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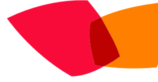

مجلة الشرق الأوسط
لعلم النفس الإيجابي

How Emirati Muslims Experience Coaching: An IPA Study

King, S., & van Nieuwerburgh, C.

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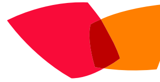
Abstract: Coaching, with positive psychology at its heart, has the potential to support Emiratis in a national economic transition away from public sector employment. Yet, current literature on coaching in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is fragmented and dominated by coaches' views. This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring how four Emirati Muslim coachees experienced coaching through an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study. Through perspectives gathered in semi-structured interviews, this study identified aspects only partially covered in the literature. Participants valued opportunities provided by coaching for learning and self-understanding to move forward and grow, personally and professionally, through clarity gained in coaching relationships built on mutual trust, respect and sharing. Their perspective of coaching encompassed a wider spectrum of one-to-one learning than coaching literature and competence frameworks would suggest. They welcomed opportunities for self-directed reflection that contributed to deeper forms of understanding, potentially linked to wellbeing. Where participants felt coaches were familiar with aspects of Emirati culture, it added to feeling understood, to building trust and respect, and to conversations taking directions that were felt to be more culturally aligned. Our findings raise the possibility that coaching could support an Emirati Muslim workforce through economic transition and improve wellbeing, with some cultural adaptation.

ملخص: التدريب ، مع علم النفس الإيجابي في صميمه ، لديه القدرة على دعم الإماراتيين في الانتقال الاقتصادي الوطني بعيدًا عن التوظيف في القطاع العام. ومع ذلك ، فإن الأدبيات الحالية حول التدريب في الإمارات العربية المتحدة مجزأة وتهيمن عليها آراء المدربين. هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى سد هذه الفجوة من خلال استكشاف كيفية تجربة أربعة متدربين إماراتيين مسلمين للتدريب من خلال دراسة تحليل الظواهر التفسيرية **(IPA).** من خلال وجهات النظر التي تم جمعها في المقابلات شبه المنظمة ، حددت هذه الدراسة الجوانب التي تمت تغطيتها جزئيًا فقط في الأدبيات. قدر المشاركون الفرص التي يوفرها التدريب للتعلم وفهم الذات للمضي قدمًا والنمو ، على المستوى الشخصي والمهني ، من خلال الوضوح المكتسب في علاقات التدريب المبنية على الثقة المتبادلة والاحترام والمشاركة. شمل منظورهم في التدريب نطاقاً أوسع من التعلم الفردي أكثر مما توحي به أطر التدريب والكفاءات. ورحبوا بفرص التفكير الموجه ذاتيًا التي ساهمت في أشكال أعمق من الفهم ، والتي يحتمل أن تكون مرتبطة بالرفاهية. وحيث شعر المشاركون أن المدربين كانوا على دراية بجوانب الثقافة الإماراتية ، فقد أضاف ذلك الشعور بالفهم وبناء الثقة والاحترام والمحادثات التي اتخذت اتجاهات شعرت بأنها أكثر انسجامًا مع الثقافة. تثير النتائج التي توصلنا إليها احتمال أن التدريب يمكن أن يدعم القوى العاملة الإماراتية المسلمة من خلال التحول الاقتصادي وتحسين الرفاهية ، مع بعض التكيف الثقافي.

Keywords: coaching; United Arab Emirates; culture; wellbeing; positive psychology

About the Authors: Silvia King is an intercultural positive psychology coach and enthusiastic empowerer of people. She holds an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology



(MAPPCP), an MA in business management and complementary qualifications. Silvia delivers workshops and trainings, is a conference speaker and "puts the P into PERMA", e.g. as the founder of the Dubai Pop-up Laughter Club. Email: silvia@positivity-international.com. Prof. Christian van Nieuwerburgh is Professor of Coaching and Positive Psychology at the University of East London and Executive Director of Growth Coaching International. He is Honorary Fellow at the Centre of Positive Psychology of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne (Australia) and Visiting Professor at the University of Bergamo (Italy). He undertakes research into the integration and application of coaching and positive psychology in professional contexts. Email: c.j.vannieuwerburgh@uel.ac.uk

The UAE, like many countries in the Gulf region, is increasingly looking to diversify its economy away from declining oil revenues and public sector employment (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2010). The UAE has made such diversification part of its Vision 2021 (UAE Government, 2014). Implementation strategies include skills development, increased entrepreneurship and "Emiratisation" (i.e. the increase of the proportion of Emiratis in the local workforce, especially women) in value-added sectors (mainly private sector services). The characteristics of the UAE workforce create implementation challenges for private sector organisations due to demographic, cultural, educational, economic and regulatory factors (e.g. Budhwar et al., 2019; Forstenlechner, 2010; Goby et al., 2017; Grey & Thomas, 2019; Whiteoak et al., 2006); challenges also differ by gender (Itani et al., 2011; Omair, 2010).

Coaching, a form of self-directed learning, is a cross-disciplinary methodology (Grant, 2008) with a conversational process (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) and positive psychology (PP; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) at its heart (Kauffman, 2006), and could be a way to support economically active Emiratis in this economic transition. Through its link with PP, coaching may simultaneously enhance wellbeing and support the UAE government's ambitious wellbeing programme for UAE communities, schools and work environments (Lambert & Hussain, 2016), even though PP and wellbeing are not the explicit focus or aim of coaching.

Several UAE companies already use coaching as a long-term strategy for employee development and retention (Singh & Sharma, 2015). Yet, culture may affect coaching effectiveness (e.g. Rosinski, 2003). Thus, coaching may need culturally-sensitive adaptations as other fields of psychology have proposed, for example cross-cultural psychology (e.g. Berry et al., 2011), positive cross-cultural psychology (Lomas, 2015), indigenous PP (Lambert et al., 2015), psychotherapy (Sue, 2001) and counselling (Carney & Kahn, 1984; Pedersen, 2001) as well as professional competence frameworks (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2017).

Current research on coaching in the UAE, and the Middle East region, is fragmented (Al-Nasser & Behery, 2015) with a focus on improving performance rather than wellbeing. Extant literature mostly describes how individual (Western) coaches in the region have adapted to the coachee culture, providing insight into the interpretative realm of coaches' experiences. Yet, there seems to be little or no indication as to how Middle Eastern and specifically Emirati coachees experience coaching. The lack of perspective is relevant given coaching's emphasis on the centrality of the coachee experience (De Haan, 2008). This study sought to fill this gap and create

the basis for further research to explore how coaching may need to be adapted, if at all, for the UAE and what, if any, wellbeing benefits Emirati Muslims may gain from it.

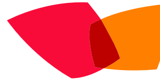
Coaching and Culture

Coaching Spectrum

Many definitions aim to capture the richness of coaching (Passmore et al., 2013). Here, we define coaching "as a collaborative solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, nonclinical clients" (Grant, 2003, p. 254). PP has been described as the science at the heart of coaching (Kauffman, 2006) and a natural partner to coaching psychology (CP; Linley & Harrington, 2005). It increasingly underpins coaching practice in general and amplifies positive psychology interventions (PPIs) within coaching specifically (Green & Palmer, 2019). Despite the clear connection between coaching and PP, a distinction needs to be made with positive psychology coaching (PPC; Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burke, 2017; Lomas, 2019; Passmore & Oades, 2014; van Zyl et al., 2020). PPC is a relatively new and separate discipline within coaching that tends to have an explicit wellbeing focus and can be considered a PPI in itself (Lomas, 2019). Put simply, all coaching has links with PP, but not all coaching is PPC.

A coach may display a variety of coaching behaviours, captured in a circumplex model (De Haan & Nilsson, 2017; Heron, 1975) along a vertical axis of push-pull and a horizontal axis of challenge-support. Push behaviours (i.e., confronting, prescribing, informing) intervene closer to the surface while pull behaviours (i.e., releasing, exploring, supporting) go deeper and are more insight- and person-focused. De Haan and Nilsson (2017) posit that the best coaches are those able to flex and adapt across all six behaviours. However, informing and prescribing (De Haan & Nilsson, 2017) and the contribution of expert knowledge (Grant, 2008) could arguably be inconsistent with coaching frameworks (e.g. European Mentoring and Coaching Council, 2015; International Coach Federation, 2019) and may cross into other practices (Bachkirova & Cox, 2004; Passmore, 2007). Thus, coaches may instead work on a continuous spectrum of one-to-one learning (De Haan, 2008). An example of such a learning continuum has been observed in medical education, involving role modelling, teaching/tutoring, coaching, mentoring and supervision (Radha Krishna et al., 2019).

Coaching has its historical roots in Ancient Greece and is in its current form largely a Western practice (Abbott & Salomaa, 2016; Plaister-Ten, 2013; Rosinski, 2010); in Asian coaching contexts, the question has been raised whether mentoring – where a more experienced person shares expert knowledge with a less experienced person, often informally (Garvey, 2014) – might be more culturally appropriate (e.g. Anagnos, 2013). Forms of mentoring-like guidance have also been described in Arab/Muslim culture (Dwairy, 2006). Specifically wasta, a system historically designed to maintain (wider) family relationships, contains aspects of mentoring and is used today in professional contexts (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Whiteoak et al., 2006) and organisations (Noer et al., 2007). Role-modelling has shown significant impact with Emirati female business graduates (James & McManus, 2011) and in Muslim/Arab therapy settings (Dwairy, 2006). Overall, coaches'



roles might then resemble that of mentor and guide (van Nieuwerburgh & Allaho, 2017), respected elder and mentor (Gan & Chong, 2015; Nangalia & Nangalia, 2010; Pio, 2005; Raina, 2002), or authentic leader leading by example (Gardner et al., 2005).

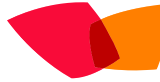
Culture

Culture influences the coaching relationship (Rosinski, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh, 2016) on the personal levels of coach, coachee and in their interaction (De Haan & Gannon, 2016). Culture has been defined and categorised in a variety of ways, for example by Hofstede (1991), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1993) or Triandis (1972, 2002). Constructs like Cultural Intelligence (CQ; Ang et al., 2015; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Thomas, 2006) and Global Mindset (Javidan & Bowen, 2013) aim to help navigate cross-cultural encounters. As an overarching definition, this study defines culture as the "accepted beliefs, conventions, customs, social norms and behaviours associated with people who self-identify as members of a particular group" (van Nieuwerburgh, 2016, p. 450). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) consider culture in three layers. The outer layer is observable and explicit (e.g. language). The middle (i.e. norms and values) and core layers (i.e. basic assumptions) are implicit in the outer layer's observable components. Combined, "culture is beneath awareness in the sense that no one bothers to verbalize it, yet it forms the roots of action" (2012, p. 32). Cultural group dimensions describe general tendencies of one group relative to others, yet they may vary considerably with time, individual and context (Hofstede, 2011; Rosinski, 2003). Thus, applying generic cultural characteristics in a one-to-one relationship like coaching risks stereotyping the coachee (Hofstede et al., 2010; Rosinski, 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012).

Cross-Cultural Coaching

The applicability of Western-rooted psychology across cultures has been questioned (e.g. Berry et al., 2011; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Sue & Sue, 1977) and has led, for example, to the introduction of culturally-sensitive frameworks for psychologists (American Psychological Association, 2017) and a Global Code of Ethics for coaches, mentors and supervisors (European Mentoring and Coaching Council, 2018). Cross-cultural sensitivity became a focus of coaching practice with the introduction of the term cross-cultural coaching (CCC) by Rosinski (2003) and the Coaching Across Cultures model. The model integrates culture into the coaching process and includes a Cultural Orientations Framework assessment with 17 cultural dimensions. Other cross-cultural approaches include Plaister-Ten's (2013, 2016) Cross-cultural Coaching Kaleidoscope, a three-stage model that views the coaching relationship as a complex adaptive system of factors that together form culture. Passmore and Law (2009) describe the Universal Integrated Framework (UIF), a five-dimensions model which includes, as one dimension, cross-cultural emotional intelligence, consisting of emotional intelligence's four competencies (Goleman, 1995), cultural competence and coaching professional competence.

The use of the term cross-cultural hints at the origin of these models and implies that coach and coachee hail from different cultures with the need to bridge a cultural divide. It is less clear whether such approaches were implicitly intended to bridge a Western-rooted coaching approach



that is applied in a coach-coachee dyad where both hail from the same, but non-Western culture. For the purpose of this study, we consider *cross-cultural* to apply to both scenarios since in both cases, a cultural divide needs to be bridged, whether it stems from the coaching model or the coach/coachee culture.

While CCC models appear to aim for universal application in any cultural setting, the bases of these may still be influenced by, and biased towards, Western culture (Berry et al., 2011). Instead of universal concepts, indigenous "CPs" (Misra & Gergen, 1993; Pickren, 2009) with culture-specific coaching frameworks and tools could be considered, as for example postulated for PP (Lambert et al., 2015) or counselling (Dwairy, 2006) in the Middle East or Muslim PP contexts (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2019). A review of cross-cultural approaches and empirical studies by Abbott and Salomaa (2016) supports the need for culture-specific adjustments to allow for coachees' contexts. However, while there appears to be an argument in favour of cultural adaptation, for the relatively new field of coaching that aims for universal professional standards (Passmore et al., 2010), indigenous CPs and adapted frameworks could create challenges.

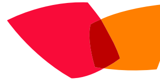
Although definitions of CCC share certain premises, no single definition has emerged (Abbott & Salomaa, 2016). Hence, the following working definition is proposed for coaching:

> *Cross-cultural coaching is a multifaceted approach – mindfully open to the coachee's cultural beliefs, values, norms and practices – that appropriately integrates cultural knowledge and behaviour to facilitate improvement of wellbeing and achievement of personal and professional goals within a co-created coaching relationship guided by the coachee culture.*

Coaching in the Middle East

A search on ProQuest, Ebscohost, Google Scholar and Researchgate found scant English language literature on coaching and specific adaptations for the Middle East, in line with prior suggestions that no consistent English language body of regional coaching literature appears to exist (Al-Nasser & Behery, 2015). This corresponds with findings in leadership and management (Hammad & Hallinger, 2017), PP (Lambert & Pasha-Zaidi, 2019) and counselling (Dwairy, 2006).

An empirical account of coaching in the Middle East is offered by Palmer and Arnold (2009), based on their work with predominantly male Arab Muslims. They identify common cultural obstacles a Western coach may encounter (e.g. wasta, communication styles) and offer pragmatic ways to coach with the help of the five-step Development Pipeline. The approach proposes a more directive style. For example, they found "more of a need to teach/cultivate a different kind of self-awareness or mindfulness than is typical within Arab culture" (2009, p. 116) and recommend that coaches frame "suggestions within Islamic tradition and/or with quotes from the Quran" (2009, p. 117). However, reflection and reasoning are highly valued in Islamic tradition (Hasan, 1976) and already 11th century Muslim theologian Al-Ghazzali (1910/2016) described self-knowledge as a constituent to happiness. This suggests that such skills may already exist within regional culture. An example for integration of such traditions is the use of qiyas or analogies (Hasan, 1976) in counselling (Dwairy, 2006).



Other literature includes a case study by Noer (2005) on the development of a coaching culture within a Saudi organisation. During a six-year project, the Triangle Coaching Model was developed and suitable cross-cultural coaching behaviours were defined (Noer et al., 2007). A regionally non-specific, religion-based coaching model is proposed by van Nieuwerburgh and Allaho (2017) with the Ershad framework. It links Western-based coaching practice with Islamic teaching and proposes a terminology familiar to Muslim coachees around the Alignment Wheel. However, the framework has not yet been tested. Dodds and Grajfoner (2018) investigated how UAE-based executive coaches adapted their approach when working with Emiratis. They found that coaches did not change their methods, but became more directive as they felt that coachees wanted them to adopt a position of power and guide them.

Summary

Extant English language literature, while fragmented and dominated by Western CP and coaches' perspectives, suggests that coaching may be a viable tool to support economically active Emiratis during the UAE's economic transition and simultaneously improve wellbeing, albeit with potential cultural adaptations. Adding the perspective of the Emirati Muslim coachee would fill a gap in research.

The Present Study

Method

This study asked how Emirati Muslims wanted to experience coaching. A quantitative methodology is not possible when central variables like culture may not be explicit and measurable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). IPA is a qualitative research methodology rooted in phenomenology (i.e., the study of experience), hermeneutics (i.e., the theory of interpretation) and idiography (i.e., a particular person in a particular context) (Smith et al., 2012). IPA's integral processes of epoché and reduction (Zahavi, 2018) allow active reflection by the researcher to create awareness for their influence on the research (Eatough, 2012). Critically, researchers aim to set aside their own (cultural) assumptions (epoché) and describe the phenomenon for what it is excluding assumptions (Langdridge, 2007). As language shapes the experience (Lomas, 2018) through its culturally implicit assumptions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012) and can influence outcomes in cross-cultural research (Aneas & Sandín, 2009; Ji et al., 2004), awareness of the language used by participants and its interpretation by the researcher are crucial (Langdridge, 2007).

Considered the most widely used form in phenomenological psychology research (Langdridge, 2007; Willig, 2013), "there is no single, definitive way to do IPA" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 54). This research followed the IPA methodological steps (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2007) with reflective journaling (Vicary et al., 2017), clarifications during interviews and transparency in consideration of methodological critique.

Participants

Recommended sample sizes in IPA tend to be between three and six participants (Smith et al., 2012) due to its idiographic focus and the importance of data quality rather than quantity. Study

participants were four Muslim Emirati nationals (see Table 1) who had been coached by more than one third-party coach unknown to the researcher. Coaching was self-funded or funded by employers. During interviews, it emerged that all four had later trained in coaching.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Study Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest level of education and language	Hours of coaching received
A	41	Female	Masters, English	>12
B	35	Female	Masters, English	30
C	30	Male	Bachelor, English	15
D	54	Male	Masters, English	25

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of East London (UK) before recruitment. Participants were unknown to the researcher, recruited via the researcher's social network and sent an invitation letter, consent form and intake questionnaire. A pre-interview call allowed participants to clarify questions about the study prior to signing the consent form. Interviews were held in public spaces in Dubai (UAE) and recorded. The 30-60-minute interviews were semi-structured; new topics were pursued in an unstructured fashion (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Questions were empathic and open in the first instance (Langdridge, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2007), complemented by a questioning stance and closed questions to clarify the researcher's understanding and reduce the influence of the researcher's implicit cultural assumptions.

Analysis

The data analysis explored different layers of meaning (Smith, 2018) in multiple steps (Charlick et al., 2016). First, initial automatic transcripts were repeatedly re-read and recordings re-listened to correct mistakes. Reflections were noted in a journal throughout. In step 2, transcripts were annotated with detailed comments. Tentative first-round themes were kept close to participants' wordings to reduce potential influence from the researcher's interpretations. In steps 3, 4 and 5, analysis moved away from participants' language. Themes were developed, analysed and consolidated in an iterative process, using text and visual formats. Moving back to the transcript, superordinate and sub-themes were checked for consistency with participant language before moving to the next participant. In step 6, themes and patterns were investigated across all participants, again in visual and text formats.

Results

This study identified three superordinate themes and constituent sub-themes in participant experiences (see Table 2). To reflect IPA methodology, this section gives voice to participants and

portrays their experience in their own words to the extent possible. The discussion then aims to interpret the observed phenomenon from the researcher's perspective.

Table 2

Overview of Superordinate and Sub-themes

Superordinate Theme	Sub-theme	Prevalence
1) Learning and moving forward	a. Moving forward – personally, professionally and in life	A, B, C, D
	b. Learning from the coach as a person and role model	A, B, D
	c. Learning new tools, techniques and skills	A, B, C, D
2) Self-understanding	a. Gaining clarity and self-understanding	A, C, D
	b. Coach listens and challenges	A, B, C, D
	c. Reflection for self-directed learning and understanding	A, C, D
3) Mutual sharing, respect and trust	a. Relating – coach *and* coachee share their stories	B, C, D
	b. Feeling understood – no need to explain	B, C, D
	c. Building mutual trust and respect	A, B, C, D

1. Learning and moving forward

The Emirati Muslim participants of this study used "moving forward" frequently to describe forms of growth, learning and development, be it in a professional or personal context. Sometimes it simply described progress in a coaching session:

> *C – I mentioned something, she grabs it and then it's something that moves the conversation forward.*

It was an aspect that participants described as enjoyable, for example:

> *A – He always helped me move forward, that's what I liked about coaching. – I love the momentum of moving forward.*

Participants wanted to learn from the coach as a person and as a role model/mentor:

> *B – I saw him speak. He was very impressive. Um, and that's kind of what I wanted to do and what I wanted to be.*

B and her coach did roleplays to explore different career scenarios while other participants learned new tools and techniques through skills training or specific guidance from their coaches, for example:

> *A – So he gave me some technique, power pose and how to de-stress before the session. And it really helped me like, uh, moving forward.*

Sometimes participants learned new techniques and skills through observing the coach, for example by picking up on ways to structure thoughts:

> *C – When I got introduced to coaching, I noticed that: "Oh, it can get better than just doing that." Maybe someone can kind of direct your thoughts, I do as well.*

Participants' coaching experiences often blended observational learning, coaching, mentoring and role-modelling, for example when a boss acted as coach:

> *D – So they walked me through the process rather than saying, "This is what you need to do!", which [boss' role] usually do.*

2. (Self) Understanding

Participants considered (self) understanding and clarity as some of the main benefits from their coaching sessions, for example:

> *A – The more I became aware of myself, the more I was able to understand things around me and move forward.*

> *C – When the person is listening to you, they see a different angle and that already opens a lot of doors for clarification. – For me, coaching is getting more clarity and awareness about life.*

Careful listening and paraphrasing by the coach were mentioned as important factors for coaching outcomes because of the sense of understanding they fostered in participants:

> *C – You feel the person understands you from a few words. They explain what they understand, and it is exactly what you say, maybe in a better way. Yes, it affected a lot.*

> *D – It's the ability to sense what's going on in the back of your mind rather than the things that that are being said... I think that makes the difference between a successful coach and not.*

When challenging the participants, tone and manner of the challenge seemed to matter. For example, C wanted to be challenged because:

> *C – Sometimes you need someone to be a little harsh.*

But even "harsh" challenges needed to be delivered appropriately:

> *C – I want someone who speaks very nicely. And so, when we're having conversations, it's more acceptable for me.*

Opportunities for exploring, thinking and reflecting, both during or between coaching sessions, were valued and noted in their absence:

> *D – It didn't work. There was no thinking process or interpreting of how the conversation would go.*

Participants engaged in unprompted reflection, which created learning that had not been explicit during the session, especially where coaching was informal or encompassed a wider spectrum of one-to-one learning and coaching behaviours:

> *D – But then in other cases you don't know that you are being coached until you reflect on what lessons you have learned and how you have learned from these.*

Gaining (self) understanding as a result of the collaborative coaching process and reflection could become the key outcome for participants, for example:

> *C – It made me understand why I do things that I didn't know why I'm doing them. – That [higher self-awareness] was the really, really, I would say main accomplishments through the coaching sessions.*

3. Mutual sharing, respect and trust

Being comfortable with the coach as a person and being able to relate was one of the main reasons for participants to choose a coach and then continue the sessions:

> *D – Maybe relating, to their more similar thought process. Uh, it's just being comfortable with the person. – Your gut feeling says this is not the skills I was looking for or not the person who I could relate to or they could not relate to me. Then it's... useless.*

> *C – I needed someone who would understand the way I think.*

Participants in this study wanted to get a feel for the coach, and stories told by the coach seemed to play an important role. These stories could also take the place of "powerful questions", help explore values and support decision-making. D made sense of sharing stories thus:

> *D – Because when you relate your experience, it makes a big difference for becoming closer to the coachee, and it makes a big difference in understanding that it's fluid, it's not only questions and getting them to get to their own perspective and [inaudible] and so on. –*

I think storytelling is one of the most effective ways to let people become aware of certain values, certain decisions they need to take and so on.

Participants described experiences of feeling understood implicitly by the coach at a fundamental level:

D – A good coach would be someone… who will be able to relate to what feelings you are having.

C – When you say what you have, the person in front of you would understand you even better than what you know, because you're sharing. – I was shocked that, how would she know something about me that I don't know.

An implicit understanding of Emirati and Muslim culture by the coach was highlighted as crucial to feeling understood as a person, also because this would impact how the sessions unfolded:

C – [Understanding the culture] made a lot of difference, for me at least. – But if the coach understands the culture, they would know that yes, it is a big issue. – If the coach understands the background you're coming from, the life you're living and all of the important people in your life, the way they direct the conversation would be different.

D – They need to understand, you know, Islamic culture. If a prayer time is in the middle of the coaching session, they are not aware of it, but they know that we need to finish this coaching session regardless of what … that, that's a total No-No.

Where such profound understanding developed, participants no longer felt the need to explain and showed deep trust, for example:

C – Oh, she will get this one, let me say whatever I have. – I was not trying to explain myself. Unless she asked for more explanation.

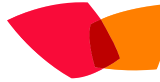
In their interactions with the coach, participants valued mutual respect, for example:

A – If people are being respectful and they respect the boundaries, I don't mind if it's a guy or lady who I'm dealing with as long as there is mutual respect.

For participants, such respect appeared to find its expression in respecting boundaries, for example in interactions between genders or topics that were deemed off-limits or too personal:

A – The grief is something, as a Muslim something life and death, it's coming from God. I don't want to go into details. – I replied to him very politely, but I don't want to go there.

C – Um, there was one I would, one moment I remember, when like I was going through something, uh, personal, I said: "No, I don't want to talk about it, leave it for another day."



Discussion

The study found that coaching created two different but not mutually exclusive participant experiences, reflected in two superordinate themes. Some participants thrived on learning new tools and skills resulting in behavioural change and improved performance or career development to move forward. Others focused more on growing professionally and personally through self-understanding. Participants' experiences of their coaches varied as coaches seemed to adapt coaching behaviours accordingly. For learning, participants described a more authoritative push behaviour by their coaches and a more facilitative pull behaviour where coaches facilitated reflection and understanding. This affected what happened during sessions and the characteristics of the relationship with their coaches, reflected in the third key theme of mutual sharing, respect and trust. Figure 1 provides an overview of the overall experiences reported by participants, structured along a push-pull/learning-understanding axis.

Opening the spectrum

Participants' experiences in the push/learning spectrum resembled closest the type of coaching relationships described in extant regional coaching literature with more directiveness from the coach (e.g. Dodds & Grajfoner, 2018; Palmer & Arnold, 2009). What the literature does not appear to address is the wider spectrum of one-to-one learning from the perspective of participants. Participants in this study used some of their coaches – explicitly or implicitly – as role models and mentors, and sometimes chose them for their expertise in certain fields to learn new skills and move forward. This would be in line with observations of role-modelling and mentoring already occurring informally and effectively in regional contexts. One participant, for example, explicitly referred to two such "coaches" (i.e. a grandfather and a former boss) whom he considered the most effective coaches he had had because he felt the learning came more naturally than in formal coaching:

D – Probably that [formal coaching] takes you to a different set of thinking rather than when it comes naturally… Or it, it… you tend to take it naturally where probably the other side has meant it to be going in a certain direction.

Notably, both these coaches came from the participant's culture, and despite the wider spectrum of coaching behaviours, D's experiences and outcomes fell within the definition of coaching. Taken together with other participants' accounts, it seems that participants in this study brought a broader perspective to coaching, with a wider spectrum of one-to-one learning and coaching behaviours than current competency frameworks and delineations to other practices like mentoring propose.

Inviting reflection and stories

A related aspect was storytelling by the coach, which served several purposes. First, participants viewed it as a kind of expert knowledge sharing for learning from the coach. Second, participants also saw stories from the coach as an invitation for reflection and alternative to powerful questions. While participants greatly valued careful listening, paraphrasing and

challenging by the coach which could lead to deep insights during sessions, participants also appreciated a slower kind of self-directed reflection, especially after sessions. The object of such carefully considered reflection might be events from the session or stories from the coach. This reflection may have come easier to this study's participants who were all professionals, have higher education and may be more practised in independent thinking (Dwairy, 2006). However, self-directed reflection to gain a deeper understanding of a current problem through reasoning and analogies with similar cases appears to show similarities with the practice of qiyas (Hasan, 1976). Rooted in Islamic law and tradition which guides Muslims' daily life, the practice extends to resolving matters of grammar (Baalbaki, 2006), Islamic banking (Onagun & Ahmad, 2017) or mental health (Dwairy, 2006).

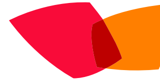
Another reason such reflective practice may have been familiar to Emirati participants could lie in the examples of role models. Aspects of storytelling and qiyas can be seen in the publications of the Ruler of Dubai, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum (2017, 2019). His invitations to the public to reflect and learn from his personal anecdotes and reflections show similarities to how participant D described the coaching from his grandfather. While qiyas and the use of stories have been proposed for Arab therapeutic settings (Dwairy, 1997, 2006), extant English-language regional coaching literature does not seem to capture this type of reflection or the role of storytelling. However, stories feature in multimodal coaching (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008), bibliotherapy (Cohen, 1994; Crothers, 1916; Marrs, 1995) and narrative coaching (Drake, 2018). Third, sharing stories played an important role in creating trust as discussed below.

Understanding and wellbeing

Participants valued the self-awareness, clarity and understanding of the self and the environment gained through coaching. Reflection was often a route for participants to achieve this. Here, their experiences resembled that of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed who describes reflection as a way to restore his personal positivity and balance (2017, p. 133):

> *Every successful leader needs, on a daily basis, space for contemplation and retreat, because these two practices show you the facts as they are, without embellishment or glittery façades; they show you the real you, the reality of things and people around you, and the reality of the world in which we live.*

Participants did not report any specific PPIs during or explicit wellbeing goals for their coaching sessions. Yet, for example, self-knowledge – an element of understanding for participants – may be considered a route to happiness in some Islamic traditions (Al-Ghazzali, 1910/2016). The term "understanding" has been linked with wellbeing in a cross-cultural lexicographic project that explores wellbeing through languages, especially untranslatable words, to counter cultural situatedness (Lomas, 2020). While the use of understanding in this study blends various lexicographic categories (including character, competence and understanding) and while the study was not able to establish an explicit link to wellbeing, the finding points to a potential path how coaching might contribute to wellbeing through (self)-understanding.



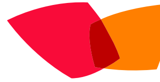
Authoritative – Coach leads
Coachee leads - Facilitative
PUSH
PULL

Coaching
Phenomenon

Learning tools & skills &
Moving Forward
Superordinate Theme 1
Coach as teacher, mentor & role model
Role of coach
Coaching process
What happens during
Teaching
Practice & role play
Role modelling
Mentoring
Coachee experience
Move forward personally & professionally
Apply learning

(Self)Understanding
Superordinate Theme 2
Coach as (self)learning facilitator
Role of coach
Coaching process
What happens during
Role modelling
Invite reflection
Listen & challenge
Mutual sharing
Coachee experience
Exploring & thinking
Self-directed learning through reflection
Gain clarity & (self-) understanding
Feeling understood
Mutual trust, respect & sharing
Superordinate Theme 3

Figure 1. Overview of Emirati Muslim Participants' Coaching Experiences



Culture as key to feeling understood

All participants in this study had worked with coaches of different nationalities, religions and of the opposite sex. Participants did not relate differences in coaching style or outcome to gender, nationality or religion when coaches understood the cultural layers. However, one participant mentioned that their spouse had questioned the choice of a coach of the opposite sex. Participants valued greatly when the coach comprehended their lived experience. Context seemed crucial for participants feeling understood and for conversations staying on course. Such context included an appreciation for the importance of the family in Emirati culture, religious practice, the different lived experiences of male and female Emiratis and implicit rules for the respectful interaction between genders. The crucial importance of context has also been highlighted by Palmer and Arnold (2009) and was captured by B thus:

B – You can't just coach that person. It doesn't work here.

Not having to explain layers of culture appeared to deepen participants' feeling of being understood by the coach. They attributed such cultural understanding mainly to coaches having spent time in the UAE or wider region but not to any cross-cultural or adapted coaching methods. This suggests that from participants' perspectives, a degree of acculturation (Berry et al., 2011) of the coach may have been more important than specific (cross-cultural) approaches. However, acculturation may also have led coaches to tacitly adapt Western-centric approaches, a process that may not be reflected in participant experiences. Indications for this include disappointing experiences where a coach, for example, coached only the individual without considering family context or without allowing for reflection.

The experience of one participant highlighted the potential risk of applying generic cultural attributes in individual contexts by a coach, described as "brand new" to the UAE and seeing the participant as "this Emirati". Considering stereotyping of Emiratis in the workplace is frequent (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2010) and led that participant to seek coaching in the first place, it left the participant feeling unheard and frustrated. While participants in this study could be explicit when respectfully setting boundaries, sometimes they merely sat with negative experiences and did not raise them with the coach even if it meant that coaching was ineffective. For example, D described how a coach conducted the sessions not entirely to D's liking:

Researcher – Did you discuss that with your coach?

D – No, I never tend to do because the coaching contract as I said (chuckles) it has a certain, you know a framework that you agree on in the beginning, and you, you feel obliged that okay we need to get things done rather than being able to explore more.

Such attitudes would be congruent with reported social norms in Arab/Muslim society geared towards maintaining cohesion, with communication guided by respect and social duties (Dwairy, 2006), avoidance of confrontation (Dwairy, 2006; Jones, 2008) and creating impressions that are socially desirable among an Emirati workforce (Whiteoak et al., 2006). Similar

observations, where coachees would avoid feedback to the coach, have been made in Asian cultures (Anagnos, 2013). Yet, regional coaching literature draws little attention to this.

What participants appeared to welcome resembled aspects of CQ, with the coach displaying cultural content and process knowledge, appropriate behaviour and mindfulness (Thomas, 2006) and with applying competencies similar to the UIF's cross-cultural emotional intelligence competencies (Passmore & Law, 2009). Findings also seem to support Plaister-Ten (2016) who proposes that coachees should lead with culture which might help prevent coaches bringing generic cultural dimensions into the conversation.

Whom and how do you trust?

Confidentiality enshrined in codes of conduct seemed secondary to participants. They felt coaching styles varied considerably even among coaches who signed up to the same frameworks, which appeared to create uncertainty regarding the adherence to such frameworks. However, confidentiality was very important to all participants. Thus, they based the decision to trust on the person of the coach, similar to Asian contexts (Nangalia & Nangalia, 2010). With participants trusting the person of the coach rather than any code of conduct, participants wanted to get a feel for the coach and be able to relate, especially through stories, experiences, observations and thoughts coaches divulged. Experiences of relationships and trust built on this mutual sharing resembled the process of relational authenticity in authentic leadership contexts (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Ilies et al., 2005).

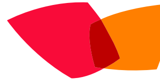
One participant offered insight into the cultural importance of confidentiality for Emiratis, who are a minority in their country:

> *B – So as much as we are openminded this and that you're still very much a part of this small community and everybody knows everybody's names. So God forbid you do something wrong that could ruin your whole family name. Everything your father built, gone, done.*

Such an obligation on the individual would be consistent with the collective responsibility to maintain the family name in Arab/Muslim society (Dwairy, 2006) and raises the possibility of self-censorship during coaching. However, where trust between participants and their coaches was built, it grew to a point where participants trusted the coach to understand implicitly whatever they said and maintain confidentiality.

Limitations and Future Research

Originally envisaged as a Grounded Theory study, the design shifted to IPA with a much smaller sample size, necessitating future validation of findings. Second, certain types of questions (e.g. too open) occasionally proved challenging and required reduction of openness where participants asked for clarification. Third, participants blended at times experiences from the moment with retrospective sense-making based on their new-gained perspective as coaches. Where it allowed the observation of reflective insights by participants and where the perspective was clear,



such comments were used for additional consideration in the analysis. Fourth, the researcher may have engaged in sense-making of their own regional experience and as coach, despite efforts at bracketing. This point is relevant in the context of IPA and for future qualitative studies. Interpretation by the researcher played an important role in this study where data quantity could be low both with respect to interview duration as well as length of answers or amount of information volunteered. Culturally and with respect to the study's findings, however, this was consistent, since the participants did not know the researcher and mutual trust to reveal personal information had deliberately not been sufficiently established with the aim to preserve neutrality and avoid priming. Thus, careful listening, reflexivity and interpretation by the researcher about the information provided may have become more important.

Future research may be able to expand on the results from this small sample, specifically, exploring the wider coaching spectrum, possible adaptations and the theme of self-understanding. Additional research may consider specifically the impact of language, for example by replicating this study in Arabic, or the impact of trust between researcher and participant on data quality and findings. Ultimately, it is the researchers' hope that future investigations might build on this study to offer guidance around how coaching might best be adapted for UAE culture.

Conclusion

This study fills a gap in extant literature by exploring how four Emirati Muslim coachees experienced coaching. It found that the participants seemed to value opportunities provided by coaching for learning and self-understanding to move forward and grow, personally and professionally, through deeper insight and clarity gained in coaching relationships built on mutual trust, respect and sharing.

Participants also appeared to bring a wider perspective of coaching to their sessions, encompassing a broader spectrum of one-to-one learning and the full range of the coaching behaviour circumplex. This raises the possibility that coaches working in the UAE may have to get comfortable with roles that may not fall strictly within the remit of existing competency frameworks. Findings suggest a potential link between coaching and wellbeing through the dimensions of self-understanding and clarity, for which unprompted opportunities for self-directed reflection seemed key. Such welcome contemplative practice, which seems not reflected in coaching literature, might have roots in Emirati tradition.

Stories shared by the coach are largely absent in extant literature but featured in several ways throughout participants' accounts: as expert knowledge sharing, as basis for reflection and to build mutual trust. Participants seemed to base the latter largely on the person of the coach rather than any codes of conduct. Thus, getting a feel for the coach, relating to the person and feeling implicitly understood was considered essential. Whether and how mutual sharing might, and should, be integrated to build trusting coaching relationships, remains a question.

Coaches understanding the layers of Emirati culture and participants' lived experience were highly valued. It contributed to feeling understood, to building trust and respect and to coaching conversations taking a direction aligned with their culture. This finding points towards acculturation by the coach and/or aspects of CQ benefitting positive experiences. While

participants did not seem to perceive Western-centricity of the coaching discipline as an issue or were aware of cross-cultural models being applied, there is a possibility that culturally sensitive coaches may already have adapted without participants noticing. This raises the question to which extent cross-cultural adjustments might already be made ad-hoc but not reported and what kind of successful adaptations they might include.

In conclusion, by sharing the perspective of Emirati Muslim coachees, this study has identified several aspects currently not or only partially reported in cross-cultural and regional coaching literature. It raises the possibility that multifaceted coaching in its widest sense and with mindful cultural adaptations could support economically active Emirati Muslims while improving wellbeing. Post-pandemic shifts in the working life of Emiratis, with increased remote working and multicultural encounters facilitated by virtual platforms, have accelerated the need to build on this study's findings.

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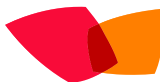

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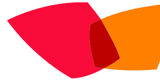

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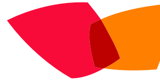

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