

## **Silence as Ethical Intervention: A Pressure Point in the Universalist Assumptions Underlying the Coaching Field**

**Dr Elly Li Tai  
Dr Winnie Sin Wai Pui  
Cambridge, United Kingdom**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines silence's role as an ethical intervention within coaching practice and education. Silence exposes fundamental tensions in the coaching field's underlying foundations, which stand at the intersection of philosophical reflection and psychological care. The coaching field's dominant approach, 'Positive Psychology', is defined by its optimistic emphasis on proactive agency and performance, an orientation that makes it attractive to contemporary organizational contexts. Such optimism, however, is tested by coaches' diverging attitudes towards silence: while most foreground silence positively, as reflective and potentially empowering, several have argued that this optimism simplifies silence's psychological and emotional dangers, including its capacity to be coercive and exclusionary. The paper explores this tension by examining how silence is approached within coaching practices, a context where coaches' ethical stances towards their own practice are developed and solidified. In so doing, the analysis will review how coaches can confront the potential ethical fragilities of their own practice.

*Keywords: silence, coaching ethics, coach education, positive psychology, vulnerability*

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### **Introduction**

This paper argues that silence, as a concept and practice within coaching, raises ethical challenges for the field, specifically regarding which coaching methods and techniques may be considered universally beneficial interventions. While silence is treated as a positive and productive method within certain contexts, particularly those influenced by Western philosophical and psychological traditions, its powerful affective repercussions may carry more ambiguous or adverse impacts on culturally diverse clients. This paper therefore examines silence and its use within the coaching field, in order to set an informative precedent on how coaches might approach silence, as well as other ethically charged discursive forms. More specifically, this study will review silence's treatment in coaching literature and practice more broadly, before drawing out its implications for coaching education, the context where coaching's dominant values, assumptions and ethical orientations are formed and transmitted. As the most direct site where coaching norms may be reproduced unreflectively, this formative environment is also one of the most productive for exploring the ways these norms may be examined and, when necessary, interrupted. Coaching education is retained throughout as a deliberate case study, as the concentration of structural, institutional and cultural forces within such contexts make the ethical stakes of silence unusually legible. At the same time, the paper's central argument – that silence requires culturally situated ethical framing – extends to coaching practice more broadly.

Silence is a relational and situational practice which, as a form of communication, exceeds its common perception as the simple absence of speech. As Turner (2021) notes, silence operates as an active communicative force that can shape meanings, regulate relational dynamics and carry affective weight that spoken language alone cannot convey. The topic of silence has attracted attention within coaching research given its challenge to assumptions within the coaching field that are both culturally specific and ethically laden; for example, the equation of silence with reflective depth, the privileging of verbal articulation as the primary marker of engagement, and the presumption that discomfort with silence signals a developmental opportunity rather than a legitimate cultural or relational response. While rarely made explicit, these assumptions actively shape how silence is understood, taught and enacted within coaching sessions, and their consequences extend into the coaching field's broader ethical culture. As such, the unreflective transmission of such assumptions risks enacting harm, particularly for clients whose relationship to silence falls outside coaching's dominant cultural frameworks. This paper takes that risk as its starting point.

Some of these assumptions are tied to optimism, a value often associated with the core of the coaching field. One of coaching's dominant underlying approaches, Positive Psychology, positions coaching at the intersection of psychological intervention and broader philosophical orientations towards human flourishing, with optimism serving as the affective disposition through which psychological wellbeing and aspirational self-development converge (Duncan, 2020; Roark & Abelsky, 2024; Turner, 2021). While this emphasis on optimism may appeal to clients, it overlooks the emotional or psychological risks also associated with aspects of coaching dialogue, including the use of silence (Law, 2013). Psychologically oriented coaches in particular have noted that the emotions and meanings surrounding silence are often negative, given silence's ability to elicit feelings such as uncertainty or coercion, depending on a client's previous psychological experiences (Turner, 2021). This paper therefore contends that the role of silence in coaching must be interrogated, along with the ethical assumptions that uncritically grant it legitimacy. Failure to question these assumptions risks the potential for coaching to cause epistemic harm under the guise of reflective practice.

Coaches' respective ethical views on silence influence their coaching methods. Those with a cautious approach to silence tend to adopt careful interventionist techniques, in contrast to philosophically oriented coaches who consistently frame silence as a generative space for self-orientation and responsibility (Mills, 2026). This spectrum of attitudes towards silence raises essential ethical tensions within the coaching field regarding intervention and restraint, directive care and the valorisation of autonomous self-regulation, and culturally situated practice and the imposition of universalised norms. Arguably, these tensions have emerged from coaching's roots within the neoliberal workplace, which stresses productivity, efficiency and performance over psychological care. Neoliberal priorities embed particular ethical positions into coaching's foundational concepts, resulting in a field-wide tendency to recast silence through an optimistic lens – as productive pause, reflective opportunity or autonomy-affirming restraint. Such an optimistic slant may obscure silence's capacity to coerce, exclude or reinforce existing power imbalances, particularly for clients whose cultural frameworks do not share these assumptions.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it examines coaching's development at the intersection of organisational utility and individual cultivation, an integrated focus that reflects the influence of neoliberal values on the field's core ethical assumptions. It then analyses how

silence, a practitioner intervention often operating beneath the threshold of what is considered explicit technique, is viewed by both philosophy- and psychology-oriented coaching traditions; in so doing, it demonstrates how both orientations carry culturally situated ethical assumptions rarely addressed directly in the research literature or during sessions with clients. Drawing upon Law (2013), Turner (2021) and Stelter (2016), the paper then develops a framework for understanding silence as ethically ambiguous rather than inherently beneficial. Finally, the paper concludes by proposing principles for a more culturally responsive, ethically attentive coaching practice.

### **Coaching Between Organisational Utility and Individual Development**

Among coaching approaches, Positive Psychology, pioneered by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), warrants particular attention due to its significant influence on coaching's ethical culture, contributing not only to coaching methods but also underlying assumptions about human flourishing, self-regulation and the meaning of progress. The model gained particular prominence following its formalisation in the late 1990s and rapid expansion in the 2000s, an era when neoliberal values amenable to human capital development were reshaping organisational life. This context proved fertile ground for Positive Psychology's growth, due to its emphasis on optimism, resilience and goal-oriented mindsets, all of which aligned closely with neoliberal priorities on individual productivity, self-management and competitive self-advancement (Law, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the same time, neoliberalism's problematic ethical implications are also reflected in the coaching field; these include the commodification of human potential, the privileging of measurable outcomes over relational depth, the rendering of cultural difference as developmental deficit and the delegitimization of non-Western systems of knowledge. Neoliberalism's high evaluation of culturally specific frameworks and values (i.e., self-reliance, autonomy) as universal benefits is notably rigid, enough to be considered a kind of violence when used to undermine contrary frameworks as deficiencies to be overcome. Alternative frameworks that are not congenial to neoliberal corporate attitudes – for example, those that stress dependence, interdependence and communal obligation – are all legitimate ethical orientations in their own right, so their subordination within coaching practice may enact harm, not through malicious intent but through the uncritical universalization of particular moral frameworks. More importantly, the self-oriented values to which these alternative frameworks are subordinated tend to have at least partial roots in Western philosophical traditions that are culturally specific yet treat selfhood, autonomy and progress as universal. These traditions have long shaped the contemporary workplace, marginalizing those whose relational obligations or conceptions of flourishing do not conform to individualist assumptions. This philosophical inheritance and its potentially adverse ethical consequences on coaching culture is the central rationale for its focus.

Silence's ethical ambiguities within coaching may be connected to this relationship between the field and neoliberal values. While silence is rarely valorised within neoliberal productivity culture more broadly – verbal output, visibility and demonstrable activity are typically more openly prized within this context – in the coaching field it has been selectively reframed as generative and conducive to self-reflection and autonomous problem-solving. This alignment is recognizably optimistic, and valuable to neoliberal workplaces in its promotion of individual performance, self-management and self-responsibility. In contexts not oriented toward neoliberal productivity, silence may be more openly recognized as dialogically uncomfortable or

coercive, especially within hierarchical environments. The recasting of silence as productive self-reflection thus subordinates silence's relational complexity, especially its ethical ambiguity, to neoliberal norms of management, and in particular self-management. Silence's negative valences include the capacity to coerce, alienate or exclude, all of which clash with Positive Psychology's drive to frame all coaching interventions as developmental and empowering; this may result in a field-wide tendency to underestimate silence's potential for harm. Weinberg (2024) has argued that coaching's corporate origins have resulted in its professional standards, as currently articulated, failing to guide practice meaningfully, with coaching organizations' ethical frameworks tending to either be inconsistent or privilege professional legitimacy over client welfare. Weinberg's (2024) critique pertains specifically to business coaching contexts, yet may be even more suited to contexts where organizational and individual interests diverge openly, such as universities. For vulnerable and culturally diverse populations beyond corporate settings, such divergences may foreclose ways of knowing that fall outside coaching's individualist assumptions.

### **The Ethics of Coaching as Applied Philosophy and Psychological Experience**

Coaching has been conceptualised as a form of applied philosophy, as its reliance on dialogue, self-examination and ethical reflection for clarifying thought and reorienting action mirrors classical Western philosophical practices. Exemplifying this philosophical orientation in coaching is what Thomson (2009) describes as 'non-directive' coaching models, which seek to maximise clients' autonomy and sense of personal responsibility, often by reducing the coach themselves to a facilitating role. Significantly, this model treats silence as a productive resource: Thomson (2009) prescribes dialogical pauses in order to cultivate client self-reliance, positioning silence not as a communicative difficulty but as evidence of the capacity for independent reflection. This treatment of silence as a vehicle for autonomous self-discovery reveals non-directive coaching's deeper philosophical assumption that autonomy is not merely a desirable outcome but a self-evident *telos* of the coaching encounter. Autonomy occupies a privileged position within Western philosophical tradition, where rational self-governance has, since the Enlightenment, long been treated as an ostensibly self-evident good in its perceived support for self-determination and individual moral agency. Nevertheless, this valorisation is culturally situated: in contexts shaped by collectivist values or structural constraints, insistence on individual self-direction may function less as liberation than the imposition of a particular ethical worldview. In collectivist contexts, insistence on individual self-direction can erode communal bonds, pathologize interdependence, and place undue burden on individuals to resolve structurally produced difficulties through personal reflection alone. This ethically ambiguous dynamic may appear in the coaching field, where client autonomy often means taking maximum responsibility over one's words and actions – a conflation of autonomy with accountability. Within corporate environments, where responsibility is unevenly distributed on a structural level, this conflation may be beneficial for employers yet coercive for employees, another instance of coaching values echoing workplace priorities.

Dolan's (2020) values-based corporate coaching approach articulates one example of this philosophical stance, encouraging an 'ethical alignment' within organizations that is abstract enough to provide limited insight for implementation and can therefore be applied flexibly. That Dolan explicitly labels this alignment "ethical" is telling: it reveals how 'ethical' treatment, in his view, is not a universal standard but a workplace-specific construct shaped by organizational

culture and corporate interests. Both Thomson (2009) and Dolan (2020) are careful to foreground practical exercises in their work, emphasizing coaching's active nature; for example, Thomson (2009) begins his book with non-directive tasks that readers can complete themselves, and which demonstrate how the silence that emerges during written exercises can cultivate self-reliance. Nevertheless, philosophical orientations towards coaching may under-theorise its emotional and experiential dimensions, favouring detachment over supportive intervention. This detachment is itself ethically contested: where self-directed reflection is regarded as a mark of autonomy and professional maturity, disengagement may be seen as respectful, while where coaching is understood as a relational and caring practice, this same detachment risks being perceived as neglect.

In recent decades, coaching's philosophical orientation has begun intersecting with cognitive neuroscience. One proponent of this view, DeFilippis (2008), has argued that the neural processes underlying coaching are relational and context-dependent, a framing that seemingly resists individualism. Nevertheless, DeFilippis (2008) retains a focus on the individual in order to stress individual self-regulation, again aligning coaching with neoliberal priorities and lending these priorities empirical authority in the process. This intersection is ethically significant: by granting culturally specific values the authority of neuroscience, such research risks laundering coaching's Western philosophical assumptions as empirical fact, presenting what is ethically situated as biologically universal in order to foreclose critique. This move has direct implications for how silence is understood: if self-regulation is treated as neurologically grounded, silence – its assumed facilitator – inherits the same scientific authority, making its use during sessions harder to question. This, in turn, can obscure the possibility that silence may obstruct rather than support client reflection.

When compared to their philosophically oriented counterparts, psychologically informed coaching models tend to foreground technique and client experience. Researchers such as Woodcock (2010) have applied methods from the social sciences to coaching sessions, using thematic analysis on session transcripts to identify emotionally salient moments within coaching engagements. The social sciences carry their own ethical orientations – toward reflexivity, power, and the situated nature of knowledge – and their application to coaching introduces these commitments in ways that may be under-acknowledged. Although listening, not silence, is Woodcock's (2010) primary focus, she implicitly treats pauses, hesitations and uncertain moments as analytically significant, reinforcing the view that silence is a meaningful affective phenomenon, not just an opportunity for greater productivity or neutral absence. Law (2013), meanwhile, has mapped comprehensively the many theoretical frameworks available to coaches, explicitly with the aim of accommodating cultural plurality and competing values systems within organizational environments. Building upon these psychological approaches, Turner (2021) has explicitly addressed silence, distinguishing between its passive, neutral and potentially harmful uses and more active, engaged silences indicating client focus. Turner (2021) stresses how silence must be approached carefully and dialogically, rather than simply encourage client responsibility. Overall, what separates psychologically and philosophically oriented models is the former's prioritisation of how coaching techniques are experienced by clients: delicate dialogic areas such as silence are understood by psychologically oriented coaches as relational and emotional phenomena shaped by context, rather than a conceptual or ethical issue. Nevertheless, psychological approaches are themselves not ethically neutral, and the coaching

field's general *a priori* commitment to affirmative frameworks may still foreclose honest engagement with the broader affective dimensions of silence.

The above literature demonstrates how the coaching field has allowed for the integration of philosophical and psychological themes in novel ways. One particularly careful integration has been that of Stelter (2016), whose work on values and narrative dialogue attempts to balance coaching's utilitarian, corporate aspects with psychological care and philosophical rigour. Citing the overwhelming "hypercomplexities" of the present moment, Stelter (2016) argues that coaching is a prime opportunity for working through pressures using social meaning-making and narrative engagement. His approach to coaching practice is thus theoretically balanced, although he does not address specific tension points such as silence, leaving room open for further inquiry and responses from psychologically oriented experts. In effect, silence and other ambiguous discursive emotions that emerge during coaching sessions will require greater consideration from theoretically neat approaches to coaching such as Stelter's (2016), especially since these integrative frameworks, however sophisticated, remain predominantly grounded in Western philosophical traditions. A commitment to Western ideological coherence may outweigh coaching's concern for client welfare, a risk that can only begin to be mitigated through explicit ethical interrogation.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

While silence has long been present in coaching practice, it is now increasingly naturalised within the practice as a means of self-orientation and reflective autonomy – an opportunity for individual contemplation rather than a dialogic engagement requiring ethical examination. Yet it has not been theorised extensively within coaching scholarship. Silence as a topic has been addressed only intermittently within the research literature, and rarely as a subject of sustained ethical inquiry. Consequently, silence in its particulars remains as an emerging topic in coaching scholarship, one whose longstanding practical presence has not been matched by critical examination of the value orientations it carries.

While the wide range of theoretical frameworks now promulgated in coaching literature reflects the field's ongoing effort to organize practice for diverse contexts and purposes, this position paper argues that these frameworks do not yet account for the ethical ambiguities surrounding tensions such as silence. Silence is not a neutral dialogic tool, but one whose ethical significance varies considerably depending on the relational, cultural, and institutional context in which it is deployed. This means that coaching frameworks which treat silence as neutral or universally generative risk neglecting its capacity to coerce, exclude or reinforce existing power imbalances across different cultural and institutional contexts. Moreover, ethical concerns are particularly acute wherever coaching engages clients who are structurally vulnerable, navigating unequal power relations, or unable to opt out of institutional expectations; those conditions that cannot be assumed away by performance-oriented or organizational frameworks. What is needed, therefore, is a theoretically grounded alternative ethical approach to coaching education that will equip practitioners with the tools to recognise silence not as a default positive intervention but as a site of genuine ethical ambiguity. In so doing, this framework will encourage culturally responsive, context-sensitive judgments that current training frameworks have yet to address adequately.

Law (2013) has outlined how Positive Psychology's assumed optimism is not shared across cultures. Although the optimism of Positive Psychology allows the coaching field to avoid pathologizing clients' struggles as deficient, it can nevertheless be unhelpful to those from non-organizational contexts and unmanageable in lopsided environments. Law (2013) therefore warns that the coaching field has significant potential for cultural insensitivity, and stresses how coaching practice must be treated as *fundamentally* psychological, rather than utilitarian or conceptual. The knowledge that emerges during coaching sessions is situated, relational and shaped by emotion and experience, meaning that any ethical frameworks applied to coaching must be responsive; they cannot impose predetermined values of autonomy or resilience onto those for whom such values may be alienating or inaccessible. Law (2013) critiques several commonly used theoretical models, such as Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, as too generic for coaching practice despite their flexibility, then surveys a variety of detailed learning and motivational theories intended to ensure coaching's inclusivity. These theories are a significant resource for coach education, as they do not presume equal agency and resilience among organizational members: clients from different backgrounds cannot automatically be expected to cope with ethically risky discursive forms of discourse, including silence, and must be approached with relational care. In other words, silence's ethical significance cannot be assumed, but must depend on how learning and power are negotiated within coaching settings.

Understanding silence as ethically situated rather than as a neutral given raises the question of what purposes silence might serve within coaching practice. The following section approaches this question through the lens of values, arguing that silence is not merely a technique for managing dialogue, but a constitutive element of the values-activation process that lies at the heart of coaching. How silence is framed, experienced and negotiated within a coaching session reflects and reinforces particular assumptions about what clients value, how clients know themselves, and whose ways of knowing are recognised as legitimate during sessions. Coaching education will serve as a starting point for this exploration due to its structural vulnerabilities, cultural diversity and power asymmetries, all of which foreground silence's ethical stakes and thus allow for the further exploration of broader questions surrounding silence in coaching.

## **Silence as Learning Space: Towards Ethical Practice in Coaching Education**

### ***Silence and Values Activation***

One core philosophical commitment of coaching, inherited from Western thinkers ranging from Plato to Mill, is the activation of values through reflective dialogue. These values are not pre-existing internal properties of a community simply awaiting discovery, but are the shared co-constructions of conversational engagement (Stelter, 2016). As such, they require coaches to attend to how social and institutional contexts shape what clients experience as their authentic, value-laden choices and beliefs.

As a necessary component of dialogue, silence contributes to the co-construction of values, including within coaching sessions. When a coach invites silence after posing a reflective question, they create temporal and cognitive space for a client to move beyond rehearsed responses and towards deeper self-examination. Nevertheless, silence's generative function depends entirely on how silence is framed and experienced. For example, Thomson's (2009) non-directive approach explicitly positions silence as an opportunity for self-authorship, with

verbal silence stemming from reflective writing exercises to create a structured and contained “productive silence.” In contrast, Turner (2021) achieves such productive silence through more interactive client exercises, ones framed by in-person engagement. In both instances, productive silence reflects coaching priorities: Thomson (2009) stresses the client’s own assumption of responsibility for their actions, going so far as to advise the coach not to engage with client exercise responses at all, while Turner (2021) emphasises silence’s contribution to focused thought, something with which the coach might engage at any time. Both of these silences stand in stark contrast to coercive silence, wherein absence of speech acts as a disciplinary mechanism, or silence that the client experiences as judgment or withdrawal of support.

### ***Three Approaches to Silence in Values-Based Coaching***

If silence is contextually constructed rather than universally meaningful, coaches must make deliberate and informed choices about how they deploy it. Stelter (2016) outlines three such approaches for working with silence in values-based coaching, each offering their own possibilities and risks:

- **Existential Silence:** This approach treats silence as a space for phenomenological engagement, with the coach’s silence signalling presence and attentiveness to lived experience without interpretation or analysis. Existential silence can help clients articulate experiences that resist easy categorisation, including disorientation, impostor syndrome or cultural displacement. This approach requires high levels of relational trust and emotional safety: without explicit framing and ongoing consent, existential silence risks being experienced as abandonment, particularly by clients already feeling marginalised or uncertain.
- **Protreptic Silence:** This form of silence involves deliberate abstraction, moving away from specific situational details towards underlying patterns and values. Silence is used to distance the client from immediate concerns in favour of looking for connections between broader themes (i.e., perfectionism, peer conflict avoidance, career anxiety). Critically, such abstraction can feel invalidating if clients are dealing with acute material concerns such as financial stress or discrimination, meaning that coaches must know how to employ protreptic silence judiciously alongside more concrete problem-solving strategies.
- **Narrative-Collaborative Silence:** This approach, Stelter’s (2016) own, incorporates a consciousness of contemporary society’s “hypercomplexity” by treating silence as a shared space for co-constructing meaningful narratives. Rather than silence being under the coach’s complete purview, or merely implemented to prompt client reflection, both coach and client may pause together to acknowledge ambiguities or limits to available solutions, with silence working as an explicitly relational act rather than a technique. Narrative-collaborative silence can validate client difficulties, allowing them space for agency, yet coaches must be comfortable with not-knowing – that is, resisting the impulse to resolve ambiguity prematurely or impose interpretive frameworks onto client experiences, which risks premature closure or false optimism.

These three approaches all reflect different understandings and implementations of silence within coaching settings, meaning that coaching educators face a double responsibility: shaping both how their students will use silence with future clients, and how students will formulate their

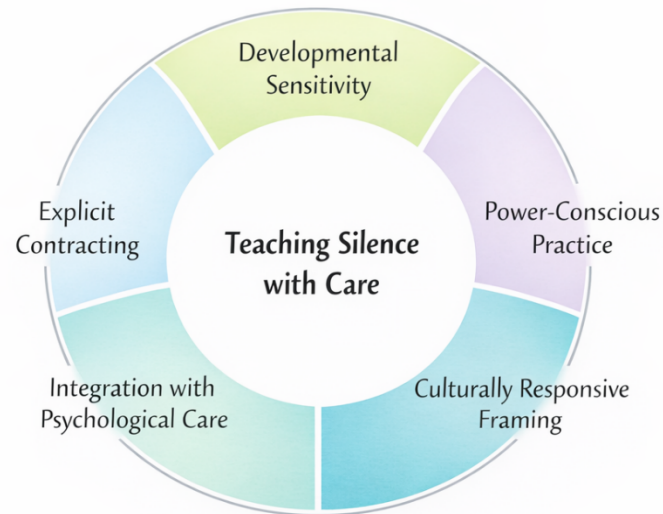
own overall professional identities. Coaching students, meanwhile, must have some idea of how silence will be used during coaching sessions, and cannot internalise silence as neutral without processing their own experience of it.

### ***Practical Principles for Ethical Silence in Coaching Education***

Rather than being inherently beneficial, silence is valued depending on how it is introduced, monitored and adapted to individual clients. The following principles (see Figure 1) translate silence's contextual valuation into practice:

- **Explicit Contracting:** Silence should be discussed during the initial contracting phase of the coaching relationship. Coaches can explain that silence is a reflective tool that may emerge during sessions, and invite clients to share their existing associations with silence in order to establish ways that clients may signal discomfort or request verbal engagement.
- **Culturally Responsive Framing:** Coaches must acknowledge explicitly that silence carries different meanings across cultures, and that what reads as “holding space” in one context may read as “withholding engagement” elsewhere. Asking clients directly about their relationship with silence, rather than assuming its universality, is essential for this framing (Turner, 2021).
- **Developmental Sensitivity:** Clients will have different capacities to tolerate and use silence productively. While clients in early or transitional stages of development may benefit from structured, brief silences paired with clear prompts, those engaged in deeper exploratory work, such as long-term goal planning or identity negotiation, may welcome more extended silence for sustained reflection.
- **Power-conscious Practice:** Coaches must remain attentive to how institutional power asymmetries shape the experience of silence. A silence that feels generative within a peer coaching relationship may feel coercive when the coach holds institutional authority (i.e., as an administrator, superior or faculty member). Regular check-ins about the experience of silence are essential in order to avoid assumptions about its effects.
- **Integration with Psychological Care:** Clients may present with mental health concerns alongside developmental or vocational questions, so coaches must be prepared to recognise when silence is counterproductive or harmful. If a client is experiencing acute anxiety, trauma responses or dissociation, extended silence may exacerbate distress rather than support reflection. In such cases, psychological referral or a new approach is necessary.

Together, these principles reframe silence not as a passive absence or noise that is merely tolerated within the coaching setting, but as an active ethical responsibility that coaching must consciously manage. Coaching educators must equip their students not to avoid silence, but to use it with the contextual awareness, cultural humility and relational attentiveness that ethical practice demands.



**Figure 1: Teaching Silence with Care: A Coaching Education Framework**

### **Contribution and Significance**

This paper contributes to coaching scholarship by arguing that silence is both a dialogic technique and an ethical intervention whose meaning and effects are inseparable from context. Coaching has emerged from Western corporate settings that are frequently conceptualised as arenas of equal agency and shared purpose despite unequal characteristics. This has resulted in the coaching field's foundational optimism being applied inappropriately, potentially causing cultural insensitivity. As coaching expands its vistas and becomes more culturally inclusive, it is imperative that these risks be addressed, particularly through analysing divergent approaches to liminal, ambiguous dialogic elements such as silence.

The practical risks associated with silence within coaching sessions have been partially acknowledged, especially in the work of Turner (2021), who has offered careful practitioner-oriented attempts to address silence's ethical ambiguities. Nevertheless, current coaching literature can go farther in acknowledging silence's complexities, and its revelation of the coaching field's deeper ethical fragilities. Additionally, psychologically oriented coaching literature, while more nuanced than its philosophical counterpart, has only vaguely acknowledged silence's risks, neglecting structural difficulties in favour of making silence more "comfortable" for clients. The lack of comprehensive workable approaches to areas such as silence makes coaching's extension into vulnerable populations challenging, and this paper responds to a significant gap in the research literature resulting from silence's theorization primarily as a practitioner tool, rather than as an ethically ambiguous relational event. Such a gap has particular consequences for coach education, where silence is frequently transmitted as an inherently positive or neutral practice without critical examination of the value orientations it carries – orientations that, this paper argues, coaches must be able to recognise and, where necessary, actively counteract.

**Conclusion: Silence, Vulnerability and the Future of Coaching Ethics**

This paper argues that silence reveals fundamental tensions in how coaches understand agency, vulnerability and care. Many coaches treat their practice as a sort of applied version of Western philosophical ethics, with silence serving to help clients achieve clarity and self-knowledge necessary for the ‘vita contemplative,’ the contemplative life (Stelter, 2016). Nevertheless, this view neglects the Western philosophical tradition’s conscious effort to divorce reflection from considerations of power, precarity and psychological safety. If the coaching field adopts such philosophical attitudes uncritically, it risks reproducing the very conditions of coercion it claims to transcend. Coaching students, who are by definition in a process of development, must be supported by coach education programmes that cultivate not only technical proficiency but critical ethical reflexivity, equipping them to interrogate value orientations rather than reproduce them unreflectively. The five practical principles outlined in this paper represent starting points, not comprehensive solutions, for this care, and are offered in the spirit of Stelter’s (2016) call for narrative-collaborative engagement: as provisional framings open to revision through practice and dialogue.

Looking forward, coach education programs must move beyond teaching silence as technique and toward preparing coaches to navigate silence as ethical practice. Coach students must develop their capacity for reflexivity, cultural humility and psychological attunement, alongside their skills in questioning and presence. Moreover, coaching education programmes must receive institutional acknowledgment that coaching carries responsibilities separate from the corporate sphere, thereby requiring tailored, if not unique, frameworks.

The question of silence is a question about coaching’s purpose. If coaching optimizes performance, silence is a tool. If coaching enables relational human flourishing, silence is ethical and value laden. This paper argues for the latter: silence as presence that honours coaching students and the coaching field.

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### Author contact

Dr Elly Li Tai, Associate Lecturer at the University of Cambridge Professional and Continuing Education (PACE)

Dr Winnie Sin Wai Pui, Course Director at the University of Cambridge Professional and Continuing Education (PACE).

Professional and Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, Madingley, Cambridge CB23 8AQ, UK

Email: [winnie.pui@pace.cam.ac.uk](mailto:winnie.pui@pace.cam.ac.uk)