

Academic Paper

An action research study on the development of a coaching model which optimises rapport in cross-ethnicity dyads

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Abstract

Rapport is imperative to the development of coaching relationships and predicts coaching outcomes. However, rapport can be hindered in cross-ethnicity helping relationships, especially if the coach is White and the coachee is a person of colour (POC). This action research study developed a coaching model which optimises rapport in cross-ethnicity dyads. Maintenance of an equitable power dynamic was vital. Factors which affected rapport included the perception of coaching as an exclusionary White space and allowing space for ethnicity discussions. Both required cross-ethnicity skills. Due to the discernment of coaching as a White space, actions beyond the dyad are required.

Keywords

ethnicity, coaching, rapport, cross-ethnicity skills, power dynamic

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Introduction

Boyce et al. (2010) define rapport as the reduction in differences and building on similarities between coach and coachee. De Haan and Gannon (2016) extend it to include ease with another, associated with positivity, warmth, attentiveness, interest, sharing of personal details and the coachee's confidence to embrace challenge. Other characteristics include trust, listening (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010), and harmonious interactions (Tickle-Degmen & Rosenthal, 1990). In contrast, working-alliance is the collaboration between participants of a dyad which requires a bond plus a mutual commitment to a task (Bordin, 1979). Therefore, working-alliance includes both rapport and goal orientation. Consequently, studies measuring working-alliance are appropriate to the rapport context.

Rapport is imperative in the early development of a coaching relationship and predicts coaching outcomes including goal attainment, satisfaction, self-disclosure, and retention (Gyllenstein & Palmer, 2007; Boyce et al., 2010; Gan & Chong, 2015). Graßman et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis

study found working-alliance was positively related to helpful coaching outcomes. Absence of rapport has also been recognized as a barrier to effective mentoring (Andrades et al., 2013). In contrast, Gessnitzer and Kauffeld's (2015) observational study found bonding behaviours, as a measure of rapport, had no effect on coaching goal attainment. However, there was a high level of working-alliance across the study groups affecting the useability of the comparison between groups.

De Haan, et al. (2020) found working-alliance correlated with coaching outcome scores early but not later in the relationship. This suggests rapport and goal setting are more important early in the coaching relationship and may indicate a readiness of the dyad for coaching. Wycherley and Cox (2008) asserted surface diversity attributes, like ethnicity, are useful in rapport building but become less important as the relationship develops. Both papers suggest that in the cross-ethnicity context the White coach needs to be most cognisant of rapport building early in coaching relationships.

Study Context

Racism and inequality are problematic in higher education institutions (HEI) (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Black female academics are a particularly marginalised group and experience the double jeopardy associated with two minoritised identities (Johnson & Pietri, 2022). This negatively affects their career progression. In 2022 in the UK only 0.6% of university professors were Black (HESA, 2022), a fraction of these were female. This compares to 83% who were White. Consequently, there is a low availability of ethnic and gender matched mentors for Black female academics. Cross-ethnicity mentoring for these academics is often a negative experience (Davis, et al., 2021). In contexts where suitable mentoring is limited coaching would be an appropriate substitute. However, there is a shortage of Black female coaches. Passmore's 2021 report of a thousand global European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) members found POC coaches are underrepresented. Only 3.5% identified as Black and 9.9% as other or dual heritages. Further analysis revealed that in the UK and USA POC were disproportionally underrepresented. The industry needs more POC coaches to offer their unique support to POC coachees (Shah, 2022). Until this situation improves it is imperative that White coaches know how to coach outside of their ethnicity in a manner that supports rapport development.

Literature Review

Psychotherapy studies suggest ethnicity matching affects utility of services and drop-out rates (Weekes, 2010), evaluation of therapists (Cabral & Smith, 2011) and client satisfaction (Ilagan & Heatherington, 2021). Van Zyl (2022) found that psychosocial support is provided by matched ethnicity mentors and sponsorship mentoring is more probable in cross-ethnicity mentorship. This suggests a differing experience between ethnicity matched and unmatched mentees. Ethnicity mismatching also negatively affects mentoring outcomes for Black and Latino female academics (Davis, et al., 2021). Inman's (2020) autoethnographic paper concurs and highlighted how for some academic mentees, ethnic similarity is most salient early in mentoring relationships, but as rapport develops similarity of values takes precedent. Self-selection bias in these studies may have missed positive mentee experiences. Nevertheless, these studies suggest cross-ethnicity helping relationships are problematic. Since rapport is an important factor in dyadic relationships it is possible that rapport is the key factor affecting these outcomes. Review of the literature suggest two interconnected factors that explain why rapport development could be hindered in cross-ethnicity dyads. The first is the *unique experiences of POC* the second is the *obstructive behaviours of White helping-professionals*.

The Unique Experience of POC

The unique experiences of POC includes the disempowering experience of living in a White centric culture, the trauma due to discrimination and racism and the resulting mistrust of White individuals. POC coachees are living in a discriminatory White orientated society that disadvantages them (Shoukry, 2016). White dominated institutions such as higher educational institutions (HEI) mirror this prevailing societal discrimination, adversely affecting career progression of POC academics (Ogbonna, 2019). The dominant coaching culture is also White centric and is influenced by society's emphasis on White supremacy and its resulting power imbalances (Passmore, 2021). Accessing a White orientated coaching process is likely to adversely affect rapport in the cross-ethnicity context. In addition, racial discrimination can result in POC coachee's disbelief in social justice and a mistrust in White coaches (Hart, 2019) which can hinder rapport formation.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a useful theory to understand cross-ethnicity coaching relationships from the perspective of POC. CRT is an interdisciplinary perspective aiming to exam and transform the pervasive relationship between ethnicity and power (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). A central tenet of CRT is the acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of racism, ingrained in all aspects of society (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). The interest convergence principle of CRT (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014) explains how racism benefits the interests of Whites. Therefore, actions to improve the welfare of POC will only occur if White people benefit from these actions. This further explains POC's mistrust of White people (Sue, 2015), including White coaches, as the oppressor and resistant force preventing racial equality.

The resulting trauma due to racial discrimination (Hart, 2019) distinguishes POC from White coachees. Kirkinis et al.'s (2021) systematic review found a strong relationship with racial discrimination and trauma symptomology. The need for acknowledgement of racist trauma in helping-relationships has been recognised by practitioners (Hart, 2019; Shoukry, 2016; Sibrava et al., 2019). This issue is often neglected in relationships between persons from dominant and minority cultures. The importance of addressing racism and power imbalance has been acknowledged in cross-cultural mentoring relationships (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004), but an awareness of racial trauma is lacking. Not acknowledging these traumatic experiences may adversely affect rapport in helping-relationships (Hart, 2019).

Obstructive Behaviours of White Helping-Professionals

The obstructive behaviours of White helping-professionals that can adversely affect rapport development are microaggressions, the politeness protocol and colour-blindness. All these behaviours can also be explained by CRT which acknowledges White dominance and Whiteness as the inequitable, prevailing discourse (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) determining what is acceptable in society and institutions, including the coaching industry and HEIs. While overt racism still occurs, it is unacceptable and prohibited by law. However, more subtle versions of racism leak into everyday discourse in the form of microaggressions and colour-blindness strategies (Sue, 2015). These indirect racist mechanisms are suggested by CRT to maintain White dominance (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Microaggressions are defined as commonplace communication of denigrating messages to POC often dismissed as inoffensive by the aggressor (Sue, 2015) and are associated with poor rapport (Owen et al., 2014). Assumptions that White values, for example individualism, are 'correct' is a form of microaggressions because they devalue other ways of being. Good rapport may prevent microaggressions or at least improve the possibility microaggressions can be discussed to prevent rupture of the coaching relationship.

Rapport may also be hampered due to White coaches' hesitancy to partake in diversity conversations with Black coachees (Bernstein, 2019). One reason for this is what Sue (2015) refers to as the 'politeness protocol' which is the social discomfort often felt about discussing

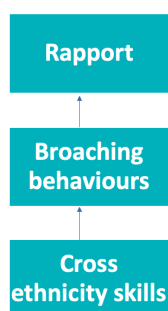
ethnicity, rendering it taboo. However, awareness of the taboo nature of and engaging in, what Sue (2015) calls 'race-talk', improves the ability to overcome this. A hesitancy to discuss ethnicity may also be a symptom of colour-blindness defined as the belief ethnic differences should not affect decisions, impression formation and behaviours (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). It is a strategy used by White people to avoid being seen as racist or biased but is interpreted as hostile by POC observers (Apfelbaum et al., 2008). POC's daily experiences and research provides evidence that ethnicity effects perceptions, interpersonal relationships, and life experiences (Burris, 2012). All coaches and coachees will bring their ethnicity based psychosocial perspectives with them to coaching-sessions. Colour-blindness denies this rendering POC invisible, and invalidates their everyday struggles with racism (Sue, 2015). Consequentially, it is a form of microaggression. Burris's (2012) study of cross ethnicity dyads found colour-blind strategies reduce the therapeutic alliance. Colour-blind therapists are rated as unemphatic and hold POC more responsible for solving their own psychological issues, than White clients (Burkard & Knox, 2004). Therefore, practitioners who claim ethnicity is not relevant, in practice may be differentiating their clients based on ethnicity. Fundamentally, colour-blind strategies hinder the ability to appreciate the perspective of others from a differing ethnicity and thwarts rapport.

In summary studies suggest mismatched ethnicity dyads have poorer outcomes in helping-relationship dyads. The unique experiences of POC can lead to self-protective mistrust of the White coach. In addition, the obstructive behaviours of White coaches can be detrimental to rapport. In this context a differing approach to establishing rapport is required. Some coaching commentators have provided approaches for considering cultural differencing in the coaching context (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2016; Rosinski, 2010). There is a wide variation of cultural contexts from the group level within communities and work cultures and at the international level between countries. However, the sociocultural impact of ethnicity and the treatment of POC remains consistently inequitable and extends beyond cultural differences. There is a lack of guidance on rapport development in cross-ethnicity coaching (Shah, 2022). The aim of this study was to develop a cross-ethnicity coaching model which provides a framework for rapport development. The first step was the development of a theoretical coaching model based on relevant literature.

Theoretical Model

The theoretical coaching model (Figure 1) identifies approaches which help optimize rapport in the cross-ethnicity context. It was constructed from my interpretation of research studies, meta-analyses, commentaries, and theoretical papers on behaviours that build rapport in cross-ethnicity helping-relationships. The literature review and the model are briefly summarised below. The model suggests that in the cross-ethnicity context coaches should use cross-ethnicity skills to build rapport and to prepare them for broaching behaviours which improve rapport.

Figure 1 Theoretical coaching model



Cross-Ethnicity Skills

Several skills have been described in the counselling literature which improve outcomes in cross-ethnicity dyads. These include *cultural-humility* (Owen et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2018), *cultural-immediacy* (Day-Vines et al., 2020) and *cultural-comfort* (Davis et al., 2018). *Cultural-humility* is appreciating how a coach's White ethnicity is positioned in relation to other ethnicities, such as the oppressive effect of White privilege. It requires personal introspection and an understanding of personal biases and prejudices (Owen et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2018). Cultural-humility necessitates that a White coach seeks out knowledge of other ethnic groups. It has been shown to increase the perception of authenticity (Chang & Berk, 2009), improves comfort in discussing ethnicity (La Roche & Maxie, 2003) and has a strong positive correlation with working-alliance in cross-ethnicity dyads (Davis et al., 2018). Coaching and mentoring researchers have also recognised the need for practitioners to improve self-reflection, as understanding the 'self' aids understanding of others (Carroll & Barnes, 2015), and to acknowledge limitations in areas of ethnicity and diversity (Reddick, 2012). Others have acknowledged that cross-ethnicity coaching requires courage and humility to have difficult discussions about ethnicity and racism (Bocala & Holman, 2021).

The cross-ethnicity skill of *cultural-immediacy* (Day-Vines et al., 2020) means addressing ethnicity issues, such as discrimination, as and when they arise in sessions. Day-Vines et al. (2020) found this strengthens relationships, promotes trust, deepens dialogue, and helps the client feel heard. Cultural-immediacy also communicates helping-professionals' willingness to discuss ethnicity issues and helps prevent or repair miscommunications. *Cultural-comfort* is feeling unperturbed by these discussions and is associated with a healthy rapport (Davis et al., 2018). These cross-ethnicity coaching skills should help build trust and rapport with POC coachees and prepare the coach for broaching-behaviours.

Broaching-Behaviours

Broaching-Behaviours are the deliberate discussion of ethnicity issues in helping relationships (Day-Vines et al., 2021). They are integral to establishing comfort, disclosure, and trust in cross-ethnicity helping-relationships (Chang & Yoon, 2011; Fuertes et al., 2002; Zhang & Burkard, 2008) including mentoring relationships (Carroll & Barnes, 2015; Chan et al., 2015). Avoidance of broaching predisposes helping-professionals to inadvertent microaggressions (Day-Vines et al., 2021). However, some studies have found initiation of ethnicity discussions had no effect on client satisfaction (Thompson & Alexander, 2006) others found mixed results (Maxie et al., 2006).

Researchers in the field of cross-ethnicity helping-relationships report ethnicity issues should be discussed early in the relationship to build rapport and trust (Carroll & Barnes, 2015; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Zhang & Burkard, 2008) and continuously to maintain it (Fuertes et al., 2002; Sue, 2015). However, Day-Vine et al. (2021) suggest rapport should be established before any discussion on ethnicity while also suggesting broaching-behaviours are necessary to enhance trust and develop rapport. Some researchers advocate the preparation of broaching statements to aid these discussions (Cardemil & Battle, 2003; Day-Vine, et al., 2021). The literature divides broaching-behaviours into *the discussion of coachee ethnicity, dyadic ethnic difference, racism, similarity of identities and other salient identities* (Day-Vine, et al., 2021).

Methodology

The pragmatic paradigm shaped my decision to use an action research (AR) methodology. Pragmatism embraces the cyclical nature of experience and reflection (Creswell & Plano-Clarke, 2007). AR is a cyclical, flexible methodology (Green, 2012) that allows for adjustment to practice based on ongoing study outcomes. Evolutionary AR (EAR) as described by Cox et al. (2020) was

used based on my positionality of ethnic outsider, as a White coach coaching Black female academics, and the cooperative role of the coachee-participants.

Participants and Recruitment

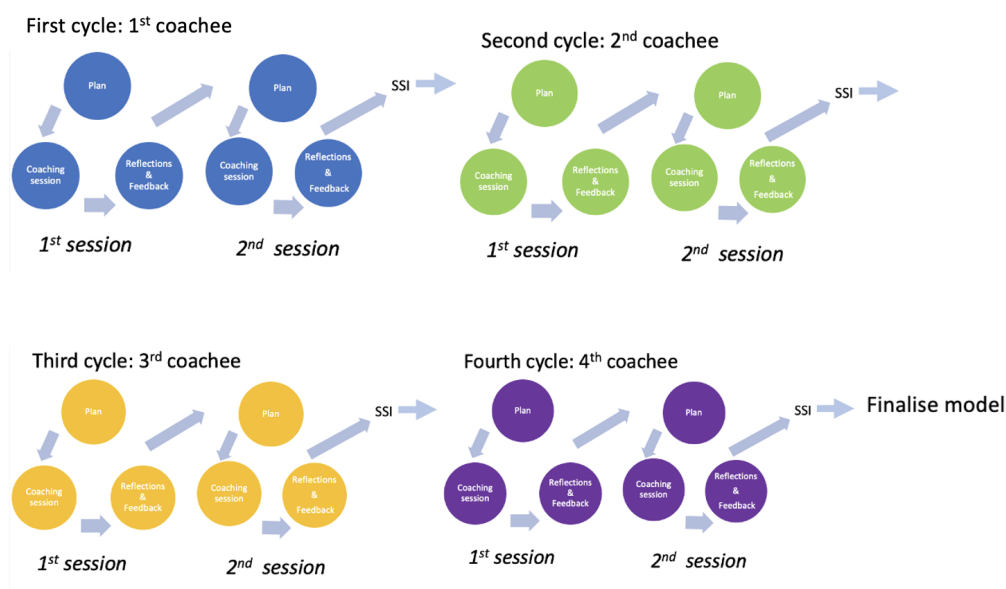
Black female academics working in HE in the UK were invited to participate. Recruitment involved my academic network and the University College Union (UCU). As a female academic, recruiting female academics removed the issue of gender and career mismatch from the study. Coachee-participants interested in participating were emailed a participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form. There were four coachee-participants. The individual participant demographics are withheld to maintain anonymity. Their ethnicities were Black and mixed Black heritages. The mean age was 40 years.

Procedure and Action Research Cycles

Each AR cycle involved one coachee who participated in two coaching-sessions, a semi-structured interview (SSI) and completed two post-session feedback forms. As the coach/researcher I conducted the coaching-sessions and SSIs. The aim of each coaching-session was determined by the individual coachees. Coaching-sessions and SSIs took place over Zoom and were audio-visually recorded. SSI questions were developed using relevant literature on rapport in the cross-ethnicity context. An example question was: 'How did you feel being coached by me?' After a pilot SSI no adjustments were made. However, the SSI questions were amended as the study progressed to reflect the model adjustments. The SSIs lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The text was fully transcribed using the Nvivo transcription service.

The theoretical model, developed from the literature, guided the plan for the first cycle's first *coaching-session* (Figure 2). My *reflections* and coachee *feedback*, guided the adjustments to the *plan* for the next *coaching-session*. After completion of both coaching-sessions the coachee's SSI helped determine further adjustments to the plan before the next AR cycle. McNiff (2017) suggests a minimum of two cycles in AR studies, therefore this was repeated over four cycles and resulted in the final coaching model.

Figure 2: Action research cycles



Data Collection and Analysis

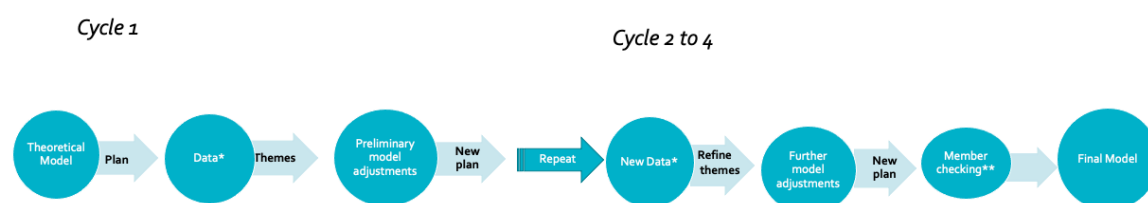
The data from the coachee post-session feedback, and SSIs were analysed and interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2013) method of thematic analysis. The data was manually coded and the process of generating codes and themes was repeated for each cycle (Figure 3). Transcripts were read several times, and reduced to meaningful codes, which were grouped into subthemes and themes which together with post session reflections formed the basis for the *preliminary model adjustments* which guided subsequent cycles. New data from successive cycles resulted in themes that formed the basis of the *further model adjustments*. After the final cycle the data generated formed the basis for the *final model*.

Similar themes emerged across cycles therefore writing up each cycle in isolation felt constrictive and risked distorting the model developments. Therefore, the adjustments across all four cycles are described in two overarching themes. Other action researchers (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Green, 2012) have commented on the importance of fluidity in the AR methodology to allow for the expression of each participant voice.

Research Ethics

Ethical standards as determined by Oxford Brookes University's Code of Practice was maintained. Ethical approval was granted by my supervisor. Before taking part, the coachees were provided with a GDPR privacy notice, given an opportunity to ask questions, and informed taking part was voluntary and they could withdraw without explanation at any time. Coachees were invited to record their consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were respected by anonymising the data and using pseudonyms. The coachee details and data were kept in a password protected laptop only I could access.

Figure 3 Action research model development



*Data: SSI, Feedback, Reflections

**Member-checking involved sending a summary of themes to participants for comment

Findings

The final model (Figure 4) emphasised the importance of the power dynamic within the coaching dyad to rapport development. Empowerment of the coachees in the coaching space was associated with trust and comfort with me, which encouraged openness and honesty in sessions and acceptance of meaningful challenge. The factors that affected the power dynamic form the basis of the study themes which were *coaching as a White space and allowing space for ethnicity discussions*. Both were mediated by the *cross-ethnicity skills* which remained important in the final model (Table 1). For brevity the themes are described collectively rather than cycle by cycle. The quotes used as evidence in the analysis are derived from the SSIs, unless otherwise stated. Quotes from the first or second coaching-sessions are recorded as CS1/2 and coachee-feedback as FB.

Figure 4: Final coaching model

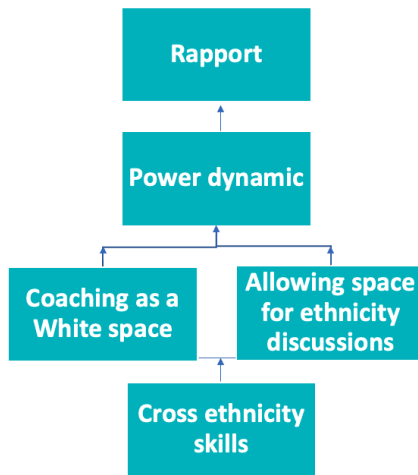


Table 1: Table of themes, subthemes, and codes

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Coaching as a White space	Mistrust	Exclusionary White centric
	Build trust	Endorsements Emphasising strengths Coalition Appropriate Ethnicity Terms
Allowing space for ethnicity discussions	Barriers	Exhausting Filtering 'Knowing'
	Bridges	Coachee control Feedback Openness
Mediator	Cross-ethnicity skills	Cultural-humility Cultural-comfort Cultural-immediacy

Theme 1: Coaching as a White space

This theme highlights coachees' *mistrust* of the coaching space. Empowerment of the coachees required an awareness of this perception and action to *build trust*.

Mistrust

Coachees viewed coaching as an untrustworthy, hostile White space. A space that was exclusionary and White centric based on White perspectives and Western values. Adaku felt the coaching space was unwelcoming to POC: "...they [coaching] are predominantly for and delivered by certain groups of, people who are really exclusionary." This perception explained a hesitancy to volunteer for my study and an initial reluctance by most coachees to discuss ethnicity related issues. Leal felt a White coach might not be able to support a Black-Coachee due to a lack of appreciation of the alternative strategies POC require: "...they're looking at it purely from a White perspective. So that might work for you. But that's not going to work for me." The association of coaching with Western values of productivity and capitalism, made Oba suspicious of the process: "I did have slight scepticism...I did have like this connotation of various things about like productivity...and capitalism..." Rapport required an understanding of how the coachees understood the coaching space and a concerted effort to create a welcoming space that avoided Western assumptions and built trust.

Building trust

Despite offering free coaching-sessions potential participants were not volunteering. In fact, the coachee-participants only volunteered after a personal endorsement by a trusted other. As Leal explained: “Jane knows you personally. And obviously I trust her, so that did help”. Therefore, a significant aspect of trust was established outside of the dyad. An important part of coachee empowerment and trust building was emphasising the equality of the coaching relationship. It was important to present the dyad as a coalition not an allyship. Adaku explained the distinction: “coalition is standing equally together rather than I'm choosing to be your ally because you've got a problem”. For her allyship maintains a power difference and places the coachee as a victim, devoid of power. Alyssa also emphasised the importance of emphasising strength over victimhood and the importance of avoiding a “white saviour complex” (CS2). Her feedback emphasised the need to remain culturally humble and that POC are fighters not victims that need rescuing by the coach:

...the importance of the coach being culturally humble...not assuming the person walking into your space is a downtrodden victim of the system...but they have learnt to cope by putting on boxing gloves every single day they go to work (FB).

A vital component of rapport is respect. Therefore, addressing coachees' heritage in a manner they consider appropriate, and empowering was important. For Alyssa an appropriate term to describe an ethnic heritage was needed to avoid: “saying you are less than”. She explained minoritising terms were devaluing and preferred empowering terms: “global majority is good as well because it's empowering”. Each coachee had differing ideals about what term/s were appropriate. Leal used terms such as Brown, ethnic minority (EM) and POC during our sessions. This was her prerogative, and I mirrored her use of terms. While Oba liked POC as a collective term she preferred to be addressed more specifically as Black or as a “woman of colour”. In contrast, Adaku felt that “language is not as important as intention” (CS1). This illustrated to me that the term/s to describe ethnic heritage are a personal choice. It is not the White coach's prerogative to decide what terms are appropriate.

Theme 2: Allowing space for ethnicity discussions

This theme reflects the adjustment away from the list of broaching-behaviours to strategies that provided space for discussions of ethnicity related issues. Based on the theoretical model, the researcher in me planned to use a tick list of broaching-behaviours. However, as a coach I realised this was unnatural and disingenuous. Instead, I responded intuitively with curiosity to ethnicity discussions as they arose. This required an understanding of the *barriers* that thwart these discussions. To overcome these barriers strategies were used to *bridge* the gap between us.

Barriers

My opening statement of “How is the university treating you?” was enough to provide space for Alyssa's cathartic discussion of her experience of prejudice and discrimination especially in HE. As a dyad we illustrated cultural-immediacy as the ethnicity discussions happened spontaneously. All that was required was both our cultural-comfort with these topics and allowing space for Alyssa to reflect on these issues in her own time. However, an openness to discussing ethnicity issues was not always enough. Leal explained that discussing ethnicity with a White person is: “...exhausting to think you even have to explain everything first. With a POC you don't have to explain”. I could not counteract my lack of experience beyond whiteness. This understandably explains filtering of discussions on ethnicity.

Oba was apprehensive about being coached by me. She worried I might have dismissed her opinion. As a result, she held back until she had assessed my trustworthiness and openness to ethnicity discussions: “...how open is this person to what I potentially might say? Can I say certain things...so it was just like testing the waters.”

Alyssa explained that discussions on ethnicity may be avoided by a coachee of colour if a White coach misguidedly claims to have good insight or 'knowing' of the experience of being a POC. She summarised how derogatory that is:

I have this thing against people who say "they know"...When you come into something knowing, then you are already assuming superiority of information.

Adaku also felt White coaches needed to accept their limitations and that they can never understand her Black experience: "...just accepting where we are...sometimes it's not our thing to get...somebody else is an expert." Therefore, I needed to accept the limitation of my ethnic experience.

Bridges

The difficulty of discussing ethnicity with a White coach needed to be respected. The control of the ethnicity discourse needed to remain with the coachee. They were the experts of their own experience. Requesting feedback gave coachees the power to indicate any errors that could be potentially damaging microaggressions. Alyssa pointed out that requesting feedback from a coachee of colour is imperative to avoiding a rupture in rapport: "Because you could say something that could kill the whole interview because somebody felt violated."

To illustrate openness to discussions of ethnicity, and other identities, I spoke about my own salient identities including my gender and White Irish heritage. It had a positive effect and facilitated trust as Adaku explained: "You seemed like you were being open...it felt safe to expose vulnerabilities and talk about difficult things." Despite the coachees initial hesitancy rapport did develop and the coachees felt more comfortable discussing ethnicity experiences as the sessions progressed, as Oba described: "I felt perfectly fine and comfortable to talk about those things [ethnicity]". Being open to feedback and openness about my own identities indicated that the coaching space was a safe space to be vulnerable and to discuss ethnicity.

Mediator: Cross-Ethnicity Skills

Before embarking on this study, I was poorly skilled in cross-ethnicity coaching. My personal reflections on whiteness and its attendant privileges and associated oppression of POC, helped prepare me to practice cross-ethnicity coaching. The *cross-ethnicity skills* mediated both themes and helped me to build a trusting rapport with the coachees. Cultural-humility, cultural-comfort and cultural-immediacy were important to my appreciation of the coachees' mistrust of *coaching as a White space* and the importance of *allowing space for ethnicity discussions*, while still appreciating coachees' hesitancy to engage in ethnicity dialogue with me. The self-reflection associated with cultural-humility prevented me from the inappropriate use of broaching-behaviours and helped me understand the need for endorsements to improve trust in a White coach. I was also aware of the importance of determining individual's preference for terms to describe their ethnic heritage and the significance of positioning coaching as a coalition. Both cultural-comfort and cultural-immediacy meant I felt comfortable with dialogue related to ethnicity and engaged with these discussions in the moment. Consequentially Alyssa embraced my study and welcomed me as one of her own: "it means a lot to me and some of my own...through this [the study] you become one of our own, our tribeswoman."

Discussion

The coachees scepticism of the coaching space and their initial difficulty trusting a White coach highlighted the importance to rapport of playing close attention to the power dynamic. When coachees felt empowered there was trust and comfort with me and acceptance of challenge. The

power dynamic has been acknowledged as inherent to a mentor's power to effect career progression (Davis et al., 2021). Coaching has been portrayed as a relationship of equals (Brennan & Wildflower, 2018). However, some commentators have argued coaches have the power to influence their coachees and this can be problematic (Welman & Bachkirova, 2010). Shoukry and Cox (2018, p.418) concur that coaching is a 'complex power dynamic'. Playing attention to this dynamic was important in the current study's cross-ethnicity context because the socially constructed concept of ethnicity is disempowering to POC (Dabiri, 2021) and is a barrier to rapport. It also explains why POC coachees may distrust White coaches and why empowerment of the coachee is central to rapport development. Modification of the factors that affect the power dynamic shifted power to the coachee. Thereby attempting to readdress the socio-culturally imposed imbalance inherent in cross-ethnicity relationships. Two overarching themes and a mediating factor summarised these modifications. These were *coaching as a White space* and *allowing space for ethnicity discussions* and the use of *cross-ethnicity skills*.

Coaching as a White Space

The initial perception of coaching by the POC coachees was as an exclusionary, disempowering White space associated with White-centric practices and values. Indeed, POC coaches are underrepresented in the coaching space (Passmore, 2021; Roche & Passmore, 2021; Shah, 2022). Consequently, the perception of coaching as a White space is well founded and leads to suspicion and mistrust of White coaches. In addition, POC have significant experience of the manipulative use of power by White people and institutions. Hence their mistrust is a justifiable self-protective mechanism (Hart, 2019; Sue, 2015; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). This scepticism of a White coach emulates finding in other cross-ethnicity helping-relationship studies (Fluckiger et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2021; Van Zyl, 2022). Other coaching and mentoring commentators have emphasised the importance for coaches to build trust and psychological safety for POC coachees (Guramatunhu-Mudiwa & Angel, 2017; Roche, 2021; Shah, 2022). Feeling safe in the coaching space is imperative to successful rapport development but mistrust in this context should be expected. Appropriate adjustments were required to build trust. This modification in coaching approaches resonates with Mackey and Shannon's (2014) mentoring study that concluded that the White centric traditional system of mentoring should adjust to meet the needs of POC academic mentees and not vice-versa.

Reflective of the mistrust of White people and White dominated services (Sue, 2015; Hart, 2019) was the coachee-participants' need for endorsements. The value of endorsements to induce trust and rapport can be somewhat explained by social-identity-threat (SIT). SIT refers to the perception of devaluation of an in-group due to negative stereotyping (Steele et al., 2002). Potential coachees may have avoided the study because they feared being negatively stereotyped and therefore disempowered. An endorsement may have acted as an identity-safety-cue (Walton et al., 2015). Meaning the endorsement signalled their ethnic identity was valued by me therefore I could be trusted. Johnson and Pietri's study (2022) illustrated that a White woman endorsed by a woman of colour (WOC) can serve as an identity-safety-cue for an organisation. This suggests that my successful rapport with WOC coachees may act as a vicarious endorsement of White coaches and the coaching industry. However, the coaching space needs to signal it values all ethnicities. While it remains dominated by White people this is formidable.

Empowerment within the dyad required recognition and acknowledgement of the strengths of POC and avoidance of their victimisation. Victimisation, as expounded by CRT (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020), removes responsibility from society and focuses unconstructively on POC. Empowerment within the dyad required a focus on the inequality of systems, assets, and opportunities. In the current context there was an emphasis on the discriminatory systems within HEI, which is widely recognised (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020). This shift acknowledged the sources of oppression and inequality and recognised the strengths, resilience, and determination of Black-coachees within this oppressive context. Envisioned coaching as coalition of equitable partners empowered the

coachees. In contrast, allyship was imagined as providing the ally with the power and the victimisation of POC. This emulates Dabiri's (2021) construct of allyship as disempowering. Therefore, an emphasis on coachee strength and the equitable coalitional nature of the coaching relationship is likely to improve rapport.

Establishing each coachee's preference for the term/s to describe their ethnic heritage was an important act of respect. Harmonious interaction is a component of rapport (Tickle-Degmen & Rosenthal, 1990) and cannot be achieved without respect. Undesirable terms to label non-White ethnic groups have been imposed as a form of control and subjugation (Dabiri, 2021). The current study illustrates that the appropriateness of terms is a personal choice. A recent survey of POC in the UK (Katwala, 2021) illustrated the range of personal preference for ethnicity terms. They established participant preferences varied widely from POC to non-White, and ethnic-minority to 'Black Asian and Minority Ethnic' (BAME). Thus, illustrating the importance of determining preferable terms individually. Making assumptions regarding terminology, could be construed as playing into Erskine and Bilimoria's (2019) definition of White supremacy and its association with power and White ideologies, and could be interpreted as a microaggression. It is not the White coach's prerogative to determine the appropriate term for an individual coachee's heritage.

Allowing Space for Ethnicity Discussions

The final coaching model moved away from the initial theoretical model's emphasis on the list of broaching-behaviours (Carroll & Barnes, 2015; Day-Vines, et al., 2021) to allowing space for ethnicity discussions to occur naturally. This felt more empowering to the coachees than the use of predetermined topics. Broaching-behaviours are driven by the helping-professional and remove control of the discourse from coachees. This control of the discourse may explain why some studies found deliberate initiation of discussions on ethnicity issues had no effect on relationship dynamics (Thompson & Alexander, 2006) and others had mixed findings (Maxie et al., 2006). The preference for openness over structured discussion of ethnicity topics overcomes Day-Vine et al.'s (2021) confused suggestions to wait for rapport before discussing these issues, while advocating these discussions as a mechanism to develop rapport. It also by-passed any concern that ethnicity issues were not appropriate as suggested by Sue's (2015) politeness protocol.

However, discussion of ethnicity with a White coach is complex. These issues were central to the coachees' experience, yet an inherent mistrust of me as a White coach together with my lack of personal experience beyond my whiteness resulted in initial reluctance to engage in these discussions. Coachees emphasised the importance for White coaches not to assume a position of 'knowing' the experience of being a POC. This not 'knowing' aligns with the coaching concepts of curiosity and being non-judgemental (Cox, 2013) which stems from humanistic person-centred and existential approaches (Rogers, 1983; Spinelli, 1994) and are understood to improve bonding in helping-relationships. In addition, coachees found discussing ethnicity issues with a White person exhausting and occasionally resulted in filtering of their discourse. This hesitancy to discuss ethnicity issues with a White person mirrors previous findings (Chang & Yoon, 2011). While previous studies have emphasised the importance of discussing racial trauma in helping-relationships (Shoukry, 2016; Hart, 2019;). The avoidance of such discussions, as noted by these researchers, may be explained by participants' need to protect themselves and the arduousness of discussing ethnicity with a White helping-professional.

From the coach perspective, careful listening and openness to ethnicity discussions overcame the juxtaposition of saying the wrong thing, in the form of microaggressions (Owen et al., 2014), and the loss of trust associated with colour-blindness (Apfelbaum et al., 2008), had I circumvented these discussions. The adverse effect of microaggressions and colour-blindness on rapport has been acknowledged in the above literature. Creating a safe space for ethnicity discussions was aided by my openness about my own salient identities, including my gender and ethnicity. The

value of similarity of salient identity in rapport development has been noted previously (Fuentes et al., 2002; Chang & Berk, 2009; Chang & Yoon, 2011).

Cross-Ethnicity Skills

Together the experiential learning and critical self-reflection required in this AR study helped to develop my cross-ethnicity coaching skills. These included *cultural-humility*, *cultural-comfort*, and *cultural-immediacy* (Day-Vines, et al., 2021). As predicted by the literature *cultural-humility* (Davis et al., 2018; Bocala & Holman, 2021) helped enhance rapport development by facilitating my openness and sensitivity to discussions of ethnicity and appreciation of my limitations as a White coach. It improved my awareness of the adverse effect of the normalcy of White cultural norms on POC coachees. *Cultural-immediacy* (Day-Vines, et al., 2020) ensured ethnicity conversations were coachee led and that I embraced these. *Cultural-comfort* (Davis et al., 2018) meant I was unruffled by these discussions. Collectively these skills ensured I sought coachee feedback, determined coachees' preferred terms, and had an awareness of coaching as a White space. However, as evidenced by cross-ethnicity mentoring studies (Davis et al., 2021; Van Zyl, 2022) not all White coaches have the mindset and skills to coach cross-ethnically. This study has illustrated openness to learning, appropriate preparation and seeking coachee feedback can enhance these skills. However, a White coach's skills cannot replace the understanding associated with the lived experience of oppression of the POC coach. But where matched coaching is either unwanted or unavailable cross-ethnicity coaching skills can help build rapport.

Conclusion

The final model highlighted the importance to dyadic rapport of maintaining an equitable power balance. The White coach's behaviour should be driven by this awareness and attempt to rebalance the outside world's uneven distribution of power. This study proposes that openness to discussion of ethnicity might be preferable to a list of broaching-behaviours. In addition, the study highlights the importance of cross-ethnicity coaching skills which are novel to the coaching space. While there are commentary pieces on cross-cultural coaching (Roche & Passmore, 2021; Shah, 2022) to my knowledge there are no studies that have produced a coaching model to optimise rapport in this context. The study provides an evidence-based model that is experientially applied. However, the disempowering effect of Whiteness in this space is the product of socio-cultural factors beyond the remit of the dyad.

Affirmative action is needed by industry leaders to position coaching as a welcoming space for all ethnicities. This requires reconsideration of the structures and mechanisms limiting POC coach/coachee numbers and a review the Western approaches on which coaching is based. The lack of priority in supporting POC in the coaching space is evidenced by the failure of coaching accreditation bodies to collect ethnicity data on coaches and coachees (Roche & Passmore, 2021). For coaching to strive for social justice there must be better accountability and opportunities for POC individuals to train as coaches, thereby improving the availability of POC coaches. Thus, signalling POC are welcome in the coaching space.

To improve coach diversity, strategies are needed to attract more POC coach trainees. Training organisations need to review entry requirements, ensuring trainee potential is considered over qualifications which disadvantages POC trainees. The cost of training is substantial and privileges the well-off. Scholarships, flexible training, and coaching and/or mentoring of POC coach trainees could widen the participation of POC. In addition, training organisations need to provide training in cross-ethnicity skills and trainee exposure to cross-ethnicity coaching with an emphasis on the importance of the power dynamic to rapport.

Limitations

A study limitation was the *ethical issue* of a White person researching POC. The study premise meant this was unavoidable. I took steps to reassure participants my study would be carried out in a respectful manner. The study premise was made clear. I was open to questions and feedback and member-checking was used. Another limitation was that rapport was assessed *indirectly* by me. Rapport was assumed if coachees demonstrated trust by talking openly about personal concerns and were accepting of challenge. My assessment of rapport might have been affected by my conflict of interest to successfully complete this study. However, I did report participants' initial hesitations and difficulty with rapport. A further disadvantage was the conflict between the roles of *researcher and coach*. I had to maintain the integrity of the coaching-sessions and successfully complete the study. As a coach I wanted to suggest longer gaps between sessions and to offer more than two. Time constraints prevented this. Also, being studied impacted rapport in a way coaching alone might not have. I offered the coachees further coaching-sessions after the completion of the study. The dual role of participant and coachee may have led to *social desirability bias* (Bryman, 2016). After two coaching-sessions the establishment of rapport might have influenced the coachees to respond to the SSI questions in a way that pleased me. I attempted to negate this by making it clear I valued candid feedback.

Further Research

To overcome the impact of participation in research on the coaching process, and remove the dual role of coach-researcher, SSIs could be used to explore the experience of rapport in POC previously coached by White coaches. Further research is also needed to fully comprehend factors that dissuade POC coaches and coachees from engaging with the coaching industry.

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