Coaching a client with a different cultural background - does it matter?

Andrea Roth, Hong Kong
Contact: lesrouges2@gmail.com

Abstract

In today's global economy, executive coaches might increasingly work with clients from other countries. This article asks whether it is important for effective coaching to pay attention to cultural differences. Using a qualitative approach, the study explores which experiences 11 executive coaches had when coaching a client with a distinctively different cultural background. They came to different, partly opposing assessments about cultural impacts on coaching. The findings suggest that culture in coaching is not an objective, defined fact but a subjectively interpreted concept. The findings also suggest that the impact of national culture might be overestimated in the discussion on cross-cultural coaching.

Key Words: Cross-cultural coaching; dimensions of culture; cultural lens; meaning making; constructionism.

Introduction

An increasingly diverse and global workforce has led to the assessment that cultural issues play an important role for executive coaches who work with today's global business managers (e.g. Rosinski, 2003; Coultas, Bedwell, Burke, and Salas, 2011). The role of culture in coaching is discussed in two contexts. One discussion refers to coaching executives in global companies with the objective "to raise their awareness of cultural competence" (Passmore, 2009, p.5). The other one looks at how culture might affect the coaching practice itself when coaches are working with clients from other cultural backgrounds, which is the focus of this study. This discussion is based on theories and findings from researchers, who study differences between cultures. Those researchers generally assume that individuals who "grow up within a particular culture … are socialized in ways that internalize key aspects of that culture" (Smith, 2002, p.3) and that those influence their thinking, beliefs, values and behaviours (Handin and Steinwedel, 2006; Buchtel, 2014). This is also the stance of Coultas *et al.* (2011, p.150) who suggest for the context of coaching that coaches should "have a deeper understanding of cultures … but also be able to adapt (i.e., individualize) coaching strategies for maximum effect when dealing with culturally different others."

This claim makes two assumptions: Cultural differences can be distinguished and they matter for coaching. How justified are these claims? On the one hand, it seems obvious that there are differences between nations. On the other hand, assuming that an individual from a certain country will behave in a certain 'typical' way, can lead to unjustified generalisations and stereotyping (Nathan, 2015; Abbott 2014). How relevant might national culture then be for coaching? This research sets out to provide an answer to this question by exploring experiences executive coaches have when they are working with clients from a different cultural background. I will first summarise the relevant discussion about culture in the literature and will then describe the research methodology and practice employed in this study. I then highlight key findings and discuss the role of culture in coaching.

Literature

What is culture and what impact does it have on the individual?

Joint features of different definitions of culture are that culture refers to a group of people, and that the members of this group share something that distinguishes them from other groups such as values, practices, meanings attributed to behaviour, beliefs or norms (e.g. Smith, Bond and Kağitçibaşi, 2006; Hofstede, 1980; Poortinga, 2015; Rosinski, 2003). Nations as political units "with distinctive ecological, historical, political, educational, legal, regulatory, social, and economic characteristics" (Smith, Bond and Kağitçibaşi, 2006, p. 77) are said to 'have' cultures. Those define the context in which their individual members are socialised. Through the socialisation process individuals learn and internalise key aspects of culture (Smith, Peterson and Schwartz, 2002) which are assumed to influence the development of values, beliefs, ways they think about themselves, and their meaning making of experiences (e.g. Handin and Steinwedel, 2006; Hofstede, 1980).

However, cultural influence on the individual might not be as relevant as suggested by these authors. Some authors point to the impact of other, non-cultural causes (e.g. personality, economic, political and social conditions, age or gender) on behaviour (e.g. McCrae, 2002; McSweeney, 2002; Kealey, 2015). The socialisation process will also not be the same for every individual in the same nation but will depend on many factors; such as their family situation, the class systems and neighbourhoods they live in (Pearce, 2014; Nathan, 2015). Some scholars criticise that models of culture are often described in an essentialist notion as they assume characteristics of culture, such as being static, homogenous and deterministic which might lead to the stereotyping of individuals. They claim that a tendency to 'essentialise' culture neglects individual capacity for agency and choice, interaction between individuals and their environment, and adaption of behaviour to different contexts and situations (Nathan, 2015; Pearce, 2014; Poortinga and Van Hemert, 2001; McSweeney, 2002).

Differentiating between national cultures

Since the 1980s, researchers have started to *measure* differences in national value systems and conceptualised independent dimensions of national culture based on empirical analysis of data (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1999; House et al., 2004; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012; Minkov, 2011). The dimensions describe "an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures" (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p. 31). The different approaches have in common that they are working within the positivist paradigm, assuming that cultural differences exist and aiming at describing them objectively and on the basis of empirical measurements in a few major dimensions (Williamson, 2002; Minkov, 2011). Precise index scores on each dimension seem to express an accurate measure of common, homogeneous national cultures and cross-cultural differences (McSweeney, 2002; Fischer and Schwartz, 2011). Those interpretations often lead to the assumption that the national scores allow us "to understand individuals within a business and organisational context with a singular national identity" (Nathan, 2015, p.102). However, these assumptions don't hold true. Studies by Fischer and Schwartz (2011) and an analysis of data of 153 cross-cultural studies by Poortinga and Van Hemert (2001) indicate that there seem to be more heterogeneity within nations and more homogeneity between nations than measured value scores on national dimensions suggest. Furthermore, cultural dimensions that were developed to describe patterns on a societal level are often used to analyse or predict behaviour on an individual level, which assumes a causal relationship and might lead to stereotyping (Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson, 2006). A cultural dimension is a complex construct. Individual responses are first aggregated into a national average score per value and then several average scores of values are merged into one dimension based on correlations (Bearden, Money and Nevins, 2006; Hofstede, 2011). However, the values, which correlate on the aggregated level do not necessarily correlate meaningfully on the individual level (Venaik and Brewer, 2013; Minkov and Hofstede, 2011). Cultural dimensions on the country

level therefore don't allow for prediction or description of individual behaviour (Hofstede, 2011; Smith, Bond and Kağitçibaşi, 2006; Minkov, 2011).

About cross-cultural coaching

While the academic discussion about the relevance of culture for coaching is not very broad, the contributing authors have different understandings of cross-cultural coaching. Some authors regard both societal and organisational levels of culture as relevant for cross-cultural coaching (Abbott, 2014; Rosinski, 2003; Passmore and Law, 2009), whereas others focus on national culture (Coultas et al., 2011; Milner, Ostmeier and Franke, 2013). Two different approaches for cross-cultural coaching can be distinguished. The first looks at cultural issues in the client's world (Abbott, 2014; Rosinski, 2003) whereas the other focuses on potential cultural impacts on the relationship between coach and client (Coultas et al., 2011; Milner, Ostmeier and Franke, 2013; Peterson, 2007; Plaister-Ten, 2013). Most authors assume a more or less essential influence of culture on behaviour and thinking of clients and coaches and thus relevance for coaching. They refer to above-mentioned frameworks of national cultural dimensions to analyse cultural influences in coaching, notwithstanding their discussed limits (Coultas et al., 2011; Abbott and Rosinski, 2007; Passmore and Law, 2009; Peterson, 2007). At the same time they acknowledge the danger that assessing individual clients through the cultural lens might lead to stereotyped perceptions and inappropriate labelling of the client.

These arguments raise issues about how helpful or misleading national cultural dimensions are for coaching and whether culture really matters in coaching. There is hardly any evidence from the research in coaching practice to answer these questions. The few studies that have analysed cultural influences in coaching have assumed, at the outset, that culture will count (Carmenate, 2015; Milner, Ostmeier and Franke, 2013). However, there is no study to my knowledge that has not made this assumption. The purpose of my research was therefore to find out and conceptualise how culture might be relevant in a cross-cultural coaching encounter.

Methodology

This study explores personal experiences and is therefore situated in the framework of qualitative research (Morrow, 2007). I chose a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as my methodological approach as it aims to generate a general explanation for a process or interaction (Creswell, 2013), which is the intention of this study. The theory is grounded in the data and constructed by the researcher in an iterative process of data analysis, concept developing, and checking the emerging concepts against new data (Charmaz, 2006). CGT is based on the principles of reflexivity, which takes into account the standpoints of both researcher and the researched and of relativism, which acknowledges the subjectivity of knowledge (Charmaz and Bryant, 2010). This is in line with my philosophical stance as a researcher which is constructionism in the sense that there is no objective truth "waiting for us to discover it" (Crotty, 1998, p.8) but that we make sense of the world by engaging with it and constructing meaning. Furthermore, I will bring my own subjectivity to the research process as I necessarily apply my own filters when interviewing coaches and interpreting their experiences.

Research participants

Two considerations defined the approach for selecting executive coaches as research participants. If culture impacts coaching, it might be easier to identify potential cultural influences if the cultures are distinctively different as the dissimilarity is easier to detect than in similar cultures (Selmer, 2006). Furthermore, the specific impact might differ, depending on the respective cultural backgrounds of coach and client (Peterson, 2007). In order to conceptualise the relevance of culture, it may be helpful if the cross-cultural coaching situations are comparable. Therefore, this study

restricted the context to a particular cross-cultural coaching dyad, namely coach from an Anglo background (defined as raised in the USA, Canada or Great Britain) and Chinese client (raised in Mainland China or Hong Kong) or the other way round (Chinese coach and Anglo client). Even though intercultural researchers distinguish differences between the Mainland and Hong Kong Chinese cultures, and also between the countries, which are combined into the Anglo cultural cluster, they are not very distinct as countries within the cluster share core values (Fan, 2000; Minkov, 2011; Hofstede, 1980). By contrast, the differences between Chinese and Anglo cultures are regarded as clearly distinctive by intercultural researchers (Hofstede 1980; House et al.; 2004, Minkov, 2011).

In order to identify potential interview partners, I checked the homepage of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (HKICC) which provided a short description of the profiles of its members. If coaches were offering executive coaching, belonged to one of the above-mentioned nationalities and stated experience with coaching a culturally diverse clientele, I sent them an email invitation to participate in my research project with an attached participant information sheet. Eleven coaches participated in my research (six women and five men). To ensure the anonymity of the participants, I assigned a fictional name to each coach. However, the name expresses whether the coach has a Western or Chinese background.

Coach	Raised in	Other countries lived in	Target group for coaching	Clients from	Years of coaching
Alex	USA	> 20 years in Asia (HK and Singapore)	Line managers, high potentials	Europe, Australia, HK, Singapore	6-10
John	Canada	UK, 5-10 years in HK	Senior executives	Expats from diverse nationalities, HK, China	>20
Ella	USA	> 30 years in HK	Senior executives	Expats from all over the world, HK, China, other Asian clients	>20
Henry	USA	> 20 years in HK and China	Directors/ general managers	America, Europe, HK, China	11-15
Huan	HK and Singapore	China, > 20 years in USA	Global executives	USA, Asia, HK	1-5
Chan	HK	USA, China	Emergent leaders, high potentials	Britain, Germany, Italy, Australia, USA, HK, China	1-5
Andy	UK	5-10 years in HK	Senior executives	Europe, Asia, HK	11-15
Tom	Canada	Malaysia, 5-10 years in HK	Middle management to CEO level	Expats from diverse nationalities, HK, China	6-10
Alison	UK and Canada	> 20 years in HK	Emergent leaders and leaders	Expats from diverse nationalities, HK, China	6-10
Fang	HK	China	Managers to general managers	HK, China, Malaysia, Singapore	1-5
Ling	HK/ UK	France	Career and business coaching	HK, Europe, Australia, New Zealand	6-10

Table 1: Participant Information

Data collection and analysis
Data were collected through intensive interviewing which combines a certain structure - the interview guide as a list of topics to be covered - with flexibility to allow for further exploring of answers (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted face-to-face or via skype, audio-recorded and fully transcribed afterwards. The data were then analysed in an iterative process of coding, categorising, finding theoretical connections across the categories, checking with the data again and revising the process if necessary (Charmaz, 2006). The first step was to segment data and to name each segment in a concise term, the so-called code (Charmaz, 2006). However, for making sense of the data, I did not only use segmental coding but also

looked at the entire interview. I summarised my impression of the interview and noted what struck me as remarkable, for example contradictions within an interview. I was thus applying the hermeneutic circle method, which is not an integral part of the CGT methodology. In a hermeneutic circle, understanding "is achieved by our interpreting with-in a circular process, in which we move from a whole to the individual parts and from the individual parts to the whole" (Debesay, Nåden and Slettebø, 2008, p.58).

During the journey towards developing the theory, I kept a research diary in which I noted ideas, questions, observations, reflexive insights and possible connections between emerging categories. I also started to write memos in order to structure my thoughts and clarify emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006, p.113) proposes to stop gathering data when it 'no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories.' I conducted the last two interviews after I had developed a set of categories in order 'to check, elaborate, and assess' (Charmaz and Bryant, 2010, p.411) the emerging categories. They only confirmed the emerging categories and theory, but didn't result in new insights.

Findings

In the beginning, it struck me that there was no common assessment about the influence of culture among the interviewed coaches. I was struggling to find answers to questions such as: Who defines something as cultural? How would they know that it is a cultural issue? Why do some coaches regard culture as very relevant for coaching while others don't? Codes that I defined to capture the meaning behind the coaches' statements such as 'generalising', 'assuming', and 'hypothesising' became essential for my interpretation of the data. They expressed that coaches did not describe a factual, absolute impact of culture. Instead, their statements mirrored what they perceived, assumed and interpreted as cultural influences as will be argued in the following three sections: Various cultural and non-cultural influences in coaching, coaches' individual cultural lenses, and their use of the cultural lens in the coaching engagement.

Various cultural and non-cultural influences

One of the issues, which arose in the analysis of the findings, was the difficulty of defining cultural influences in coaching. One explanation for it might be that various factors influence the identity shaping of a client and the coaching relationship. Coaches mentioned other cultural factors such as subcultures (region, family), multicultural experiences and organisational culture.

Tom: There is such a huge range of Chinese leaders. We work mostly with multinationals, so you have Australian educated, who went to high school in the US, did their Masters at some English program in Germany. So it's really hard to pin down what is Chinese from that perspective.

Fang: If this is talking about companies it depends on what kind [of] company. If this is [a] multinational company in Hong Kong, actually people speak up. And are expected to speak up more. But in [a] local company even though this is Hong Kong based company the hierarchy thing is there.

Coaches also named non-cultural factors such as client's personality, historical context, geography, religion and education. This is in line with scholars who argue that various subcultures, multicultural, generational and other influences impact the individual as well (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; McSweeney, 2002; Nathan, 2015). If all these factors influence the identity shaping of a client it means that belonging to national culture is unlikely to say much about a client and doesn't allow for any predictions about the client. It might also make it difficult for the coach to determine whether an

observed phenomenon has cultural or other reasons, and to compare coaching experiences (Armstrong, 2012; Abbott, 2014).

Coaches' cultural lenses: Individual focus and shape

Knowledge, assumptions and beliefs about culture provide one lens through which the coach might make meaning of experiences in coaching and interpret a client's behaviour. The findings suggest that coaches acquired their cultural knowledge and assumptions in different ways and that they don't necessarily refer to the same when they talk about culture. Some cultural frames of reference were shaped through life experience, others also through studying cultural theories, or through coaching and other professional experiences, such as cross-cultural training.

> *Alex: It's not like I went and studied the culture... It's like learning a language when you are a baby, you pick it up all on the way.*

> *Huan: I learned about culture in the beginning not from books, only because I hang out with all kinds of people and that's how I learn. ... Then I officially learned about culture in graduate school, you know Hofstede, high context and low context, and direct communication, indirect and all that stuff.*

The focus of the individual cultural lenses varies as well. Some coaches seem to perceive their clients more from a generalising cultural perspective, whereas others focus on the individual. Even though the coaches with a focus on 'generalising' differentiate as well, they still distinguish between groups and not between individuals. There is an inclination to look at the commonly shared aspects instead of the individual ones.

> *Ling: If we talk about people, we are also talking about generations. Generations X, Y, Z they have different characteristics.*

> *Andy: The Western educated Chinese get that, the local educated Chinese don't understand it.*

Other coaches find it difficult to define general patterns, as they would come up with examples that wouldn't fit into the generalisation or would see a similar pattern in other cultures as well.

> *Alison: I mean I have had HK Chinese clients and Mainland Chinese clients who were very outspoken and I had some Western ones who probably were not. I'm always very careful about saying this is exclusively like that.*

> *Chan: The difficult part for Chinese is talking about themselves - is it? (hesitating). Can I remove that sentence because again it's bringing me a lot of different experiences about - no, it's not.*

How coaches acquired their cultural knowledge might have contributed to the shaping of their individual lenses. Thus, some coaches, who also work as cross-cultural trainer, seem to be particularly influenced by the focus on general patterns and on differences between nations. Their cultural lens might get in the way of effective coaching if their own biases lead to "expecting people to fit their cultural stereotype" (Peterson, 2007, p.262) rather than perceiving individual client's characteristics, as some coaches also made explicit.

> *Alison: I think the danger is though assuming that because this person is from this country, this culture, that's how they need to be treated. You can be really wrong with that. Coaching is so personal.*

Use of the cultural lens: Perceiving cultural impacts on the coaching engagement

If the shape and focus of cultural lenses differ among coaches, it is not surprising that they also use these lenses in different ways and perceive different cultural impacts on the coaching engagement. How they use their cultural lens is presented in four categories. One category analyses how culture might play a role when a client chooses a coach, the second one looks at how a coach uses his cultural understanding to assess the client. The third category presents how coaches interpret their clients' behaviours and their expectations of coaching and coach as culturally induced. The fourth section discusses whether coaches perceive a need to adapt their coaching style and practices in a cross-cultural coaching dyad. Figure 1 represents a summary and visualisation of how coaches use their cultural knowledge.
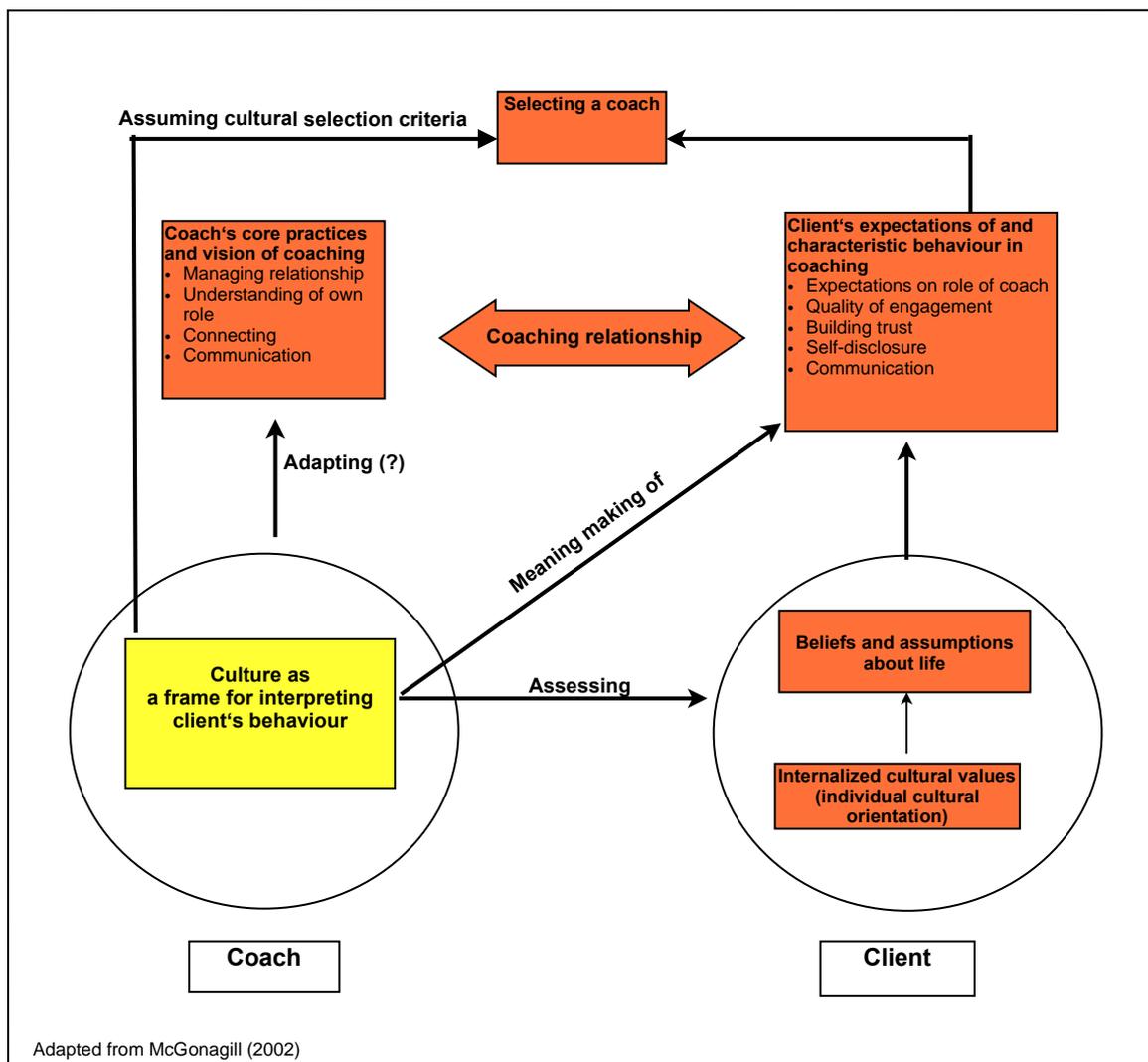

Figure 1: Coach's use of the cultural lens

Assumed cultural impact on client's criteria for selecting a coach

Some coaches assume that culture might have an influence on the client's decision for selecting a coach. They guess that the client might be looking for cultural closeness or have expectations that the coach will understand the client's culture. They therefore position themselves as culturally experienced and knowledgeable towards potential clients.

> *Henry about Chinese clients: I have to help them feel comfortable that I can be an effective partner that helps them achieve what they want to achieve. So part of it is to let them know that at least culturally I'm more in sync with them than they may think.*

Assessing the client

For several coaches it is important to assess the cultural background of their clients. It helps them to create a picture of their clients, to better understand them and to determine the best approach on how to coach them.

Huan: "Without the context how do I know about the person?"

> *John: It takes a long time to understand enough about the country to know what the person, you are talking to, has been through without even asking them, or how the country works, or what they might be thinking about, what's going to be important to them.*

The examples show that some coaches are creating a picture of the client by extrapolating from the national culture ('the country', 'the context') to the client. Thus, they seem to form "opinions based on generalisations and stereotypes about the person's cultural background" (Peterson, 2007, p.262) rather than on the individual's personal characteristics. By contrast, Tom suggests he actually assesses his clients by looking at their individual orientations.

> *Tom: So there is sort of this 'how are they perceiving me in terms of hierarchy, how are they perceiving development, what kind of words are they using to describe things, how open-minded are they, how do they think about learning', is a big issue with Chinese leaders. So that initial sort of assessment gives me a sense of where to approach the conversation.*

Even though he has some cultural picture in mind against which to benchmark his clients, he is not stereotyping them as e.g. hierarchical because they are Chinese, but is looking at the individual and their specific values. His approach shows that it might be possible to assess the "cultural orientation" (Smith, Bond and Kağitçibaşi, 2006, p.32) of a client without stereotyping and that fitting assessment criteria for a coaching context may be different to those that are often proposed, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

Meaning making of clients' behaviours and expectations

How coaches decide to move forward in a coaching session depends among other factors on "the meaning they were making of the session and their interaction with the client" (Buschi, 2015, p.44). Coaches use their cultural lenses for the meaning making when they perceive and interpret clients' behaviours and expectations of coaching as culturally induced. At least some coaches identified cultural differences between Western and Chinese clients in their perception of, and engagement in coaching, in building trust, in their expectations on the role of the coach, in their willingness for self-disclosure, and in the way of communicating, but their assessments vary largely. They see different areas of impacts, they find cultural or non-cultural explanations for similar behaviour of clients, and some perceive cultural differences whereas others do not. Some coaches identified common patterns of behaviours and expectations among Chinese clients that are different from Western clients. Yet, what coaches perceive as cultural patterns varies as much as their reactions to it.

Clients' expectations of the role of the coach shall serve as one example here. Several coaches perceive that it is a common pattern among Chinese clients to expect advice giving and guidance from the coach. For example, Ella and Chan remarked; *"Very common, 'I don't want to think'. Very Confucius, 'just do as I say'"* (Ella) and *"They sometimes really want to hear your experience. ... Quite a few of them would ask - how would you handle this?"* (Chan).

Nangalia and Nangalia (2010) produced similar findings in a study in which they interviewed Asian coaches on the impact of hierarchical thinking in Confucian societies on the role and status of a coach. However, while Nangalia and Nangalia (2010, p. 59) found that "all coaches adapt … [and use] a strong element of advising, teaching, and giving suggestions" in their practice, this study generates different findings on how coaches react to their clients' expectations. Some coaches would also give advice or suggestions, while others resist doing so. How coaches react seems to depend rather more on their coaching experiences, philosophy, values and the stage of the coaching engagement than on their cultural lens. This indicates that a cultural pattern in itself might not matter that much but that it is the coach's reaction to it that matters.

Do coaches need to adapt coaching style and practices?
Asked whether there is, per se, a need to adapt coaching style because of cultural reasons, the interviewed coaches again, had different perspectives. Some argued that they adapt their coaching practice to each client's personal profile, which comprises more than only considering culture and might not have to do with culture at all. Other coaches had a hard time to come up with any example of how culture influenced their coaching practice, as evidence in this example from *Ella: "I suppose it impacts my coaching style but I don't know whether I am conscious of it anymore. [Hesitates] How do I answer that?"* They suggested that they couldn't come up with examples for adaption of their coaching style because they were probably (re)acting unconsciously.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings show that the coaches come to different assessments of cultural impact on coaching and that there is therefore no straightforward answer to the question whether culture matters in a cross-cultural coaching encounter. I suggest that there are several reasons for it. Coaching situations are complex and many contextual factors impinge upon the coaching relationship (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2014). Coaches have different ways and levels of understanding of national cultures as they acquired their cultural knowledge and assumptions in different circumstances. Furthermore, culture is a subjectively interpreted concept in coaching. Coaches use their individual cultural frames of references when they make meaning of a client's behaviour and interpret it as culturally induced. This is consistent with a constructivist position, but I suggest that it is different from the notion of culture as it is discussed in the literature on cross-cultural coaching.

As discussed in the literature review, most authors on cross-cultural coaching refer to theories of culture that distinguish and explore cultural differences based on measurements and scientific methods (Coultas et al., 2011; Abbott and Rosinski, 2007; Passmore and Law, 2009; Peterson, 2007). They seem to present an objective, 'real' picture of national cultures in the positivistic sense. It implies a notion of culture as being homogenous, bound and deterministic (Nathan, 2015). It seems as if there is a set lens to look at culture and that everyone knows what the lens is. Coultas *et al.* (2011, p.151) e.g. state that "[a]wareness of the cultural values and norms of the coachee's nation and organisation" should be useful to assess the client's cultural values. Thus, there seems to be an underlying positivist notion of culture in the discussion of cross-cultural coaching, but a subjective interpretation of culture in coaching practice.

I suggest that these different notions of culture can be positioned in relation to each other as several levels of culture that can be differentiated in the coaching engagement, as depicted in Figure 2. When coaches talk about 'the Chinese' for instance, they refer to national culture (1) as collectively shared values, beliefs, norms etc. However, what exactly culture is and how it manifests itself is the subject of theories on culture (2). These discourses might impact how coaches think about culture, and thus shape their cultural lenses (4). When coaches assess how national cultures might have influence over their client's profile, they address the cultural orientation of individuals (3). However, what might come to light in coaching as cultural is not an objective description of national culture and individual cultural orientation, but a subjective perception and interpretation (green arrows) based on the coach's individual cultural frames of reference (4).
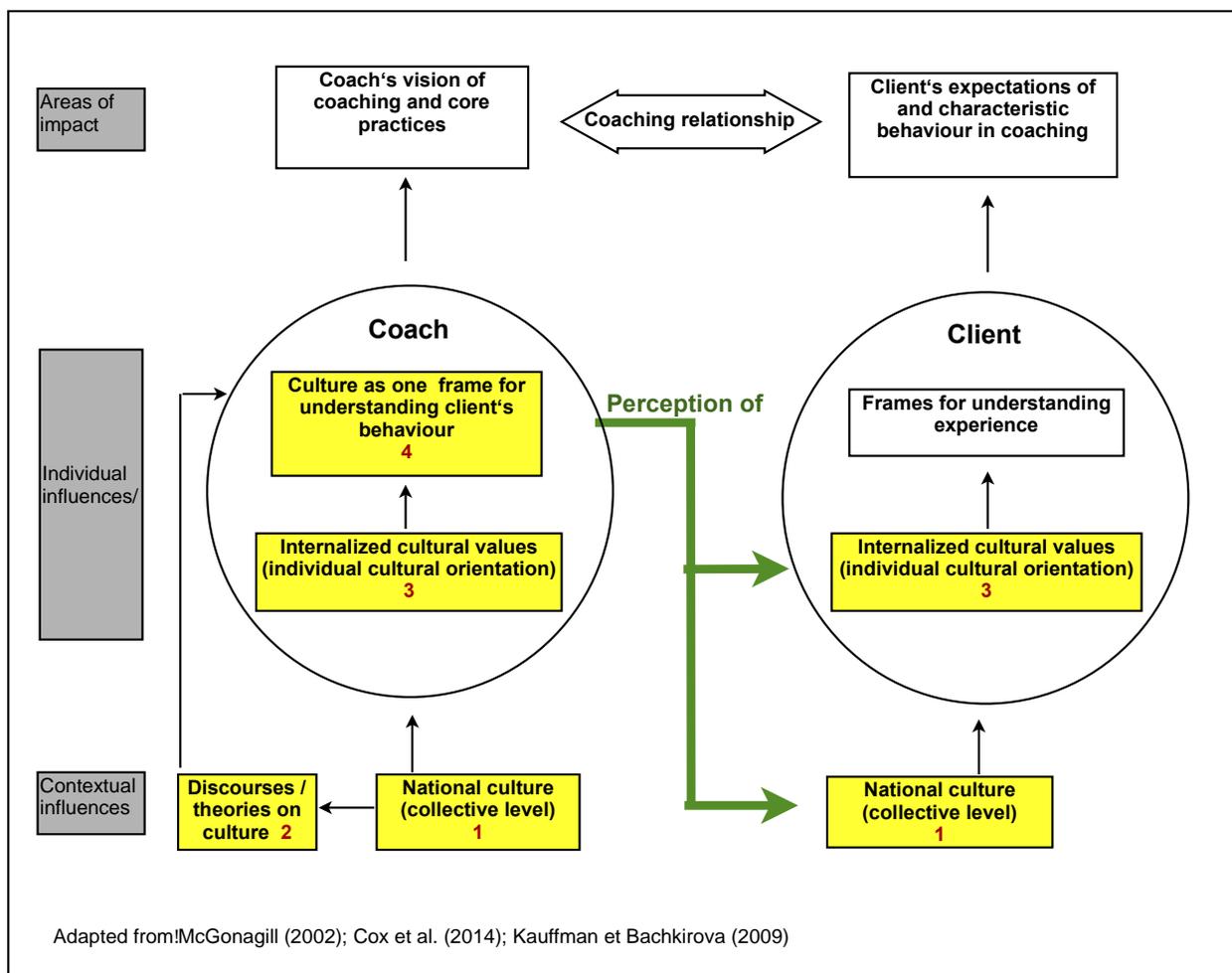

Figure 2: Locating culture in a coaching engagement

This understanding has consequences for the assessment of the impact of culture on a coaching encounter. In the context of this study, it suggests that the findings are based on different subjective interpretations of culture, and that they don't represent a factual, objective assessment of cultural influences. In the context of academic discussions of cross-cultural coaching, it suggests that "the muddiness and wooliness of the concept of culture" (Abbott, 2014, p.345) is open to further

subjective interpretation through coaches. It implies for coaching practice that the coach should be aware of cultural filters of perceptions. Cultural knowledge might be helpful in the sense of "alert[ing] one's 'antenna' to possible cultural issues" (Plaister-Ten, 2013, p.64) but this doesn't imply that the cultural issue is the same for each client from this culture.

I finally suggest that for two reasons the impact of national culture on the coaching engagement might be less relevant, than some authors on cross-cultural coaching claim it to be (Abbott, 2014; Rosinski, 2003; Passmore and Law, 2009; Coultas et al, 2011). First, the relevance of cultural norms might change according to situation and context. Thus, some coaches suggested that cultural norms or patterns, such as face saving or indirect communication might have a different relevance in coaching than they might have, for example, in a management context. Second, an essentialist notion of culture in coaching and training assumes that misunderstandings and conflict may arise when representatives of different cultures interact and that they therefore might need to adapt behaviour (Nazarkiewicz, 2013). However, this scenario might be less relevant in the context of coaching. Many coaches couldn't come up with examples of how they adapted their coaching techniques. It might have to do with them reacting unconsciously as they proposed. Yet, maybe there weren't that many situations in which they had to adapt their coaching practice. One coach stated, that the adaption of his communication style to a less aggressive one was owed to coaching education rather than to cultural adaption. It suggests that coaching practice is already culturally sensitive to a certain extent and that adaption might not be that necessary.

Limitations of this study

Reflecting about the entire research process, I see limitations that I would call limits to understanding. Some limits were set by conducting interviews in another language than the mother tongue and misunderstandings that occurred during interviews. Yet, even with the transcriptions I sometimes struggled to really understand what the coach wanted to express. Often coaches would use an indirect approach and explain their viewpoint with examples, which then left the task to interpret the meaning behind it to me. I also experienced limits to understanding because of different 'horizons' in terms of 'background knowledge of the subject matter' (Vessey, 2009, p.533). I had the impression that I couldn't always understand their reflections in all subtleties due to my so far limited coaching experiences.

Implications for further research and coaching practice

The underlying notion of culture in most of the discussed literature seems to be essentialist, assuming a deterministic influence of culture. However, there seems to be little research on how attitudes and behaviours might change according to context and situation. Thus, further research might study culture from an 'interactionist' or 'situationist' perspective (Poortinga and Van Hemert, 2001). The findings suggest that there might be a more suitable framework for assessing coaching clients than those popular cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (1980) or Trompenaars *et al.* (2012). Coaches mentioned factors such as clients' open-mindedness and willingness to learn, their level of self-disclosure and their perception of the coach in terms of hierarchy. Further research might determine relevant criteria for assessing how a client's cultural and non-cultural attitudes and behaviour might impact the coaching engagement and how it would be possible to assess them.

For coaching practice, I suggest that the focus on national culture does not say much about the individual. Even if coaches identify culturally rooted behaviours or expectations among their clients, they should be aware that they are not referring to culture as a set, real, objective 'thing' in the coaching room, but that it is their own perception and interpretation that defines something as

cultural. I suggest that coaches should reflect on how their assumptions about specific cultures, and the use of culture as a frame for understanding the client's behaviour, might impinge on their coaching practice in order to avoid the pitfall of cultural stereotyping.

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Andrea Roth is a personal coach in Hong Kong who works with clients in transition periods. She has a wealth of experience in beginning anew and redefining herself thanks to many removals. Andrea holds a German Diploma in Business Administration and an MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice with distinction.