape relational ethics. For example, in hierarchical cultures, partnership may be experienced through deference and respect. Similarly, collectivist contexts place greater value on mutual obligation where moral life is oriented toward communal well-being rather than individual growth (Hofstede, 2001). Within such worldviews, asymmetry does not imply inferiority but represents a moral structure that preserves order and reciprocity (Tu, 2000).

Recognizing these relational forms does not negate the current philosophical foundations of partnership but reveals that it may be enacted through alternative ethical logics pointing to its plural nature. When egalitarian reciprocity becomes the default expectation, such variations risk being interpreted as relational deficiencies rather than coherent moral orientations potentially reproducing forms of cultural imposition (Rosinski, 2003). As Taylor and Burgess (2019) caution, this produces epistemic assimilation, where alternative moral grammars are acknowledged yet introjected to fit pre-existing paradigms. The challenge, then, is to develop a philosophical framework capable of honoring plural moral worlds without collapsing them into sameness.

Sociological perspectives further extend this argument by locating coaching within systems of power, discourse, and institutional influence. Coaching is a social process shaped by cultural scripts, professional norms, and organizational hierarchies (Cox, 2013). Partnership, therefore, cannot be understood solely at the interpersonal level but must be situated within the broader relational ecology in which coaches and clients operate. Coaching interactions are mediated by gender, class, organizational role, and global inequalities, all of which influence who speaks, who listens, and whose knowledge is validated. This further reinforces the need to understand partnership as situated within a wider relational ecology rather than as a purely dyadic construct.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the dominant understanding of partnership in coaching reflects a particular epistemic orientation – one that privileges autonomy and symmetry as normative relational ideals. This orientation has shaped coaching's professional discourse, yet it does not exhaust the range of philosophical and ethical possibilities through which partnership may be realized. Intercultural coaching scholars have responded to this imbalance by advocating ethical pluralism (Rosinski, 2024) and cultural–ethical reflexivity (Cox et al., 2020). Ethical pluralism posits that multiple moral logics can coexist without one claiming universal authority, while cultural–ethical reflexivity calls upon coaches to recognize their own moral situatedness. These approaches move beyond cultural competence, which tends to treat culture as a set of static differences, toward philosophical reflexivity, which interrogates the coach's own ethical position within relational encounters. In this sense, partnership becomes a site of epistemic negotiation, where meaning and ethics are co-constructed across differences and diversity.

Foundations for Relational Pluralism

If the current paradigm reveals the limits of a singular relational ideal, the question becomes: what theoretical resources enable a broader understanding of partnership?

The present inquiry engages selected philosophical, intercultural, and systemic perspectives not as critiques of current foundations but as resources for conceptual expansion. These perspectives illuminate relationality as ethically constituted through presence, context, and interconnectedness.

To clarify this shift from diagnostic critique to constructive engagement, Table 1 maps the role of the literatures informing this analysis.

Literature Cluster	**Contribution**	**Role in Analysis**
Working alliance & coaching outcome literature (Bordin, 1979; de Haan, 2008; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015)	Establishes dominant egalitarian model of partnership	Diagnostic
Relational coaching traditions (Whitworth et al., 2007; Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018; Stelter, 2014)	Expands partnership toward dialogue and presence	Transitional
Dialogical philosophy (Buber, 1937; Levinas, 1969)	Grounds relational ethics in encounter and responsibility	Constructive
Ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013)	Emphasizes relational attentiveness and context	Constructive
Intercultural frameworks (Rosinski, 2011; Yu, 2013)	Highlights plurality of moral grammars	Constructive

Systems perspectives (Bateson, 1972; Ceder, 2018)	Situates relationships within broader relational ecologies	Constructive

Table 1. Role of Key Literatures in the Present Inquiry

Dialogical philosophy offers an ontological grounding for partnership as encounter rather than agreement. Martin Buber's (1937) *I–Thou* relation defines authentic encounter as a meeting of beings rather than a transaction between objects. Accordingly, genuine dialogue arises when each person meets the other in full presence with deep receptivity, transcending utility and objectification. In coaching terms, this perspective invites a shift from facilitation to encounter, where both coach and client participate in meaning-making as co-subjects. Levinas (1969) extends this notion by grounding ethics in asymmetry rather than equality. The ethical self, he argues, is constituted through responsibility to the Other, whose vulnerability calls forth care before consent. From this perspective, partnership is grounded not in reciprocity but in responsiveness – the moral imperative to attend to another's singularity.

Similarly, feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013) reconceptualize morality as relational attentiveness rather than adherence to universal rules. Care ethics foreground the emotional, embodied, and contextual nature of moral life, emphasizing that relationships are sustained by responsiveness rather than equality. In the context of coaching, this suggests that ethical partnership involves more than mutual agreement; it requires sensitivity to asymmetry, dependency, and power. Together, these philosophical perspectives illuminate partnership as a living ethical event rather than a contractual collaboration.

Intercultural scholarship further reveals how moral relationships are shaped by culturally embedded expectations. Frameworks such as Rosinski's (2011) Cultural Orientations emphasize dimensions such as hierarchy, harmony, and communal orientation. In these contexts, asymmetry may function as a stabilizing moral structure rather than a relational imbalance.

Systems thinking broadens the scope of partnership beyond dyadic interaction. From a systemic perspective, relationships are embedded within networks of organizational and social influence (Bateson, 1972; Ceder, 2018). Coaching partnerships are therefore shaped not only by interpersonal dynamics but also by institutional norms and power structures.

Engaged constructively, these perspectives support an understanding of partnership as plural and contextually constituted. Rather than prescribing a single relational form, they illuminate how partnership may be enacted through different ethical configurations while remaining relationally coherent.

This synthesis does not replace egalitarian partnership but situates it within a wider relational landscape. It provides the conceptual foundation for the Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model developed in the following section.

Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) Model

The Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model conceptualizes coaching partnership as a plural, ethically responsive, and contextually situated relational field. It reframes

partnership not as a fixed alliance between individuals but as an evolving process of co-becoming shaped by presence, cultural–ethical context, and systemic interdependence.

Drawing on dialogical philosophy, care ethics, systems theory, and intercultural scholarship, RPCP is organized across three interdependent dimensions: Ontological Encounter, Cultural–Ethical Situatedness, and Systemic Relational Ecology. Each dimension emphasizes a distinct focus within the coaching relationship: Ontological Encounter centers on ethical presence and mutual recognition; Cultural–Ethical Situatedness emphasizes moral interpretation across worldviews; and Systemic Relational Ecology broadens this understanding to include organizational, social, and ecological systems. These dimensions are not sequential stages but co-present orientations that inform how partnership is enacted within any coaching engagement. Together they provide a framework through which coaches can navigate relational diversity while maintaining ethical coherence between self, other, and world.

At the center of the model lies the coach's interpretive capability: the capacity to discern, translate, and respond to differing relational meanings without prematurely imposing a single normative framework. This capability enables the coach to hold the tensions of difference, asymmetry, and context with reflexive awareness, translating ethical meaning across multiple moral worlds without reducing them to a single universal code, and while remaining accountable to professional ethical standards.

Ontological Encounter: Partnership as Presence and Responsibility

The first dimension of RPCP locates partnership in ontological encounter – the meeting of persons in ethical presence. Drawing on dialogical philosophy, this perspective understands relationship not as an agreement between roles but as a moment of mutual recognition.

Buber's (1937) notion of the *I–Thou* relation suggests that genuine encounter occurs when the other is approached as a subject rather than an object. In coaching, this shifts the relational stance from facilitation of outcomes toward presence with the client's lived experience. The coach's attention is not directed primarily toward solving or optimizing but toward witnessing and engaging the unfolding of the client's meaning-making.

Levinas (1969) extends this ontological perspective by grounding ethics in responsibility to the Other. From this standpoint, relational asymmetry is not a deficit but an ethical condition of responsibility: the coach is called to respond to the client's expressed vulnerability, uncertainty, or aspiration. Partnership therefore emerges not through symmetry of power but through responsiveness to the other's presence.

Ontological Encounter reframes coaching presence as an ethical orientation rather than a technical skill. The coach's role is to sustain a space in which the client can encounter their own experience while being recognized as a subject of meaning. This dimension resonates strongly with Bachkirova's (2016) view of the 'self as an instrument' of ethical awareness. The coach's presence is constituted by reflexive authenticity, which involves conscious engagement with one's own assumptions, biases, and emotional responses. Through this reflexive presence, the coach embodies an ontological openness that allows transformation to emerge within the relational field.

In practice, this may involve moments in which the coach suspends instrumental questioning to remain with the client's unfolding experience. For instance, when a client expresses existential uncertainty about a career transition, the coach may choose to hold space for reflection rather than moving immediately toward the client's goal clarification. In such moments, partnership is enacted through shared presence rather than negotiated agreement. This dimension foregrounds responsiveness over reciprocity and positions presence as the ontological ground of partnership.

Cultural–Ethical Situatedness: Partnership Across Moral Worlds

The second dimension situates partnership within the cultural and ethical contexts that shape how relationships are understood and enacted. Every coaching engagement is embedded in a moral horizon that defines what counts as respect, trust, authority, and responsibility. To assume that these qualities have universal meaning is to risk epistemic assimilation (Taylor & Burgess, 2019).

Intercultural scholarship demonstrates that relational expectations vary across contexts (Rosinski, 2011; Yu, 2013). In hierarchical settings, ethical partnership may also be expressed through deference and role-based respect despite parity between individuals. In collectivist contexts, decisions may be oriented toward communal well-being rather than individual self-actualization. RPCP does not treat these differences as obstacles to be corrected but as expressions of alternative moral grammars. Partnership is thus understood as interpretive: it involves discerning how relational meaning is constructed within a given context and engaging it ethically.

This dimension draws on ethics of care, which frames morality as relational attentiveness rather than adherence to abstract rules (Noddings, 2013). Ethical partnership requires sensitivity to context, dependency, and power. The coach must therefore recognize that concepts such as autonomy, accountability, or openness may carry different meanings across contexts.

In Ubuntu philosophy, originating in Southern Africa, relationship is understood through communal belonging (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999). Partnership in this sense extends beyond the dyad to include ancestors, family, and community. Similarly, in Confucian ethics, relationships are structured by *li* (ritual propriety) and animated by *ren* (humaneness) (Tu, 2000). Here, moral harmony arises not from equality but from fulfilling one's relational duties within a hierarchy of care. Indian dharmic philosophy adds yet another layer, framing relational ethics through *dharma* (moral duty) and *karma* (reciprocal consequence) (Radhakrishnan, 1952). These frameworks remind us that asymmetry can embody care, and hierarchy can sustain moral order.

In practice, Cultural–Ethical Situatedness calls for interpretive inquiry rather than normative imposition. For example, a coach working with a senior leader in an East Asian organization may notice that the client expresses hesitation and discomfort in speaking about organizational tensions that may paint the organization in a negative light. Rather than interpreting this as lack of openness and directiveness, the coach may explore the relational meaning of discretion within that cultural context. This allows partnership to be enacted in a way that respects both the client's ethical world and the integrity of the coaching process.

Within RPCP, the coach's interpretive capability involves recognizing their own cultural assumptions and engaging relational difference with reflexive awareness. Partnership thus becomes a site of ethical translation, where meaning is co-constructed across differing relational frames.

Systemic Relational Ecology: Partnership Within Networks of Influence

The third dimension of RPCP situates coaching partnership within systemic relational ecology – the broader network of organizational, social, and institutional forces that shape relational dynamics.

From a systems perspective, relationships do not exist in isolation but are embedded within patterns of interaction and influence (Bateson, 1972). The coaching dyad participates in feedback loops that extend beyond the immediate conversation: organizational culture, team dynamics, and even global patterns of work and identity. Recognizing this interconnectedness transforms coaching from a one-to-one interaction into a systemic practice that links personal awareness with institutional and ecological responsibility. Considering that coaching is a social process, the relationship between coach and client is therefore never isolated; it is conditioned by institutional norms, professional hierarchies, and socio-economic forces (Cox, 2013).

Braidotti's (2013) posthuman ethics reinforces this point by de-centering the human subject and foregrounding relationality as the fabric of existence. Within this ontology, coaching can be understood as a form of ecological participation, where human interaction is part of a broader web that includes material, technological, and environmental forces. Ceder (2018) extends this view by emphasizing relational ontology – the understanding that learning and transformation occur not within isolated minds but through systems of interaction.

This systemic lens expands the understanding of partnership beyond the dyad. It highlights that relational possibilities are conditioned by factors such as hierarchy, role expectations, gender dynamics, and institutional norms.

Systemic Relational Ecology invites coaches to attend to these broader influences as part of the partnership. The coach's role includes helping the client become aware of how systemic forces shape their experience and choices.

For example, a client navigating leadership challenges within a highly hierarchical organization may experience tension between personal values and institutional expectations. A systemic orientation allows the coach to situate this tension within organizational dynamics rather than locating it solely within the individual.

Systemic Relational Ecology therefore extends partnership from interpersonal collaboration to ecological participation, where individual transformation is understood in relation to wider relational systems.

Integrative Logic: The Interdependence of the Three Dimensions

The three dimensions of RPCP are conceptually distinct yet practically interdependent. Partnership in coaching emerges through their dynamic interplay rather than through the

application of any single dimension in isolation. Together, they form a triadic relational framework through which partnership can be understood as a process of ethical navigation across presence, context, and system.

Rather than prescribing a singular relational stance, RPCP offers a way of holding relational complexity. Coaches move between dimensions as the coaching engagement unfolds: attending to presence in moments of vulnerability, interpreting cultural meaning in moments of difference, and recognizing systemic influences in moments of constraint or tension.

The coach's interpretive capability operates as the integrative capacity that enables this movement. It involves: (a) discerning which relational dimension is most salient in a given moment, (b) recognizing tensions between dimensions (e.g., cultural expectation vs systemic constraint), and (c) responding in ways that maintain ethical coherence without imposing uniformity.

In this sense, the model does not prescribe specific techniques but offers a conceptual orientation for navigating relational plurality. Indicators of interpretive capability include (a) eliciting the client's relational norms, (b) mapping contextual constraints, (c) proposing context-sensitive relational moves, and (d) reflecting on one's own ethical assumptions.

This integrative logic addresses the core question raised at the outset of the paper: if partnership is not reducible to egalitarian reciprocity, how can it remain ethically coherent? RPCP suggests that ethical coherence arises not from uniformity but from contextually grounded responsiveness across relational dimensions.

By articulating partnership as a plural and contextually situated ethical process, RPCP provides a framework through which coaching can engage relational diversity while retaining professional integrity.

Implications

The Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model reframes partnership as a plural, ethically responsive relational field grounded in a plural ethics of being-with. In doing so, it bridges individualistic and relational paradigms by holding together presence, responsibility, and interdependence, opening space for intercultural and decolonial perspectives within coaching (Mignolo, 2011). This reframing carries implications for coaching practice, supervision, education, and professional standards.

Implications for Coaching Practice

RPCP foregrounds the development of interpretive capability as a central professional capacity. Coaching practice extends beyond relational skills such as empathy or active listening to include discerning how partnership itself is enacted within a given context.

Interpretive capability requires the coach to recognize that relational qualities – such as openness, accountability, autonomy, or respect – may hold different meanings across moral and cultural worlds. Ethical practice therefore involves engaging these meanings reflexively rather than assuming their universality. The coach attends to how presence, authority, and

responsibility are being experienced in the coaching relationship and responds in ways that are contextually appropriate while maintaining professional ethical standards. It also enables attention to the client's situated values without assuming cultural homogeneity.

For example, a coach working with a senior leader in a hierarchical organization may notice consistent deference to authority, cautious speech about superiors, and avoidance of direct disagreement. From an egalitarian-autonomy lens common in many Western coaching contexts, these patterns might be interpreted as a lack of openness or ownership. Within an RPCP orientation, however, the coach treats these behaviors as potentially meaningful expressions of relational ethics shaped by organizational hierarchy and cultural expectations of respect. Rather than immediately encouraging more direct expression, the coach explores with the client what deference signifies in that context – whether it reflects prudence, loyalty, role responsibility, or perceived risk – and how the client wishes to navigate these dynamics. In this way, partnership is enacted through interpretive inquiry that honors both the client's relational world and the ethical integrity of the coaching process, as the coach explores the relational meaning of the dynamic rather than correcting it toward symmetry, while ensuring that the client's voice and agency remain ethically supported.

RPCP thus extends relational competence from behavioral skill to ethical discernment.

Implications for Ethical Practice

Professional coaching ethics have traditionally been framed through universal principles such as confidentiality, respect, and autonomy. While foundational, RPCP positions ethical practice as requiring contextual discernment – the capacity to interpret how these principles are enacted within specific relational and cultural contexts. This does not imply relativism; rather, it acknowledges that standards must be negotiated in practice.

Within RPCP, ethical partnership involves asking not only *what is permitted but also what is appropriate within this relational context*. Coaches are called to examine how their assumptions about equality, disclosure, or autonomy shape the coaching relationship and to remain open to alternative ethical configurations.

For instance, in collectivist contexts, respect may be understood relationally rather than individually, raising questions about how boundaries are negotiated. An RPCP-informed approach would involve exploring these meanings explicitly with the client rather than assuming a singular ethical interpretation.

This orientation aligns with the concept of cultural–ethical reflexivity (Cox et al., 2020), which extends ethical awareness beyond compliance toward interpretive responsibility.

Implications for Supervision

Within an RPCP framework, supervision becomes a critical space for cultivating interpretive capability and ethical reflexivity. Rather than focusing solely on technique or case management, supervision can engage coaches in reflecting on how partnership assumptions shape their relational stance.

RPCP-informed supervision orients around interrelated lines of reflective inquiry. Supervisors may invite coaches to examine the relational assumptions they brought into the engagement, including how they implicitly understood partnership and what norms of equality, authority, or openness shaped their stance. Attention can also be given to interpretive decisions made during the coaching process – how relational dynamics were read and responded to, and what alternative interpretations might have been possible within the same interaction. In addition, supervision can explore moments of ethical tension, where differing expectations around equality, hierarchy, autonomy, or responsibility became salient, and how the coach navigated these tensions in practice. Finally, a systemic lens encourages reflection on contextual influences, considering how organizational structures, cultural norms, or broader social forces may have shaped the relational field of the coaching engagement.

This orientation supports the development of meta-relational awareness (Cavicchia & Gilbert, 2018) – the capacity to perceive and engage multiple layers of relational meaning simultaneously.

Implications for Coach Education

RPCP also has implications for how coaches are trained and developed. Contemporary coach education has often emphasized skill acquisition – probing techniques, goal-setting frameworks, and feedback models. While these remain important, RPCP suggests that coaching competence also requires philosophical and ethical literacy.

Education programs informed by RPCP would therefore support coaches in engaging with multiple ways of understanding relationship and ethics. This includes exposure to different relational ontologies – such as dialogical, communal, and hierarchical forms of relating – through which partnership may be enacted. It also involves engagement with diverse moral frameworks across cultures, enabling coaches to recognize how concepts such as autonomy, respect, and responsibility are interpreted within different ethical traditions. In addition, RPCP-oriented education would cultivate a systemic perspective on power and context, helping coaches understand how organizational structures, social identities, and institutional norms shape relational possibilities. Through such engagement, coach education moves beyond the acquisition of techniques toward the development of philosophical literacy and ethical reflexivity required for practice in plural relational worlds.

This can guide development from technical proficiency toward ethical reflexivity and intercultural sensitivity. This aligns with the growing recognition that coaching education must evolve from skill acquisition toward moral and epistemic maturity (Bachkirova, 2016).

Learning methods may include intercultural dialogue, reflective writing, and supervision that surfaces relational assumptions. The aim is to cultivate moral imagination – the ability to envision and engage ethically across different relational worlds (Cox et al., 2020).

Implications for the Coaching Profession

Current competency frameworks and ethical codes often embed implicit assumptions about relational equality and autonomy. While these have been essential in establishing professional standards, RPCP suggests that the field may benefit from greater openness to relational plurality.

This orientation could translate into a gradual broadening of how competence and ethical maturity are understood within coaching. Professional bodies and accrediting frameworks may recognize interpretive and reflexive capacities as core competencies, alongside established relational skills. This would include acknowledging cultural–ethical situatedness as a legitimate dimension of professional capability, rather than treating it as an ancillary consideration. It may also involve encouraging dialogue across coaching traditions and cultural contexts, creating spaces where different relational assumptions can be examined and understood without being subsumed into a single normative model. Such shifts would support the profession in engaging relational diversity with greater conceptual clarity and ethical sensitivity.

Such developments would not dilute professional coherence but would strengthen the field's ethical capacity within diverse global contexts.

RPCP therefore contributes to an ongoing shift in coaching toward relational and systemic maturity, where ethical practice is understood not as adherence to a single model but as the capacity to engage responsibly across relational difference.

Such developments would not dilute professional coherence but strengthen the field's ethical capacity within diverse global contexts. RPCP thus contributes to an ongoing shift toward relational and systemic maturity, where ethical practice is understood as the capacity to engage responsibly across relational difference.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the prevailing association between coaching partnership and egalitarian reciprocity reflects a particular philosophical inheritance rather than a universal ethical necessity. While foundational in establishing coaching as a collaborative, non-directive practice, this orientation does not fully account for the plurality of relational forms through which ethical partnership may be enacted across cultural, organizational, and systemic contexts.

In response, the Relational Pluralism in Coaching Partnership (RPCP) model was proposed as a conceptual reframing. By integrating ontological encounter, cultural–ethical situatedness, and systemic relational ecology, RPCP positions partnership as an evolving, contextually constituted ethical process rather than a fixed relational condition. This reframing enables coaching to engage relational diversity while maintaining ethical coherence.

Central to this contribution is the repositioning of the coach's role from the application of relational techniques toward the cultivation of interpretive capability – the capacity to discern, translate, and respond to differing relational meanings while remaining accountable to professional ethical standards. Through this lens, coaching partnership becomes a site of ethical navigation across presence, context, and system.

The implications extend across practice, supervision, education, and professional standards, inviting the field toward greater relational and systemic maturity. Future research may explore how interpretive capability develops in practice and how plural relational frameworks can be integrated into coach education and supervision.

By articulating partnership as plural, situated, and ethically responsive, RPCP offers a pathway through which coaching can retain its commitment to partnership while engaging more fully with the diverse relational worlds in which it is practiced.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be construed as having influenced the research, analysis, or writing of this paper.

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Author contact

Abhijit Bhattacharya
Edgewood University
Email: Bhattacharya.abhijit23@outlook.com
Phone +91 83742 66655