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Coaching and Social Structures: A Bourdieusian Framework for Reflexive Practice

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Abstract

Coaching is widely presented as a values-driven profession committed to autonomy, empowerment and client-centered development. Yet coaching interactions are not culturally neutral. Coaching encounters are embedded within social fields shaped by implicit norms concerning language, identity, communication and success. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, this paper argues that coaching might unintentionally reproduce dominant cultural dispositions while marginalizing alternative ways of being, knowing, and communicating. Building on Bourdieu's relational concepts of habitus, capital and field, this paper develops a sociological lens for examining how coaching practices are situated within institutional and professional structures. Ethical coaching is therefore understood to require more than reflective self-awareness; it requires sociological reflexivity that enables practitioners to recognize how their dispositions, forms of capital and institutional positioning shape the coaching relationship. The paper introduces the Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R³C), a conceptual model that operationalizes reflexivity through four interconnected layers: habitus awareness, capital mapping, field and power awareness, and values as situated practice. The framework supports coaches and coachees in examining how values are constituted, recognized and negotiated within specific coaching contexts. By integrating Bourdieusian sociology with coaching scholarship, the paper advances a theoretically grounded approach to ethical coaching practice and positions reflexivity as a core professional competence for more contextually aware and ethically informed coaching relationships.

Keywords: Bourdieu, ethical agency, self-awareness, value in practice, coaching education

Introduction

Professional coaching is commonly presented as a values-based discipline. Codes of ethics, accreditation frameworks and professional associations consistently emphasize respect, autonomy, inclusion and empowerment (Cox et al., 2024). These commitments position coaching as a humanistic practice concerned with dignity, agency and personal development. At the same time, coaching is often treated as a culturally neutral methodology, one that can be applied universally across contexts, identities and social positions. This assumption of neutrality, however, warrants epistemological examination (Askeland, 2009; Shoukry, 2017).

Coaching frameworks emphasize the authentic presence, congruence and attentiveness of the coach (Whitmore, 2009). While these interpersonal capacities are important, they are strengthened when complemented by attention to the broader social context in which coaching occurs. Presence and congruence, though necessary, require sociological awareness (Stabler & James, 2023). Coaching conversations do not occur in a social vacuum. They are embedded within institutional fields shaped by economic priorities, organizational hierarchies, leadership discourses and culturally specific models of success. Within the coaching session itself, these

dynamics with the ecosystem might continue to operate, shaping what emerges between coach and coachee.

While coaches examine their assumptions, values, biases and communication patterns, reflexivity in Bourdieu's (2004) sense extends this work by interrogating three interconnected dimensions of our own positioning as coaches. For example, first, the field: the institutional hierarchies we occupy and the implicit rules and norms they carry. Second, our habitus: the dispositions and ways of being we have internalized through our own educational trajectories and professional socialization. Third, the forms of capital we possess and access: for example, cultural capital (credentials, knowledge, ways of speaking), social capital (professional networks, institutional affiliations) and economic capital that shapes our choices and positioning.

This paper proposes sociological reflexivity to expand and deepen the reflective practices already present in coaching. Coaching frameworks emphasize individual reflection, interpersonal presence and personal development. While these dimensions are important, they might not fully capture how coaching encounters are shaped by broader social structures. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, we argue that coaching is structured by field dynamics, habitus and capital distribution – dimensions that operate beneath conscious awareness and shape what emerges in coaching practice.

Methodological Stance and Scope

This paper is a conceptual analysis of educational coaching in higher education, drawing on three primary sources: (1) the authors' practitioner experience in coaching contexts; (2) professional coaching competencies (International Coaching Federation, 2025); and (3) critical sociology, particularly Bourdieu's theory of practice. The analysis focuses specifically on educational coaching and academic development coaching in higher education settings within competitive, achievement-focused university contexts in the UK and Europe.

The International Coaching Federation (2025) Core Competency 2.03 emphasizes that coaches develop "an ongoing reflective practice to enhance one's coaching" through reflective dialogue and collaborative processes with supervisors. This paper builds on this competency framework by arguing that such reflective practice is strengthened when complemented by sociological reflexivity. When coaches engage in this reflexive practice, they become conscious of what they unconsciously bring to coaching sessions: the subtle ways they might steer toward dominant norms, whose forms of capital they privilege, whose ways of knowing they implicitly value. This consciousness opens possibilities for more genuine co-creation, enabling coaches to notice and work with these dynamics rather than being shaped by them unknowingly. This paper argues that understanding coaching requires moving beyond psychological reflection (London et al., 2023) toward sociological reflexivity. The theoretical contribution of this work is to demonstrate that coaching is not a neutral interpersonal encounter, but a social practice structured by power dynamics that operate largely beneath awareness. Building on this analysis, we introduce the Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R^3C), which operationalizes sociological reflexivity as a core coaching competence that extends professional reflective practice (International Coaching Federation, 2025).

Coaches working within institutional contexts where power dynamics shape whose voices are heard and whose identities are recognized as legitimate face a particular ethical challenge (Chan et al., 2025). For practitioners engaging in educational coaching within such ecosystems, practicing reflexivity becomes essential to ethical practice. Through reflexive interrogation of habitus, capital and field dynamics, coaches can recognize how these dimensions operate beneath awareness and shape coaching encounters, enabling them to interrupt unconscious reproduction of institutional inequities.

This paper unfolds in four movements. First, we deepen examination of coaches' own values, arguing that while coaches reflect on their values, this reflection needs more substantive frameworks for understanding how values shape coaching encounters. Second, we draw on Bourdieu's theory of practice to explain how coaching operates within broader ecosystems shaped by habitus, capital and institutional structures; dynamics that might inadvertently reproduce inequity under the guise of empowerment. Third, we argue that reflection forms an important foundation for coaching and is deepened when complemented by reflexivity – critical engagement with the field dynamics and power relations shaping practice. Finally, we propose the Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R^3C) as a tool for unpacking these dynamics, enabling coaches and coachees to develop greater awareness of how values are constituted, rewarded and negotiated. Our aim is not to prescribe values alignment but to create space for reflexive, ethically informed practice.

The Coach as Tool: Values, Self-Awareness and Relational Practice

Coaches' own values remain underexamined in much of the contemporary coaching literature and practice (Carden et al., 2022). Although values development is widely recognized as essential to coaching competence, coaches are encouraged simply to "self-reflect" on their values, sometimes with limited attention paid to what such reflection entails in practice or how it might be enacted authentically. This emphasis overlooks a fundamental reality: while coaches already reflect on their values and work consciously with them, this reflection sometimes remains internal and individual. Values operate relationally, alive in the coaching conversation itself, shaping what emerges between coach and coachee, what gets noticed together, what possibilities emerge. When coaches deepen their awareness of how their values operate in this relational space, they can work with this dynamic more intentionally. Stabler and James (2023) argue that reflection alone may constrain coaches to objective observation of their practice against accepted norms, without necessarily surfacing the unconscious assumptions and habitual patterns informing their choices and interpretations. Bluckert (2005) identifies self-awareness and values clarity as core coaching competencies, while Bachkirova (2016) conceptualizes the coach's self as the primary 'instrument' of coaching practice, foregrounding the importance of reflective awareness. This paper contends that reflection benefits from being supplemented by deeper reflexive practice. In some cases, coaching training programs prioritize technical skill development, potentially limiting attention to the coach's personal and values centered development (Carden et al., 2022; Jordan et al., 2017). Recognizing this gap, Carden and Crosse (2025) advocate for a reconceptualization of coach development, from Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to Continuing Personal and Professional Development (CPPD), positioning self-awareness and reflexive practice at the center of coaching competence. This paper argues that reflexivity serves two critical functions: it questions our taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, and it helps us distinguish between practices that genuinely transform versus

those that maintain existing power relations and structures (Stabler & James, 2023). Without this reflexive dimension, coaching risks reproducing dominant values under the appearance of authentic self-awareness.

Machon and Machon (2025) elaborate this through their framework of four creative inner tools, contingent upon the coach's clarified value system. The Spirit level establishes grounded inner presence, reducing habitual reactive patterns. The Compass level develops inner guidance, will and intentionality toward self-trust. The Mirror level emphasizes real time reflection, enabling coaches to notice dynamics with attentiveness rather than habitual responses. Together, these foundational levels cultivate spaciousness and receptive presence. The Wand level extends this inward work to invite coachees into authentic co-creative experience. These inner capacities enable the coach to become fully present, cultivate inner spaciousness and maintain a neutral, receptive stance essential for authentic co-creative work (Madan, 2025). All four levels are grounded in the coach's clarified and reflexively examined values. This positioning underscores a critical assertion: values are not peripheral to coaching practice but constitute the foundational bedrock upon which authentic co-creative work rests. While coaches often have clarity about their own values and work presently with coachees, reflexivity offers an additional dimension to this practice.

This reorientation becomes increasingly vital within what Stelter (2016) (drawing on Luhmann, 1998) characterizes as a "hypercomplex society," where coaches must navigate multiple, contextually dependent value systems and truths. From a sociological perspective, identity and values are not fixed entities, but rather ongoing reflexive projects shaped by individual agency and social structures (Giddens, 1991). Self-awareness, therefore, is critical to coaches' emotional regulation, decision-making capacity, relational authenticity and professional integrity (Cox et al., 2024). Traditional approaches to coach self-awareness often concentrate on individual reflection, which may oversimplify the complex ways external biases, cultural conditioning and structural dynamics influence our values. This gap necessitates a more critical lens through which to examine the coaching relationship itself. In this conceptual paper, we explore how Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977) provides crucial analytical tools for understanding how coaching practices might unintentionally reproduce dominant values and marginalize alternative ways of being, knowing and communicating.

Coaching as a Field of Practice: Linking Habitus, Capital and Field

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, coaching can be seen as a co-created relationship that also operates within a socially structured field shaped by norms, values and power relations. In Bourdieu's relational model, practice emerges from the dynamic interaction between habitus, capital and field. It is this configuration that produces what appears as "natural" leadership ability, professional readiness, or executive presence (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991).

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology offers a relational theory of practice grounded in the dynamic interaction between field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986, 1991). In broad terms, a field is a structured social arena such as education, academia or corporate leadership, governed by its own rules, hierarchies and forms of legitimacy. Within fields, actors compete over what counts as value, authority and success. Capital refers to resources that confer advantage in a field. Beyond economic capital, which is normally most apparent, Bourdieu

distinguishes cultural capital (knowledge, language, credentials, dispositions), social capital (networks and affiliations) and symbolic capital (recognition and legitimacy). Habitus denotes embodied dispositions shaped by one's social trajectory. It structures what feels natural, possible or appropriate without requiring conscious calculation. The value of each form depends on the logic of the field in which it circulates.

Coaching does not stand outside these dynamics. It operates within society and is embedded in organizational and professional fields that define success and establish the symbolic economy within which agency must navigate. Coaching conversations operate within a dynamic involving the coach's and coachee's habitus alongside institutional field demands. In this space, there is a possibility that certain forms of capital become emphasized as important for development, though how this manifests varies significantly across different coaching contexts and practitioners.

Field

Within this field, coaches might not fully recognize that they are not neutral agents. Their credentials, professional discourse and organizational affiliations might confer authority and legitimacy, positioning them as definers of what counts as competence, ambition, or growth. In this way, coaches become carriers of institutionalized capital and gatekeepers of field specific norms, risking inadvertent reproduction of institutionalized hierarchies without conscious intention. This dynamic stands in tension with coaching's articulated value of presence and non-judgement, revealing how even ethically committed coaches might unknowingly constrain what possibilities are available to coaches (Fatien Diochon & Lovelace, 2015).

In educational coaching contexts, field dynamics shape what becomes possible. When a first-generation university student explores academic engagement in coaching, the conversation might initially focus on "participating more in class" or "engaging with challenging tasks." Yet within a competitive research university, what counts as "good engagement" is defined by particular norms: verbal assertion, individual contribution, disciplinary expertise etc. Even when we are aware of these norms, we can easily treat them as natural or universal rather than field specific. When coaches and coachees practice reflexivity about field dynamics, they can add a layer to this exploration. They might discover together that what feels like a personal limitation is actually a mismatch between the student's learning style and what this particular field privileges. From here, new conversations become possible: Your collaborative, reflective style is not something to fix. It is a strength. How do you want to navigate this field while staying true to who you are? This shifts the focus from individual adaptation to understanding structure together.

Bourdieu's concept of field underscores that professional domains are structured by internal struggles over legitimacy and valued forms of capital rather than unified ethical consensus. Fields are dynamic arenas organized around competing logics that define what counts as excellence and authority (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). Research on the coaching field confirms this dynamic. Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2015) demonstrate that the coaching field is structured by competing logics: one oriented toward organizational performance and measurable outcomes and another toward developmental growth and relational transformation. Educational coaching is similarly positioned within competing logics: when coach and coachee prioritize institutional

success metrics, this sits in tension with prioritizing student flourishing and authentic becoming. Understanding this helps coaches and coaches recognize that choices are sometimes not neutral.

Capital

Bourdieu identifies four interconnected forms of capital: economic capital (money and financial resources), cultural capital (knowledge, education, cultural competence), social capital (networks and relationships) and symbolic capital (prestige and recognition). While these are theoretically distinct, in practice they are deeply intertwined.

In educational coaching, this interconnection becomes particularly significant. Coach and coachee do not experience these forms of capital as separate categories but as interlocking dimensions of positioning within institutional fields. A coach's credentials (cultural capital), professional networks (social capital), ability to charge fees (economic capital) and institutional authority (symbolic capital) operate together, shaping what happens in the coaching encounter.

Bourdieu's original concept of capital, understood in relation to the four interconnected forms of cultural capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic), provides a powerful theoretical framework for examining the ethical foundations of coaching practice. Bourdieu developed capital to explain how social advantage is reproduced through institutions that present themselves as meritocratic and neutral (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital refers to socially valued forms of knowledge, language, taste, comportment and disposition that function as symbolic resources. Those who possess dominant cultural capital are perceived as articulate, confident, capable and competent. Those who do not are more likely to be seen as lacking motivation, readiness, or potential. Bourdieu reveals how inequity might persist: advantages some possess include cultural capital (university degrees, familiarity with academic discourse), social capital (academic networks, alumni connections), economic capital (ability to afford full-time study, resources for paid internships) and symbolic capital (prestige of credentials, recognition as an academically capable student). Yet these advantages are not equally distributed; they might structure by family background, socioeconomic position and inherited social standing. Inequity reproduces through subtle processes of recognition and valuation, not explicit exclusion. Those whose capital is valued are rewarded; those whose capital is invisible are quietly marginalized (Bourdieu, 1986).

Coaching as a Field: Habitus and Power

Habitus refers to the embodied dispositions individuals acquire through their life experiences, education and socialization. These dispositions shape what individuals perceive as natural, possible, or appropriate within a given context (Bourdieu, 1990). In coaching, habitus operates not as an external force but as something present in the encounter itself. The coaching session itself is a field – a co-created space where habitus, power dynamics and capital readily escape notice, despite agency's commitment to awareness.

Beyond higher education contexts, coaching is also embedded in corporate cultures, leadership development programs, executive education and performance management systems (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018). Within these contexts, certain dispositions are consistently rewarded. Assertive communication, strategic self-presentation, linear goal orientation, emotional self-regulation, individual ambition and instrumental rationality are routinely treated

as markers of professionalism and readiness. These dispositions reflect specific cultural histories and classed trajectories, yet they are frequently universalized as neutral indicators of competence (Bourdieu, 1991). When coaching frameworks privilege these dispositions, they risk transforming cultural difference into developmental deficit. In Bourdieusian terms, coaching could become a site of symbolic power, where the coach's dispositions risk being treated as the unmarked norm and the coachee's different ways of being are marked as deficient (Bourdieu, 1991).

This dynamic raises a profound ethical challenge for a profession that claims to be values driven. Coaching ethics codes emphasize respect, dignity, inclusion and these commitments matter (International Coaching Federation, 2025). Adding sociological reflexivity to this practice deepens what coaches can offer. When coaches develop awareness of how their own dispositions shape what they consider normal or valuable, they can work more carefully with difference. They become attentive to how their interpretations and evaluations might unconsciously reflect their own cultural norms rather than universal standards. This reflexive dimension helps prevent the subtle dynamic where coaching inadvertently becomes a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991).

Ethical coaching therefore requires more than good intentions. It requires a sustained interrogation of how power operates through language, recognition and professional judgement. Coaches must be able to recognize how their own training, socialization and institutional positioning shape what they hear and how they interpret (Kirkeby, 2009). They must be willing to question the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in coaching tools, frameworks and competency models (Hibbert, 2021; Stabler & James, 2023). Rethinking capital as a core concern of coaching ethics involves placing reflexivity at the center of professional values. Reflection involves turning inward to examine one's own experience: personal responses, emotions, assumptions and patterns. It is fundamentally introspective and individual-focused (London et al., 2023). Reflexivity extends this by interrogating the structural and cultural dimensions of power shaping professional practice.

Reflective and Reflexive Practice in Coaching Ethics

Reflective and reflexive practice are central to ethical coaching. Drawing on Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner, professionals develop expertise by critically examining their actions during and after practice through processes of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). In coaching, such reflection enables practitioners to evaluate whether their interventions align with ethical principles and the client's developmental needs. Reflexive practice extends this process by encouraging coaches to examine how their own assumptions, values and social positioning shape the coaching relationship and influence ethical decision-making.

While this paper is primarily grounded in Bourdieu's sociology of practice, it also resonates with broader theoretical discussions of reflexivity, values and power within the social sciences. Giddens (1991), for example, conceptualizes reflexivity as a defining feature of late modernity, where individuals continuously interpret and reconstruct their identities in relation to shifting social conditions. This perspective highlights how self-awareness is shaped not only by individual introspection but also by engagement with wider social structures. Work on values

further illuminates this terrain. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) demonstrate how actors justify their actions by drawing on different "orders of worth," revealing how moral evaluations are situated within socially recognized frameworks of legitimacy. In parallel, scholars of organizational power such as Crozier (1964) and Pfeffer (1981) emphasize how power operates through institutional arrangements, decision-making processes and control over resources. These perspectives reinforce the argument developed in this paper: that coaching practice is embedded within social fields where values, legitimacy and power relations shape what is recognized as valid knowledge competence and development. Bourdieu's relational framework of habitus, capital and field provides a particularly useful lens for integrating these dynamics by showing how reflexivity, values and power are interwoven within situated social practice.

Reflection has long been recognized as a core component of professional coaching practice (Clutterbuck, 2011; Jordan et al., 2017). Coaches are routinely encouraged to engage in reflective journaling, supervision and self-inquiry in order to enhance awareness, emotional regulation and professional judgement. However, much of this reflective practice remains psychologically framed, focusing on intrapersonal insight, emotional processing and behavioral refinement. While such reflection is valuable and important, deepening this practice through reflexivity opens additional dimensions (Bourdieu, 1991).

Power operates through these relational dynamics in subtle yet consequential ways. In Bourdieusian terms, power is not exercised only through explicit authority but through the capacity to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, competence and success within a field (Bourdieu, 1991). Coaching interactions therefore occur within symbolic economies where certain dispositions, communication styles and forms of capital are recognized as valuable while others remain less visible or less rewarded. When these norms remain unexamined, coaching might inadvertently reinforce dominant cultural expectations under the language of development or empowerment. Attending reflexively to power relations enables coaches to recognize how their own positioning within the field shapes the possibilities available in the coaching encounter.

Reflexive coaching ethics therefore requires what Bourdieu describes as epistemic vigilance: a sustained attentiveness to how power operates through professional categories, developmental language and success narratives (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It calls on coaches to recognize themselves not only as relational practitioners, but as socially positioned agency whose authority is conferred by institutional structures. From this perspective, self-awareness is not merely a psychological competence but a sociological accomplishment, requiring practitioners to critically examine how their dispositions, assumptions and professional authority shape the coaching relationship. It entails the capacity to locate one's values, aspirations and professional identity within a historically produced field of power relations. Reflexive self-awareness enables coaches to distinguish between ethical accompaniment and normative steering, between empowerment and symbolic conformity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This distinction is central to the ethical legitimacy of coaching. Without reflexivity, coaching risks becoming an instrument of social adaptation rather than a practice of ethical agency. Through reflexivity in coaching practice, dominant values that normally operate beneath awareness can become explicit. Coach and coachee can then examine them together and decide how to work with them.

Seen through Bourdieu's (1991) model of practice, ethical coaching requires more than interpersonal sensitivity. It requires field awareness, capital awareness and habitus awareness. Coaches can develop awareness of how organizational cultures, leadership discourses and professional competency frameworks operate as mechanisms of symbolic power.

This reframing positions coaching not as a technique of behavioral optimization, but as a socially situated practice of recognition and negotiation. It is within this theoretical architecture that the Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R^3C) is located, providing a structured means of operationalizing habitus, capital and field as objects of ethical reflection rather than invisible determinants of professional judgement.

The Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R^3C)

This paper proposes the Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R^3C) as an instrument for cultivating deeper self-awareness in coaching practice and coach education, while simultaneously supporting coaches and coachees in navigating coaching interactions more ethically and reflexively. This framework centers on the dynamic interaction between habitus, capital and field. The notation R^3C (see figure 1) is used to signal both the reflexive orientation of the framework and its grounding in these three core theoretical constructs. Values are not treated as a discrete Bourdieusian category, but as a reflexive orientation emerging from this interaction.

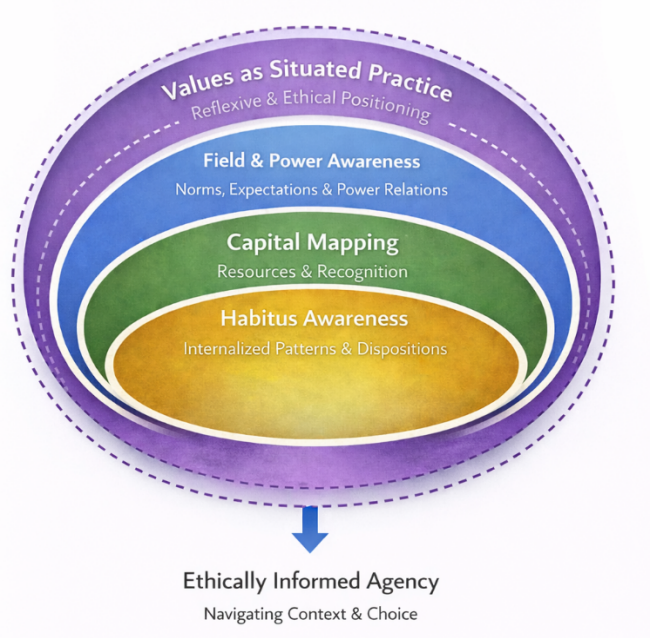

Figure 1 Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R^3C)

Grounded in Bourdieu's relational theory of practice, the framework operationalizes three core theoretical constructs – habitus, capital and field – to illuminate how coaching interactions are fundamentally shaped by socially situated dispositions, valued resources and contextual institutional norms. R^3C positions self-awareness as inherently reflexive and relational, emergent through critical engagement with these structural determinants (Stelter, 2007). By rendering

habitus, capital and field explicit objects of sustained reflection (Stelter, 2009), the framework creates conceptual space for both coaches and coachees to explore how their values are constituted, institutionally rewarded and negotiated within particular coaching contexts, thereby enabling more ethically rigorous and contextually sensitive practice.

Layer 1 Habitus Awareness

The first layer of the R³C framework focuses on habitus awareness, encouraging both coaches and coachees to reflect on the tendencies that shape how individuals come to experience what feels normal, appropriate, or possible within a coaching context. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, this layer attends to the ways in which patterns of thinking, speaking and behaving are formed through upbringing, education, cultural background and professional socialization (McLaughlin, 2024). For instance, through reflective questioning, students are invited to explore when they experience a sense of belonging or misalignment within their degree program and to distinguish between academic expectations that feel authentic to them and those that feel imposed or inherited. At the same time, coaches are encouraged to engage in reflexive inquiry regarding the assumptions they bring to students and the behaviors and ways of being they instinctively recognize as signs of engagement or potential. The aim of this layer is to support a form of self-awareness that recognizes identity as shaped and situated, rather than fixed or purely individual.

Reflexive Prompts for Coaches:

1. Which behaviours or communication styles do I instinctively read as confident, engaged, or ready and what has shaped these interpretations?
2. How might my own educational, cultural, or professional background be influencing what I notice and value in this coaching interaction?

Layer 2: Capital Mapping

The second layer focuses on capital mapping, inviting coaches and coachees to make explicit what is valued, recognized and rewarded within a particular coaching context. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, this layer attends to the skills, behaviors, credentials and ways of presenting oneself that carry legitimacy and advantage in specific environments. Through joint reflection, coachees are encouraged to identify which forms of capital are expected by the university, which they already possess but may not recognize as valuable and which feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable to perform, for example. At the same time, coaches are invited to reflect on how their own training and professional socialization may privilege forms of capital and how coaching tools and practices might inadvertently advantage some coachees over others. The aim of this layer is to support a form of self-awareness that distinguishes personal worth from socially rewarded forms of capital, thereby reducing self-blame and enabling more informed and agentic engagement with contextual expectations.

Reflexive Prompts for Coaches:

1. Which forms of cultural capital does my coaching training or professional background tend to privilege as indicators of readiness, competence, or success?
2. How might the tools, language, or frameworks I use in coaching unintentionally advantage some coachees while marginalising others?

Layer 3: Field and Power Awareness

The third layer centers on field and power awareness, highlighting the coaching space as a socially structured context shaped by implicit rules, norms and power relations. In Bourdieusian terms, a field is structured by its own internal norms and logics of practice, including what counts as success, whose voices carry authority, and which forms of capital are legitimized (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). However, fields are not unified spaces. Within educational coaching in universities, competing orientations shape what happens. One orientation privileges institutional success metrics: retention rates, graduation timelines, academic performance, alignment with degree requirements. Another privileges student flourishing: authentic development, critical consciousness, relational wellbeing. These orientations are not mutually exclusive, but they reward different priorities and shape what coaching emphasizes. This layer encourages coachees to reflect on how success is defined within their particular context, what consequences might follow from not conforming to dominant norms, and which expectations feel negotiable or imposed. For the coaches themselves, this layer invites reflexive inquiry regarding the symbolic authority attached to their role and to consider how their questions, feedback, or interventions might unintentionally steer coachees towards institutional or organizational norms. Through reflexivity together, coach and student develop a clearer lens. They can recognize contextual constraints and power relations without internalizing them as personal failure. This capacity alone can transform how students experience and respond to challenges.

Reflexive Prompts for Coaches:

1. How does my role as a coach carry symbolic authority within this interaction, and how might this shape the coachee's responses?
2. In what ways might I be unintentionally guiding the coachee towards dominant institutional norms or preferred outcomes?

Layer 4: Values as Situated Practice

The fourth layer focuses on values as situated practice, inviting attention to how values are formed, prioritized and enacted within particular social and professional contexts. Rather than treating values as abstract, stable, or purely individual ideals, this layer conceptualizes them as socially shaped priorities that emerge through the interaction of habitus, forms of capital and field-specific norms (Gergen, 2009). Critically, this layer brings together all three Bourdieusian dimensions explored in the previous layers. Values do not operate in isolation; they are shaped

by how we have been socialized (habitus), what forms of knowledge and credentials we possess (capital) and what the institutional context privileges and rewards (field) (Bourdieu, 1984). When coaches and students examine values together through this integrated lens, they develop genuine awareness of how their choices are shaped by these interconnected forces.

Recent research extends Bourdieu's framework further. Xu (2025), drawing on nearly a decade of research with over 100 Chinese youth, deepens our understanding by foregrounding time as a foundational element in capital formation and distribution. Time is not merely a chronological backdrop but an active force shaping how capital accumulates, not only in quantity but in quality.

When coaches and students explore values together through an integrated lens that encompasses both Bourdieu's theory of practice (habitus, capital and field) and this temporal dimension, they develop a more nuanced awareness of how values are constituted and lived. Capital becomes more than "what credentials a student has." It also involves temporal questions: What educational investments have been made across generations? Does the student experience time pressure while pursuing their degree? How might gender or cultural role expectations create a sense of urgency that shapes their experience, even when their actual timeframe is identical to a peer's?

Consider an eldest son in his family with parental expectations to complete his degree and contribute economically. Although his actual timeframe to graduation and available resources match a peer's, his temporal experience differs profoundly. His habitus carries family responsibility. His capital is valued differently within his family. The field of family expectations operates alongside the university field. Without examining these elements together and attending to temporal awareness, coaching might focus narrowly on "time management" or "goal-setting." However, reflexive coaching can illuminate deeper complexity. This student navigates multiple interconnected logics simultaneously: inherited dispositions, family investments in capital, multiple fields of expectation and temporal inheritances that shape his choices in ways individual reflection cannot reveal. This demonstrates why reflexive coaching can transform a coaching session. Examining Bourdieu's framework through habitus, capital and field alone cannot fully illuminate student experience. Only by weaving together all these elements through a reflexive lens can coaches support genuine self-awareness and ethically informed agency.

In summary, this layer supports coachees in articulating which values feel non-negotiable, where tensions arise between personal commitments and contextual expectations, and what forms of compromise feel ethically acceptable. Concurrently, this layer invites coaches to practice ethical humility by reflecting on how values shaped by professional socialization and institutional norms may subtly inform their understanding of what constitutes "good coaching" or "student development." This reflexive work is distinct from the previous layers. It invites coaches to explore their own values continuously as a whole, understanding how habitus, capital and field function as core interconnected dimensions. Where relevant to the coaching situation, these can be extended to include other relevant dimensions (intersectionality and temporal inheritances being two examples) (Crenshaw, 1989; Xu, 2025) for deeper contextual understanding of how habitus and capital operate and influence each other within a particular field. The aim of this layer is to foster values clarity that enables ethically informed agency, without imposing moral judgement or pressuring alignment with dominant norms.

Reflexive Prompts for Coaches:

1. Which of my own values am I implicitly treating as indicators of "good coaching" or desirable development?
2. How can I support the coachee's exploration of values without universalizing my own norms or those privileged within the field?

While the first three layers of the R³C framework make visible how coaching practice is shaped by habitus, capital and field-specific norms, the fourth layer introduces an explicitly reflexive and ethical dimension. Values as situated practice shifts the focus from explanation to choice, supporting coaches and coachees to consider how they wish to act in relation to contextual conditions. In this way, values are treated not as fixed traits but as situated orientations that can be examined and negotiated. The Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R³C) conceptualizes self-awareness as a reflexive practice through which coaches and coachees examine habitus, capital, field-specific norms and values, enabling ethically informed agency rather than uncritical adaptation.

Conclusion

Understanding coaching through a Bourdieusian lens invites us to reimagine what coaching excellence can become. Contemporary coaching education tends to emphasize the development of technical competence: questioning techniques, goal-setting frameworks, feedback models and behavioral tools (Cox et al., 2024). These skills are valuable. Yet they require complementary depth – a reflexive awareness of the social and structural dimensions shaping coaching encounters.

A Bourdieusian perspective offers this additional dimension: a framework for recognizing that coaching is fundamentally situated within complex social ecological systems where power, capital and institutional structures shape every encounter. Coaching is not a neutral space operating outside fields and power relations. Each coaching session is unique, shaped by the particular human beings involved – their intersecting identities, their temporal inheritances, their positioning within multiple social fields. Because coaching is inherently diverse and dynamic, situated within complex and shifting social contexts, reflexivity becomes powerful practice for coaches and coachees alike.

The Reflexive Bourdieusian Coaching Framework (R³C) offers a tool for this reflexive work. It does not prescribe how coaches should be but rather invites sustained reflection on three core dimensions: habitus, cultural capital and field dynamics. Additional dimensions such as intersecting identities and temporal inheritances can enrich this analysis based on situational context and coaching needs. By exploring these dimensions reflexively, coaches develop deeper self-awareness: they recognize how their own positioning shapes what they notice, what they value and what possibilities they open or close. This reflexivity becomes foundational to ethical practice, enabling coaches to support genuine agency rather than unconscious reproduction of institutional inequalities.

Importantly, this framework does not replace coaching excellence as it is currently practiced. Rather, it strengthens and enriches it. Coaches who already listen with care and genuinely seek to support their clients can deepen this practice by developing reflexive awareness of the social structures operating through them. This represents a significant enhancement of coaching's ethical foundation – not a criticism of existing practice, but an integration of sociological awareness into professional competence. To enact values in coaching, the profession must move beyond performance and optimization toward recognition and accompaniment. It must move beyond control and correction toward dialogue and co-agency (Chan et al., 2025).

For coaching to remain credible as a values-driven profession, it must confront the social conditions shaping whose voices are heard and whose knowledge is valued (Gergen, 2009). This requires that coaches engage in continuous reflexivity, developing sustained awareness of their own positioning within complex social ecological systems. Through this reflexive practice coaching can move from rhetoric to responsibility, from declaration to ethical action. When coaches practice reflexivity alongside their existing skills, they create space for co-agency, where both coach and coachee explore not only individual goals but the social contexts within which those goals are situated and negotiated. This is what ethical coaching demands.

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