Cultural Humility and Social Identity in Coaching

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Abstract

In the evolving field of coaching, social identity has become a crucial yet underexplored element of effective coaching practice. Social identity—encompassing race, gender, age, class, and other characteristics—shapes individual experiences and interactions in profound ways (Tajfel, 1972; Crenshaw, 1991). This paper argues that coaches must move beyond traditional notions of cultural competence to embrace cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), an ethical stance rooted in self-reflection and openness. Drawing on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and philosophical perspectives on the self and the Other (Sartre, 1943; Beauvoir, 1949), the paper suggests that cultural humility allows coaches to better understand and engage with the complexities of social identity. Two propositions are advanced: (1) social identity is a fundamental factor in coaching relationships, and (2) cultural humility is essential for effective coaching. Concrete tools, including assuming incomplete knowledge, challenging stereotypes and biases, creating resonant relationships, and fostering authenticity and growth, are offered as practical strategies for integrating social identity and cultural humility into coaching. This paper concludes by proposing future research on developing cultural humility as a core coaching competency, highlighting its importance in today's diverse and globalized professional environments.

Keywords: coaching, cultural humility, social identity, coaching skills

Introduction

In the ever-evolving domain of coaching, the role of social identity has emerged as a critical yet often underexplored facet. Social identity—the ways individuals categorize themselves and are categorized by others based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, and class—deeply influences one's lived experience (Tajfel, 1972; Crenshaw, 1991). This paper proposes that to develop a truly resonant coaching relationship (Boyatzis et al., 2019), coaches must move beyond mere competence in understanding these identities toward embracing the concept of cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

Drawing from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and philosophical reflections on the self and the Other (Sartre, 1943; Beauvoir, 1949), this paper positions cultural humility not just as a technique but as a necessary ethical stance in coaching. The ability to recognize the

complexity and interwoven nature of social identities in coaching relationships is critical to building trust and fostering transformative change. Furthermore, this paper will argue that cultural competence, as traditionally defined, is inadequate for coaching's complex relational demands. Instead, cultural humility requires a coach to adopt a position of "knowing what they don't know," acknowledging the limits of their own identity perspectives while being open to continual learning and self-reflection.

Social Identity in Coaching

Social identity shapes how individuals navigate their professional environments and how they experience coaching. The coaching relationship, therefore, cannot be separated from the social identities of the coachee. Understanding and acknowledging these identities is a prerequisite for building trust and fostering an environment where the coachee can be authentic.

The concept of social identity, as theorized by Tajfel (1972) and expanded through social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), plays a pivotal role in how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others in social contexts. In coaching, understanding the complexities of social identities—such as race, gender, and class—is not just a matter of building rapport but also of recognizing the deep-seated biases and stereotypes that shape these identities. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) adds another layer of complexity by asserting that identities are not isolated but interwoven in ways that can either compound marginalization or create spaces of privilege.

In coaching, the interplay of these multiple identities—whether visible or invisible (Clair, Beatty & MacLean, 2005)—is essential to understanding the lived experiences of the coachee. For example, an individual's experience as a Black woman in a corporate leadership role is shaped by her gender and race simultaneously, creating a unique set of challenges and opportunities that differ from her male or white peers. As Foucault (1980) suggests, power is embedded in social relationships, and identity is often shaped by the socio-historical context. Coaches, therefore, must be sensitive to the ways in which these identities are navigated within power structures, particularly in organizational settings.

Social identity is not only a personal lens but also a social construct, as Beauvoir (1949) theorized in her discussion of gender, where the 'Other' is defined in opposition to dominant groups. When coaching within such frameworks, the coach must understand that the client's social identity is not neutral but is shaped by interlocking systems of power and privilege (Foucault, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991). This underscores the need for a culturally humble approach, one that does not assume complete understanding of these identities but instead seeks to continuously reflect and engage with the coachee's unique context.

Proposition 1: Social identity is a fundamental factor in coaching relationships.

Cultural Humility in Coaching

Cultural humility—characterized by self-reflection, openness to learning, and an acknowledgment of bias—is a necessary skill for coaches who wish to foster transformative change in their clients.

Cultural humility, first defined in the healthcare context by Tervalon & Murray-García (1998), requires more than cultural competence. While cultural competence emphasizes "knowing" about other cultures—what Sue et al. (1982) describe as acquiring knowledge about group differences—cultural humility acknowledges the limits of that knowledge and the necessity for ongoing reflection. As Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin (2015) argue, cultural competence can reinforce stereotypes if it focuses solely on group-level knowledge without addressing the societal structures and implicit biases that shape interactions.

In the coaching relationship, this becomes particularly salient. A coach may have learned about certain cultural markers, such as the customs or communication styles of a particular racial or ethnic group. However, cultural humility moves beyond this, requiring the coach to recognize their own blind spots and be open to learning from the coachee's unique experiences. Baron et al. (2011) speak to the importance of coaches maintaining a "deliberate doubt"—a continuous openness to what they do not know about their coachee's social identities. This reflective stance not only deepens the working alliance but also ensures that the coaching process remains flexible, responsive, and respectful.

From a philosophical standpoint, Levinas' (1979) notion of "the Other" offers a powerful framework for understanding the ethical responsibility coaches have towards their clients. Levinas asserts that ethical relationships are grounded in an openness to the Other's difference, an approach that parallels the principles of cultural humility. Rather than seeing the coachee's social identity as something to master or understand fully, cultural humility encourages coaches to continually engage in self-critique and dialogue, recognizing that the coachee's experience may always elude complete comprehension. This humility allows coaches to engage in ethical coaching relationships, where power dynamics are recognized, and the coachee's social identity is respected and valued. Engaging in cultural humility provides coaches with tools to continually be curious and open to the coachee's lived experiences and thus being a life-long learner through cultural humility.

Proposition 2: Cultural humility is essential for effective coaching.

Trust and Understanding Through Cultural Humility

Coaching relationships rely on trust, mutual understanding, and emotional connection. Boyatzis, Smith, & Van Oosten (2019) define these as "resonant relationships," relationships that "embody support, security, and safety" and enable clients to reflect, take risks, and grow. But these relationships cannot be built unless coaches first acknowledge the central role of social identity in shaping the client's worldview.

Philosophically, the ethics of care—developed by theorists such as Noddings (1984) and Gilligan (1982)—offers a compelling lens through which to view coaching relationships. In the context of coaching, caring for the client involves not just supporting their professional growth but also understanding the social and cultural contexts that shape their experiences. Building a resonant relationship, then, requires cultural humility: the coach must be willing to meet the client where they are, both in terms of their professional goals and their social identity.

Bordin (1979)'s concept of the working alliance provides a foundational understanding of how helping relationships, such as those in therapy and coaching, are built on trust, mutual respect, and shared goals. However, in a coaching context, the alliance must go beyond transactional agreements. It involves an ongoing process of mutual recognition (Honneth, 1995)—an understanding that the coach and coachee bring their full identities into the relationship. The coach's cultural humility plays a crucial role in ensuring that the client feels seen and respected, thus fostering a trusting and transformative relationship.

Understanding the interplay between social identity and cultural humility is essential for effective coaching, particularly in today's diverse and globalized professional environments. Social identity categories, like race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, shape how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived within social contexts, including professional environments. As coaches engage with coachees, they inevitably encounter the layers of meaning and experience tied to these social identities. Coaches who fail to appreciate the complex, intersectional nature of social identity risk oversimplifying the coachee's experiences. For instance, a woman of color navigating a corporate-space experiences not just the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated industry but also the compounded challenges of being a racial minority in that same space.

However, understanding social identity alone is not enough to navigate these complexities effectively. This is where cultural humility comes into play. In the context of coaching, cultural humility means recognizing that no coach, regardless of training or experience, can fully know the depth and nuances of a coachee's social identities. Instead, the coach must engage in a dialogical process—a conversation that honors the coachee's expertise in their own lived experiences.

Illustrative Case Study

A previous coaching conversation between a coach and a coachee comes to the forefront as an example of the importance of applying cultural humility in the coaching process.

Context: A multinational firm with offices all around the world provided coaching services via a coaching firm for their middle and upper management. The coachee utilizing this company perk of coaching was a south Asian woman manager from the Global South – India and the coach was a white American woman experienced executive coach from the Global North – United States.

Summary of the Situation: In an effort to understand the cultural background of her coachee, the coach took the effort to attend a cultural competence training that helped her gain information of the social and economic fabric of India, specifically with regards the women in India. Armed with this information, the coach felt confident for the coaching session with her coachee from India. During the coaching session, one of the issues that the coachee brought up was around her struggles with people's reactions to her advocacy efforts for her career advancement and her recent promotion. Leaning on her cultural competence knowledge, the coach connected this to the immense gender disparities in India and the extremely patriarchal social culture and brainstormed some strategies for the coachee to be more assertive and deal with people's reactions to her advocacy and successes. The coaching call ended and the coachee

thanked the coach for her time and help. In the post-coaching reflection and feedback form the coachee expressed gratitude for the coach but also expressed hesitation in applying some of the strategies suggested given her lived experiences. This took the coach by surprise.

Applying Cultural Humility: On a follow up call, the coachee shared that she was situated in this unique middle situation, like many other women managers in India, where she had privileges and skills that came with good education and work opportunities and mentorship and at same time was in a social fabric both at work and home that was more collectivistic and patriarchal. There were individual aspects that had to be worked on while recognizing the strengths and struggles between the individual and the cultural systems (Mercaldi, 2018). This needed a more nuanced approach than the individual agentic interventions used in women leadership coaching in the Global North (Rice & O'Donohue, 2002; Wang & Stokhof, 2022). The coach in this case then had to actively listen to the coachee's lived experience, realize that the knowledge gained from the cultural competency training was useful but incomplete, challenge her own bias about women in more patriarchal cultures, recognize the racial power dynamics at play, develop that resonant relationship with the coachee and make her feel heard for the coachee to trust the coach enough to share her specific challenges and situations, and then keeping all this in mind work together with the coachee to devise nuanced strategies to help enable the coachee's progress and growth. In other words, approaching the coaching conversation with cultural humility rather than just cultural competence. The coachee made significant progress with her issues and continued the coaching relationship and even referred her other Indian women colleagues to this coach.

Concrete Tools for Coaches

Assuming Incomplete Knowledge, Challenging Stereotypes and biases, creating a resonant coaching relationship and fostering authenticity and growth are all tangible tools in the implementation of social identity and cultural humility in coaching.

Assuming Incomplete Knowledge: Social identity, particularly in its intersectional forms, often operates in ways that are invisible or misunderstood by those who do not share the same identities. For instance, as Clair, Beatty, and MacLean (2005) suggest, certain identities, such as LGBTQ+ or racial minorities, may remain invisible in professional settings due to stigma or stereotypes. A coach who is culturally humble approaches these identities with a mindset of "not knowing"—acknowledging that their understanding of the coachee's identity is limited and must be informed by the coachee themselves. This humility fosters an environment where the coachee feels safe to disclose and explore the fuller dimensions of their identity without fear of judgment

Challenging Stereotypes and Biases: While social identity theory explains how group membership shapes individual perceptions and interactions, cultural humility requires the coach to actively challenge any implicit biases or stereotypes they may hold about those identities. As Davis et al. (2016) argue, biases can manifest in subtle ways, often without the coach's conscious awareness, leading to microaggressions or missed opportunities for empathy. Cultural humility demands that the coach engage in self-reflection and self-critique, constantly evaluating how their own social identity and position of power may influence their perceptions of the coachee.

Creating a Resonant Relationship: Social identities are foundational to a coachee's sense of self, and understanding these identities is essential for building the resonant relationships described by Boyatzis, Smith, & Van Oosten (2019). Cultural humility serves as the bridge that allows the coach to move from a superficial understanding of identity to a deeper relational engagement. When the coach demonstrates openness, curiosity, and willingness to learn from the coachee's social identity experiences, it creates a relationship grounded in trust and authenticity. The coachee feels heard, respected, and valued, making them more likely to engage fully in the coaching process and embrace the transformative possibilities of the relationship.

Boyatzis et al. (2019) describe resonant coaching relationships as those that embody support, safety, and emotional connection. Such relationships cannot be built without recognizing the role of social identity in shaping the coachee's worldview. The ethics of care, as theorized by Noddings (1984) and Gilligan (1982), further suggests that coaching must be grounded in an understanding of the coachee's broader social context.

According to Bordin's (1979) working alliance model, a strong coaching relationship is built on trust, mutual respect, and shared goals. However, a culturally humble approach ensures that the coach's understanding of the coachee's identity is continuously evolving and reflective of the coachee's lived experiences.

Recognizing Power Dynamics: One of the critical contributions of cultural humility is its focus on power dynamics. Social identities often come with socially constructed hierarchies of privilege and oppression, where some identities are privileged over others. As Foucault (1980) points out, power is embedded in all social relationships, including coaching. A culturally humble coach must be aware of the power imbalances that may exist within the coaching relationship, particularly if the coachee belongs to marginalized groups. This would also advance a critically reflective perspective on coaching (Roche, 2022) and perhaps contribute towards the call for enhancing diversity, inclusion, and belonging in coaching. The coach must actively work to mitigate these imbalances by allowing space for the coachee's voice and experience to take precedence in the conversation.

Fostering Authenticity and Growth: Ultimately, social identity and cultural humility intersect to promote authenticity in the coaching process. When a coach acknowledges the importance of social identity and engages with cultural humility, they create a safe space where the coachee can bring their whole self into the coaching conversation. This authenticity enables the coachee to explore their identity in relation to their professional goals and personal development, leading to deeper insights and sustained growth. As Levinas (1979) notes in his ethical philosophy, encountering the Other requires us to move beyond the self and embrace the infinite complexity of the Other's identity—this is the essence of cultural humility in coaching.

Dialogical Complexity and Humility Beyond Social Identity

In understanding social identity and the coach's role in engaging with diverse individuals, it is critical to embrace a nuanced view that extends beyond conventional categories such as race, gender, or ethnicity. Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism highlights that identity is dialogically constructed through constant interaction with the Other, where each interaction is shaped by unique cultural, linguistic, and personal elements. This concept underscores the idea that every

person represents a distinct and evolving identity, shaped through the interplay of voices and perspectives across social contexts. Gadamer's (1975) notion of horizons of meaning further elaborates on this complexity, suggesting that understanding is always conditioned by the interpreter's own historical and cultural horizon. As horizons shift and overlap in conversation, engaging with the Other requires not only cultural humility but an openness to the continuously unfolding meanings that shape each individual's worldview.

Moreover, Hegel's (1977) dialectical approach offers insight into the relational nature of identity, viewing the self and the Other as dynamically co-constitutive. For Hegel, identity emerges through a process of recognition, where each individual's self-understanding is formed and reformed through engagement with others. This perspective challenges the coach to move beyond predefined categories and instead approach the Other with an all-encompassing humility. Such humility acknowledges the "infinite complexity of the Other's identity," encompassing not only cultural or social categories but also deeply embedded elements like personal vocabularies, bodily expressions, and aesthetic sensibilities. In this view, the coach's role is not simply to avoid cultural bias but to remain open to the vast, often uncharted differences each individual brings. This stance of humility encourages a recognition that social identity is inexhaustibly layered, thus demanding a flexibility and openness that extends well beyond conventional approaches to cultural competence.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the integration of social identity and cultural humility into coaching practice is both an ethical and practical necessity. As coaching continues to evolve as a profession, coaches must move beyond cultural competence and embrace a deeper, more reflective practice. The philosophical grounding provided by thinkers such as Levinas, Foucault, and de Beauvoir underscores the ethical imperative of recognizing and respecting the Other in coaching relationships.

Future research should explore how cultural humility can be systematically developed as a coaching competency. Quantitative studies could examine the impact of cultural humility on coaching outcomes, including trust, resonant relationships, and long-term client growth. Additionally, the development of cultural humility training programs for coaches could help ensure that future practitioners are equipped to navigate the complex social identities of their clients.

Coach competencies have been studied, but often inadequately (Boyatzis, 2016). Cultural humility could be one such coach competency that needs to be measured and more importantly developed during coach training programs. There can be multiple interventions/training exercises designed for coaches to consciously develop the competency of 'cultural humility' or 'social identity humility.'

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