Assessing cross-cultural coaching efficacy,
Jo Stansfield, 16/1/19

Executive coaching has grown to a multi-billion global market, moving away from its origins of addressing toxic leadership towards development of high-potential performers (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018), becoming a leadership development best-practice (Malbia, Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014). Yet the coaching industry is fragmented and unregulated with supporting evidence-base still growing. (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Maltbia et al., 2014).   Studies shows coaching to be effective, yet practice outpaces research (Theeboom, Beersma & Van Vianen, 2013). A strong theoretical foundation is required for deeper insight into the processes, outcomes, and underlying causal reasons for its efficacy (*ibid.*).

One such framework is proposed by Law (2013), known as the Universal Integrative Framework (UIF), and positions the self within the social, cultural and professional context. Increasingly, globalized industry necessitates cultural competency as a key skill for managers, and therefore also coaches (Law & Passmore, 2009). Culture, be it at the micro- or macro-level, provides important context for leadership as a process of social influence (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Law, 2010). Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) define six dimensions of culture, describing an onion-like model where cultural influence peels back to expose individual differences, and lastly human nature. Coaches under the UIF work at each level, taking a holistic approach and building upon the psychology of learning (Law, 2010). No single solution fits all, so coaching must engender reflexivity based in values and meanings of the coachee (Stelter & Law, 2010).

Positive psychology coaching (PPC) is an approach increasing in popularity (Mills, Fleck & Kozikowski, 2013) that can be evaluated under this theoretical framework. Resilience, appreciative enquiry, engagement, empowerment and positive leadership are a

few of its constructs (*ibid.*). Drawing on a scientific basis, positive psychology aims to increase well-being and improve performance for individuals, groups and institutions (Boniwell, Kauffman & Silberman, 2014; Linley, Joseph, Harrington & Wood, 2006). Like the UIF, a holistic approach is taken with value in subjective experiences (Linley et al., 2006.). Recognition that people's lives are embedded within a social, cultural and organizational context is in further congruence with the UIF (*ibid.*). Taking resilience as an exemplar, research links this to organisational success through developmental interventions at individual, social and organization levels (Mills et al., 2013). Secondly, positive leadership styles, including transformational and authentic leadership, have been shown to yield improvements to team productivity and engagement, which Mills et al. (2010) attribute to leaders helping employees to find meaning in their work. This resonates with the UIF approach to elicit and build upon values and meaning (Law, 2010). Only lacking in PPC is the UIF concept of "fluidity", which promotes training coachees as coaches to enable them to best drive the coaching process (Law, 2010).

Despite empirical evidence for coaching efficacy (Theeboom et al., 2014), few studies have examined social context, organizational-level outcomes (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018), or taken place outside of Western cultures (Abbott, 2014). Yet to rigorously assess an approach such as PPC under the UIF, validity of both this cross-cultural conceptualisation and its application must be established. While the UIF has apparent face validity, Western thinking dominates the coaching field (Abbott, 2014), exemplified by meta-analyses such as Theebom et al. (2014) which draw only upon Western research. While theoretically the PPC fits well under the UIF, there remains insufficient evidence for empirically-based assessment or conclusion.

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