

# **The Interdisciplinarity of Professional Coaching: A Whole Person Globalized Imperative**

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To say that something is both an art and a science credits both the creative and the procedural. When we say that, we mean that we can concretely define, describe, and know certain things—and that other things remain intuitive, ineffable, even mysterious. Cooking, for example, holds certainties--water boils at 212; gravy can be thickened with a ¼ cup of flour; the texture of scrambled eggs depends on heat and time. Cooking, too, encourages creation—what spices should flavor a sauce; how do you present a plate so that visual aesthetic enhances the food; what should you add to the eggs to make them marvelous?

Like cooking, coaching combines the concrete and the intuitive: from holding someone accountable for actions they've promised to take to creating an environment of trust, from detailed articulation of problems or opportunities to supporting a transformational change in career or character.

## **Professional Coaching and the Decline of Specialization**

We can take a first step toward framing an argument about the interdisciplinary nature of professional coaching – and the blended art and science of coaching—by noting something that is occurring in many domains of contemporary life. And not just the field of coaching. The world of specialization is leaving us, as we move away from the mechanistic notion of organizational functioning (the “assembly-line” mentality) to a postmodern notion of agility, broad-based knowledge and capacity to engage in many activities.

As noted in the sub-title of a recently published book, written by David Epstein (2019), there is substantial evidence that “generalists triumph in a specialized world.” An article (Useem, 2019) appearing in the July 2019 issue of the *Atlantic* is titled “The End of Expertise.” It features the work-restructuring of new high-tech Navy ships: every person on each ship is trained to perform a multitude of tasks—thereby reducing the number of crew members needed to staff these vessels.

We suggest that a professional coach is particularly in need of generalized skills and knowledge, for this person must address a wide variety of issues being raised by a diverse set of coaching clients. Even when working with one specific client, the coach must be positioned to appreciate the whole person – not just their role as manager, policy maker or technician. The Navy crew member will sometimes guide in a plane and at other times guide the production of an omelet, while professional coaches will host a variety of roles when working with their clients, including cheerleader, friendly critic, networker, problem-clarifier—the list goes on and on. Each of these roles requires a distinctive perspective and often command of (or at least access to) a specific discipline (be it psychology, finance, operations research, or cultural anthropology).

Coaching the whole person, in other words, require a “whole coach.” Interdisciplinarity is required—this is part of the job description for a professional coach. As coaches, we work with the science and the art of what it is to be human. In so doing, we bring the broadest variety of brushes and brushstrokes, pigments and passions, to our work. We variously engage in neuroscience and narrative; in business facts and life’s passions; in character and process.

### **Being WEIRD**

We suggest that the interdisciplinary challenge – and necessity—moves beyond just the multiple roles played by the professional coach. There is an attending challenge that comes with the global outreach of coaching and the clients being served by coaches. As Thomas Friedman (2007) has noted, the world has become quite flat for many of us as coaches. We must address coaching issues through many different cultural lenses. The so-called “grand narrative” of Western societies that have greatly influenced the field of professional coaching is not holding up as experienced and highly-successful practitioners from Asia, South America and Africa speak about the way in which they are working with coaching clients and the diverse nature of the issues being brought forth by their clients. A much more mixed and nuanced narrative is required.

In recent years, a specific phrase has been applied to the sources of a dominant grand narrative that has reigned supreme for many decades (even several centuries) in our world. This phrase concerns a perspective that is embraced by researchers, societal analysts, corporate leaders—and many professional coaches. These men and women live in western

(W) countries and are well-educated (E). As such, they live and work in an industrialized (I) society that is rich (R) and developed (D)—in other words, WEIRD.

Many of us as professional coaches could be classified as WEIRD – even if we come from the so-called second or third world: WEIRD can easily creep into our consciousness, regardless of the society in which we grew up or now live. A WEIRD perspective can be quite compelling. However, WEIRD is not very helpful when we are addressing the issues posed by clients from outside North America or Europe – or when we are assisting a coaching client from the “Western World” who is facing global challenges and needs to become less WEIRD. Professional coaching must truly be interdisciplinary in its incorporation of diverse perspectives that are aligned with widely divergent social structures and cultures. The global coach must be culturally astute and conversant--as Phillippe Rosinski (2010) amply demonstrated, in prescient manner, when writing books about coaching and culture a decade ago.

### **Professional Coaching as an Epistemological and Ethical Pursuit**

We suggest that an interdisciplinary and global perspective is still not enough for a professional coach to embrace. The art and science of coaching requires that we successfully address an even more profound challenge: in what way do we address multiple versions of the truth and knowledge (what are often framed as epistemological challenges)? In what ways do we address and work with multiple versions of societal values and practices (what are often framed as ethical challenges)? As interdisciplinary and globalized coaches, can we live with a cultural relativism that accepts all versions of the truth and acceptable human conduct?

William Perry (1970) is one of the people who has done the best job of framing (and perhaps answering) these questions. His work can readily be dismissed, for it is now almost 50 years old and Perry was very limited in studying the epistemological and ethical processes in which college students from Harvard University engage. Of what relevance is a study that was conducted many years ago with a very distinctive population? Yet, Perry’s work still seems relevant. His perspectives apply to learners of all ages and all socio-economic and educational groups. Specifically, Perry’s analysis of epistemology and ethics is

of great value in better understanding the interdisciplinary and global perspectives required of any effective professional coach.

### **Dualistic Perspective**

Perry suggested that most of us move through several stages of cognitive development and epistemological sophistication as we mature. As young men and women (and sometimes even as mature adults) we tend to view our world in a *dualistic* fashion: there is a reality that can be discerned and there is one right answer to the complex questions we are asked. Those in authority can be trusted to reveal the truth. There are also those people who are inherently evil or stupid, and they are not to be trusted. There are indeed people with white hats and black hats. Our job is to determine which color hat they are wearing.

### **Multiplistic Perspective**

While many people spend most, if not all, their life viewing the world from this dualistic perspective, there are often events or people who disrupt this simplistic frame. We discover that there are multiple sources of credible information and multiple sources of potentially valid interpretation of this information. It is not clear what is true or what is real. According to Perry, the initial response to this disconfirmation is often a sense of betrayal. We were told by people we trust and respect that the world is to be seen in one way. Suddenly we see that this might not be the case.

Given that there is no one right answer, then any answer will do. This is what Perry identified as the *multiplistic* perspective. In many ways, it is simply another form of dualism: if there is no one truth or reality than there must be no truths and no realities! Certainly, the challenge of living in a global, 21s Century world suggests that the multiplistic perspective is justifiable. If there are multiple perspectives that are always shifting, if we can't rely on interpretations and replays offered by the media, and if these interpretations often contradict one another, then why should we ever trust anything that we read or hear. The world is composed of nothing but expedient story-telling and

fake versions of the real world: those with the power are allowed to define what is real and important.

Perry proposed that this multiplistic stage is common among young adults who are first exposed to a world that is expanding in size and complexity. We would suggest that this same dynamic is occurring when a WEIRD leader is first having to address the challenge of working in a rapidly expanding global environment. This sense of betrayal is likely to remain if the young adult or WEIRD leader is provided with minimal support and finds very little that is to be trusted in the world.

We certainly see an abundance of multiplicity in our current world – along with the dualistic perspective. Perry was optimistic, however, regarding the capacity and willingness of many adults to move beyond multiplicity, especially if they are fortunate enough to live in a supportive and trusting environment – or have a skilled professional coach to provide both thoughtful support and interdisciplinary guidance.

### **Relativistic Perspective**

Perry suggested that adults often transit to a *relativistic* perspective. We now see that within a specific community there are certain accepted standards regarding truth, reality and appropriate human conduct. We can appreciate the fact that other communities adhere to different standards than our own. While adhering to a relativistic perspective, we are likely to avoid making any value judgments regarding competing versions of the truth or alternative norms regarding appropriate human behavior. As interdisciplinary and globalist coaches, we can offer diverse perspectives that assist our clients in recognizing the values and insights inherent in these other communities (whether these communities are located in other countries or in disciplines other than that in which our client typically operates).

### **Commitment-In-Relativism**

Unfortunately, we can't live forever in this suspended state of relativism. We must somehow engage – and even provide leadership – in this world of multiple and often

contradictory perspectives. As mature and responsible adults we must make decisions and take actions. Perry identified this fourth perspective as *commitment-in-relativism*. We recognize that there are alternative standards operating in various communities, but also recognize the need to pick a specific standard and base our actions around this standard. We might change our standard over time and might be able to live in a different community and embrace their standard while living there--but we come back to our base of commitment.

Perry noted that this fourth perspective will look very much like dualism to other people (who are themselves dualists or multiplists). After all, if one is making commitments, then isn't this deciding that there is a right and wrong answer and a truth that is stable and confirmable? The ongoing challenge of those with a commitment-in-relativism perspective is to recognize that this misunderstanding will often occur and that a clearly articulated rationale must be offered to other people for the decisions being made and actions taken. One of the many functions to be served by a professional coach concerns helping a client achieve this clarity. This clarity, in turn, often requires that we, as coaches, engage the wisdom to be found in many different disciplines.

### **Grieving the Loss of Innocence and Freedom**

William Perry offered yet another insight that is particularly poignant for those who are coaching clients moving from one of these perspectives to another perspective. Perry suggests that this movement inevitably involves a grieving process. In essence, one is moving from one sense of self and one sense of the world in which we live, to another self and another sense of the world. In moving from dualism to multiplicity we are losing some of our innocence, while the movement from multiplicity to relativism requires the abandonment of irresponsibility. We must "grow up" - which is rarely enjoyable. The art of coaching is often engaged when we assist our client in navigating this difficult transition.

We must now seek to understand and appreciate other communities and recognize that there are standards regarding truth, reality and ethical conduct – even if there is not one

absolute standard. Thus, in the movement from relativism to commitment in relativism we are grieving the loss of freedom. We must assume responsibility and now make hard decisions, knowing that there are several (perhaps many) good choices that could be made. We must take action in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world that does not yield easy answers or offer us assurance that we are doing the right thing for the right reason.

If we were able to access his wisdom today, William Perry would probably propose that professional coaches are in the business, at least partially, of assisting their clients through this grieving process and helping their clients recognize the value inherent in one of the more mature perspectives. This is what it means to coach the whole person. We would suggest that valuing of relativism and particularly commitment-in-relativism may be particularly important for those WEIRD clients who are operating in a leadership position. They must make particularly difficult decisions and take particularly challenging actions in a world that looks increasingly globalized. They are living and leading in Friedman's "flat world" (2007) that requires an interdisciplinary appreciation of tightly interdependent sectors (economic, political, cultural, etc.)

## **Conclusions**

That our human conditions are so varied and variable means that our clients might value a philosophical perspective, an insight from neuroscience, a tip on productivity, or an Excel sheet-based financial projection. We equip ourselves with the diverse experiences of our life, as well as our acquired expertise, and all the learning inherent in our life, in order to assist and help shape the lives of others. Whether you as a professional coach support your clients with the learnings of a 20 year career in the Army, or a tour of duty in the Peace Corps, or both; whether your approach emphasizes neuroscience, corporate experience, or positive psychology, you bring your experience, learning, and life to the conversations of coaching.

As a "scientific" coach with an interdisciplinary and global perspective, you fully appreciate the many realities to be found in a relativistic perspective, having encountered many of these realities in your own diverse life experience. You can also appreciate the need to make commitments in the midst of this relativism and can artfully assist your coaching clients in making their own thoughtful and often very difficult decisions and commitments in a

relativistic context. You are a generalist and a provider of both art and science as engaged through an interdisciplinary and global lens. A very challenging skill set!

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## References

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