Extending the worldview of coaching research and practice in Southern Africa: the concept of *Ubuntu*

Hilary Geber, Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, S.A.

Moyra Keane, Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, S.A.

Contact Email : hilary.geber@wits.ac.za

Abstract

Indigenous knowledge in coaching and coach training is key to Southern Africa's leadership development and the re-connection to more human and community-centred ways of being. Indigenous knowledge is potentially an important aspect of transformation and redress as well as a unique and valuable resource across disciplines. When we consider the role coaching plays in personal and organizational transformation, and the immediate cultural edges it comes up against, coaching and coach training could contribute significantly to people development and systems healing in a country that is ravaged by poverty, education inadequacies, and past and present social traumas. Yet such coaching, based on well-researched culturally-consonant curricula, is scarce and needs to deliberately draw on relevant cultural heritage and values. This discussion paper presents an argument for the need to include the African paradigm of Ubuntu[1] in coaching research, coach training and leadership coaching, given the previous marginalization of Africa cultural knowledge and worldview. We discuss academic coaching programmes offered in South Africa and the necessity for the integration of new cultural perspectives. Based on this we recommend directions for future coaching training and research.

Key words: Coaching; Coach training; Indigenous knowledge; Worldview; Ubuntu

Introduction

Without culture, a community loses self-awareness and guidance and grows weak and vulnerable. It disintegrates from within as it suffers a lack of identity, dignity, self-respect and a sense of destiny.   Maathai, (2004:23)

It is important to ask: How do Africans honour their own worldview and values, and still benefit from experience and knowledge of coaching so prolifically written up in the West? How may predominantly Western-trained coaches develop greater sensitivity to the assumptions implicit in their training paradigms? How may coaching practice, models and training in Africa draw on the rich and

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[1] The African concept of humanism: a prevailing African worldview that sees all beings and nature as ontologically interconnected: a value system that prioritizes relationships.

diverse Indigenous Knowledge and cultural perspectives being lived by most of the population? In particular, for Southern Africa, the worldview of *ubuntu* could contribute to the repertoire of coaching approaches and research paradigms in coaching.

Although there are numerous coaching organizations all over the world (including Mexico, Caribbean, Colorado, California, and South Africa) using the term 'Ubuntu coaching', there seems little specific integration of the paradigm of Ubuntu into their coaching or training programmes. In this paper we argue for going beyond the 'buzz word' of Ubuntu to discussing its characteristics and possible ways that it may be drawn on to inform the practice of coaching.

Ubuntu is sometimes translated as 'humanism' but it goes beyond this to an ontological paradigm that is based on the experience of a person existing in a web of interrelations: "I am because you are" (Mbiti, 1969). In the context of coaching most trainers and training models still rely, by default, on Western paradigms and values with little innovation or even awareness of the cultural bias that this may impose. Ubuntu is a widely practiced value system and deep ontology that underlies ways of being in Africa.

African cultural values, ethno-pedagogies, indigenous reference points, as well as emerging democracy tensions are generally absent in coaching in South Africa. On both a systems level and individual level, a great deal of transformation and healing still needs to take place for the well being of the country and the firmer establishment of the democracy (Ntsewa, 2013). South Africa in 2013 still struggles with tensions of racial assumptions, employment equity, parity of opportunities and achievements. Hence the issue of redress comes up in numerous contexts, including leadership, training and research (Chilisa, 2012; Passmore & Law, 2009). Black Africans form about 79% of the population in South Africa and there are increasing numbers of Black African leaders and executives in business.

The first step in introducing greater inclusivity and relevance of our reference points and paradigms is research into new ways of integrating thinking, acting and interacting. Indeed we need new ways of doing research so that we do not continue to impose frameworks and methods that belong largely to a Western scientific paradigm (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999). Coaching of leaders does not generally draw specifically on cultural values like Ubuntu. Ubuntu is not included in coach training in either African academic courses or commercial courses. Furthermore, most coaches, coach trainers and researchers in South African are white (COMENSA database, 2012). However, focusing solely on 'other' may contribute to concretising cultural rifts, or as Swartz (2013) argues in her analysis of negotiated racialised histories, "… 'whiteness' studies essentialise difference." Exploring Ubuntu, on the other hand, creates opportunites for promoting harmony and interconnection.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to argue for the development of a new culturally consonant coach training and research initiative which could assist transformation in South Africa, and possibly provide lessons for other multi-cultural situations worldwide. We give a brief history of South Africa and an outline of the Ubuntu paradigm which we propose as a foundation for coaching approaches in Africa.

A brief South African History

Over the first two decades of democracy in South Africa the discourse of heritage has been vital in reinstating the respective histories of the black majority who have been deprived of their pasts, who have had their sites and landscapes systematically erased in the brutal regimes of colonialism and later apartheid. Colonial and apartheid forces created tribal homelands and Bantustans, which were political constructions underpinned by fear and paranoia (Meskell, 2005) as well as social and geographical isolation.

Before 1994 when the first democratically elected government was instated, South Africans had to live with the legacy of enforced separation of cultural groups and often a lack of common knowledge of the many cultures living within the same country. Indigenous cultural values and worldviews still remain largely outside corporate and organisational practices. The Employment Equity Act of 1998 prohibits unfair discrimination against anyone on the grounds of (amongst others) race, gender, ethnic or social origin, colour, culture, or language. It requires employers to put in place affirmative action measures to ensure equality for people from previously disadvantaged groups. This often translates into a simple quantifying of numbers of designated groups without a deeper consideration of meaningful transformation, or the investigation of our assumptions of powerful knowledge and prevalent worldviews.

Coaching and coach training needs to adjust to and draw on African culture so as to meaningfully lead people development and systems healing in a country that is ravaged by poverty, education inadequacies and past and present social traumas. Furthermore, coaching itself could be enriched by drawing on African worldview and Ubuntu.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu as a value system is not unique in Africa but the extent of its ontology is more profound than the common translation of "humanism". Ubuntu is often expressed as: _umuntu ngumuntu abantu that_ is "I am because we are". A person is defined in relationship with others. One is expected in African culture to seek to realise the community's aspirations. The community exists as an interconnected being; connected also to ancestors and nature, to a living world seen and unseen. The values that arise from this worldview are ones of communalism; cohesion; respect; generosity; mutual care; consensus and tradition (Metz, 2007).

Ubuntu, as a relationship-centred paradigm (outlined below) is a particularly well suited framework for coaching and coaching training. Some important distinctions to take into account include the following principles of Ubuntu (van Zyl, Kleynhans & du Plessis, 2011; Keane, 2006; Malunga, 2006):

o Collective ownership of responsibility, opportunities and challenges
o Primacy of relationships: one becomes human only in the midst of others
o Harmony, humility and helpfulness are most desirable qualities and aims
o Spiritual guidance is natural in problem solving
o Consensus seeking is valued – and this can take time
o Hierarchical status is recognised; respect is a core value

Collective ownership is recognised as important and this aspect is advocated in the work of Griffiths (2010) regarding the perspectives of coaches. She recommends that we take collective

responsibility for our lives and the lives of others. Yet in our experience of various coach training programmes, the focus is on individual aims, individual values, Western assumptions. As Armstrong (2007: p. 37) points out: coaching is a "humanising activity". Of course, as Ebersöhn points out: "any culture has its richness which shows how people can be happy" (2012, p.800), but what is of central importance to Western-minded trainers is not necessarily of central importance to African coachees or leadership students. We consider the rationale nationally for the need to include African paradigms before reviewing relevant literature to inform our argument.

Context and Rationale

South African policy supports the development of indigenous knowledge (Odora Hoppers, 2002; Department of Science and Technology, 2004) yet it is concerning that in the field of coaching, the incorporation of indigenous ways of being and knowing are not well developed. The South African National Research Foundation (NRF) has a priority research thrust for indigenous knowledge; there are local research chairs and journals devoted to IK – and yet local research into coaching and culture lags behind, with a few exceptions (van Zyl *et al.*, 2011; O'Flaherty & Everson, 2009).

In spite of increased international research interest in cross-cultural studies in coaching (Abbott, 2010; den Outer, 2010; Plaister-Ten, 2009) there has been little impact on coaching curricula and research methodologies. Ebersöhn (2012) examines the conflict that occurs in inappropriate cultural approaches to training in South Africa. She asks: "…how can [training] enable clients to thrive if the techniques used and the ideals aspired to are post-colonial surplus in a transforming society?" (p. 801). Adding to this, we note: "Cultures of organisations are dominated by the values of predominantly male top management structures" (van Zyl *et al.*2011, p.7172). And in South Africa these leaders are not only male but usually White. White, English-speaking trainers also dominate in most of the coaching training courses and coaching organisations. Of the top 20 Johannesburg Stock Exchange listed companies the majority have White CEOs or MDs (http://www.topcompanies.co.za/). Two Mobile phone service providers each have a Black CEO or MD.

In the context of coaching and leadership development we still rely, by default, on Western paradigms and values with little innovation or even awareness of the cultural bias that this may impose.

Consider an incident we noted from a training session:

A coach trainer pushed a woman into a coaching 'fishbowl' situation to do a few minutes coaching in front of the group. All seemed fine and the training continued into feedback and extracting the learning in the usual way. Why would the woman leave the group and be found crying on the floor next door right after the activity? The White foreign trainer overlooked the South African context of propelling a Black woman into coaching an older White male in front of a whole group of trainees. Ghosts of Apartheid power norms, confused with traditional cultural hierarchies made the exercise all but impossible and traumatic for the woman.

We need to know how to deal with such situations sensitively and skillfully. We need to be guided by African wisdom and ways of being as well as by an acknowledgement of our traumatised racial past. We acknowledge that there are already processes and principles in coaching such as 'Deep Democracy' (Deep Democracy Institute, 2013); and that historical and hidden archetypal roles that play out in people from their culture's past. Yet, specifically drawing on an African perspective could be beneficial and enriching to both the context and to the repertoire of coaching. Ubuntu could provide a different ontological perspective for coaching in Africa. We do not yet know how to draw on the strengths of

these perspectives in coaching – or on all the other Indigenous Knowledge paradigms that inform how one relates and lives in the world.

Literature Review

There is some literature on coaching in South Africa and a few useful examples of cultural approaches where coaches are encouraged to be aware of such African values as Ubuntu (Okonkwo, 2010). However, Okonkwo discusses the use of African myths and legends in leadership coaching as a general principle but she does not provide research evidence or a case study. O'Flaherty and Everson (2009) deal with using Integral Coaching in cross-cultural scenarios in South Africa and provide some relevant case studies showing typical leadership scenarios which reflect cultural values. A few publications on coaching appear in the SA Journal of Industrial Psychology (Cilliers, 2005, 2011; Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2010). However, the general paucity of literature on coaching with African values has led us to other academic and leadership fields that are using African values in their ongoing research.

Van Zyl, Kleynhans and du Plessis (2011), writing about the gap in cultural awareness in African business management, discuss how cultural intelligence can be improved by obtaining knowledge of current leadership and management practices in Africa. Cultural intelligence (CQ) provides managers with practical techniques for functioning effectively in any culture. CQ is the ability to adapt to new cultural settings. According to Earley and Ang (2003), CQ has a cognitive, emotional and behavioural component. The cognitive component refers to one's specific ability to perceive and understand a new culture based on various types of cultural cues. The motivational component refers to one's self-motivation and commitment to adapt and adjust to a new culture, and the behavioural component refers to acting according to one's commitment to a new culture (Deng and Gibson, 2008). In order to achieve cultural intelligence (CQ) in an organisational context, it is important to understand leadership and management issues and circumstances which are unique to the African context as well as the traditional ways of dealing with such issues. These may include sharing ownership of responsibility, the primacy of relationships and consensus in decision making.

Van Zyl *et al.* (2011) suggest an appropriate and relevant way in which First World leaders can understand and approach their Third World workforce in Africa.[2] This is not easy to understand as they do not give definitions of First World leaders or of the Third World workforce and, as South Africans, we surmise that this is perhaps their way of avoiding politically charged terminology. It is confusing because First World leaders can be expatriates or they could be South Africans leaders who are educated according to Western standards i.e. most white business leaders and executives. Although this is not overtly racist it is still a reminder of the hegemony of Western models and systems of categorising ethnic groups. If Van Zyl et al. are referring to South African white business leaders, we agree that there is a need for more cultural knowledge and more inclusive practice in South Africa. Coaching leaders for this is important and as is the need for coach training based on deeper cultural knowledge, as well as sensitivity to past political brutalities. Plaister-Ten (2009) points this out as well. Her research gives a good example of how to conduct research with coaches in multicultural contexts. In South Africa it would be interesting to research South African coaches who coach members of different ethnic groups and especially leaders and executives from previously disadvantaged groups.

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[2] We note here the inherent cultural bias in such terms of 1st & 3rd World: defined largely by Western countries on perceived priorities of wealth and technology as defining 'development'.

In a study of the need for coaching of black executives in South Africa, (Myres, 2013), diversity is seen as beneficial by black executives. The differences in race, ethnicity, language, age and gender result in different world views and the individuals in the study confirmed that being challenged by someone with a different world view allowed for higher level thinking. The researcher also found that Afrocentric values including Ubuntu are not generally valued and senior black executives have noted that racism in still rife and that coaching does not address their needs in this regard (Myres 2013).

Research into the top 100 South Africa companies has found that many companies use coaching for leadership development and for up-and-coming talent, most of whom are Black, but that it is not integrated into business strategy and that Western values pervade the coaching. These companies believe that individuals should want coaching and therefore coaching should not be a mandatory part of leadership development programmes (Attlee, 2013).

The largest coaching and mentoring conference held annual in South Africa records a growth of black delegates from 12% in 2007 to 36% in 2012 (Knowledge Resources, personal communication, 2013) . Coaching in academic contexts in South Africa also needs some scrutiny and this is addressed next.

The only local coaching association in South Africa is COMENSA. It has over 1300 coaches, most of them South African, some from UK and USA, 75% white. There is no information available about the kinds of training the coaches have been exposed to or their coaching philosophies.

Academic Coaching Programmes

Universities in South Africa have been under great pressure to transform the demographic of students and staff. Student numbers have increased and are demographically more reflective of the population than 20 years ago (about 70% black students at the University of the Witwatersrand). Staff transformation has not been nearly as dramatic or as fast.

There are two academic coaching programmes available in South Africa at present which offer Masters degrees in Coaching. The older of the two is offered as a Masters of Philosophy in Management Coaching at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB). The MPhil in Management Coaching is internationally accredited by EQUIS (European Foundation for Management Development). It is also the only Management Coaching master's programme fully accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). It is relevant to African managers and leaders as it takes into account the diversity, traditions and multicultural environments of South Africa and the rest of the African continent. There is a module which explores learning conversations in the context of the African tradition of story-telling. There is also training in the Integral approach to coaching existentially in a world characterised by multiculturalism.

The newer of the two academic coaching programmes is at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) which offers a Masters of Management in Business Executive Coaching (MMBEC). (See http://www.wbs.ac.za/degrees/mmbec/)**.**This degree in coaching at the masters level is aligned to the Graduate School Alliance for Executive Coaching (GSAEC) framework for Coaching Qualifications at University Level. The framework was developed at GSAEC through a comparative study of the best practice of Coaching Certificates throughout 124 International Universities, (http://www.gsaec.org/).

The MMBEC, in the first cohort in 2011-2012, had about 30% black students but with dropout of students this dropped to 8%. This may be some indication of context and processes that are culturally not congruent. The Wits MMBEC has some content similar to USB M Phil but it does not place any emphasis on African traditions. There is a need to focus both degrees more firmly on cross-cultural knowledge and on African values such as Ubuntu.

New approaches to coach training

There are a number training paradigms and pedagogies that are emerging in other fields that could contribute to the establishment of an African Coaching model or Ubuntu approach. For example, we might explore the work of Griffiths who links cultural and spiritual values (SV). Here is one possible way in to working with Ubuntu in coach training. Africans are notoriously religious says the pre-imminent African philosopher, Mbiti, (1969; 1989). Spiritual rites and beliefs are central to Indigenous ways of working. Meetings of elders never start without a prayer; cultural festivals will include opening sermons from religious leaders. So a link to some appropriate aspects of SV could contribute to effective coaching in a multicultural context. Furthermore – there may be a synergic bridge here to more prevalent global practices as organisations are increasingly expected to consider their own moral and ethical actions and to promote diversity and openness, (Griffiths, 2010). While the 'Spiral Helix Coaching Model' developed by Griffiths may be applicable across cultures as far as human development growth unfolds, there is still the concern of seeing human interplay and structures through a dominantly Western worldview. Van Zyl et al. (2011) advocate for the development of CQ or Cultural Intelligence in dealing with cross-cultural challenges for African managers; Gorjestani (2010) concludes that a key priority for IK is to promote local adaptation as well as national and regional networks.

Even where cultural heritage is promoted and IK is acknowledged as an important resource, discussions take place according to Western memes. We note, for example, the corporate metaphors or 'cultural capital' of the World Bank report that, while exhorting developers and funders to 'learn from local communities', equates indigenous with 'poverty' (Gorjestani 2010); "poor" as it is used here is being defined by "1st world" countries. Indeed, in English, *knowledge* itself is a noun, a product, rather than 'a way of being' (Aikenhead, 2008). From an Ubuntu perspective the valuing of *things* or *products* over people, is seen to be embedded even in the language.

How a leader or manager would be different when using Ubuntu

We now discuss briefly some key elements of the Ubuntu paradigm with reference to possible coaching applications and processes. These could form the basis of new course designs and research directions. Elements of the Ubuntu paradigm are listed with suggestions for inclusion in coaching.

Primacy of interconnection and relationship: in a discovery session with a coaching client this could be an important aspect to find out the client's community history, elders, names and meanings. In goal setting – what are the implications for the client's community belonging?

Collective ownership of responsibility: how does this affect the client's dreams and goals? How may metaphors be used?

Time: seeing taking time as valuable rather than seeing time as being 'used-up'; time is cyclical rather than linear. Coaches and coach training could create sensitivity to alternative time perspectives.

Relating to others, to nature and to ancestors as part of self: again, greater sensitivity can be given to an individual having less autonomy and placing greater emphasis on being part of a whole. What are the client's community values?

Harmony: valuing harmony and respect before competitiveness and argumentation. How would coaching look different if this was a broad aim?

Consensus seeking: as important in decision making; how does this affect the client?

Seeking spiritual guidance: is natural in problem solving, how does this affect the client?

Hierarchical status: is seen as part of the natural order, how does this affect the client?

We have indicated some of the problems of culturally biased coach training and research and the need for culturally consonant approaches that draw on the concept of Ubuntu, yet the points of integration, the appropriate processes and resources still need to be explored.

Directions for research

Academics in leadership development and training need to explore Indigenous Knowledge aspects that may be used as a basis for coach training programmes. The Ubuntu worldview could form an underlying paradigm for coaching course design. How this may be done is yet unknown. Drawing on work from other disciplines such as education and anthropology could be illuminating. The richness of diversity needs to contribute to leadership training for the purposes of redress, inclusivity and for the great potential that indigenous wisdom has to offer.

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Dr Hilary Geber is an Industrial Psychologist coordinating mentoring and coaching projects at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa and was the Programme Director of the MM Business and Executive Coaching in 2012 at the Wits Business School.

Dr Moyra Keane is an Academic Advisor at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She coaches, designs courses, presents workshops to staff, supervises post-graduate students. Her research focus is Indigenous Knowledge.