

# Bedrock – Ontology

The anthropologist and her American university student had to walk for an hour after the Jeep that had brought them from Guatemala City could go no farther. They followed their native guide up and down paths through the mountains until they came to a village made up of mud huts set in a circle. In Guatemala before the civil war that made such visits too dangerous, the group would find that each village had its own typical costume, type of products that it would sell to other villages, and even its own dialect or language. The anthropologist was investigating the ravages of kwashiorkor—protein malnutrition that, in some parts of the country, left four of five toddlers dead after they switched from mother’s milk to the corn gruel that was considered the best thing parents could give to a child. Centuries of mistrust of strangers, probably beginning even before the Spanish invasion, meant that people did not believe Western doctors who told them they should give their children cow’s milk instead of their corn gruel. As she did not know how to resolve the problem, the anthropologist was there to listen instead of give advice.

A light mist had been falling, and the sky was overcast. One woman was brave enough to emerge from her mud-covered home, bringing two child-sized chairs for the anthropologist and her student to sit on. These seats were meant as a sign of honor. The woman, several children of different ages, and the guide hunkered down on the muddy ground. The woman spoke in her native tongue, which the guide had to translate into Spanish for the anthropologist. Then, because the student spoke very little Spanish, the anthropologist translated what was said into English.

The student had spent many hours in anthropology classes, learning about arrowheads and spear throwers and languages and cultural differences. But here she was faced with a living, breathing person who may never even have owned a book, much less taken a university class. How, the student wondered to herself, could there ever be any hope of communicating at all, given such differences?

But when the woman began to talk about her four children who had died from protein malnutrition, one after the other, the differences melted away. The woman named each child, described his or her personality, and offered precious memories. Tears filled her eyes. The student knew with sudden clarity that however different their circumstances, however little she understood the actual words that were used, she would never forget the emotional impact of that woman's experience. They looked at each other as if there were no boundaries between them. Never again could the student use the term "primitive" without putting quotation marks around it or preceding it with "so-called," as in "so-called primitive." It was not theory but lived, emotion-saturated experience shared with the woman in the village that convinced the student of their common humanity.

Ontology is what philosophers call the study of "being," of how we relate to each other and the world around us—that is, the study of who we are. Questions that philosophers classify as ontological are neither new nor limited to academic inquiry:

- What is the essential nature of human beings, physical or spiritual?
- Are we just animals with illusions that our conscious decisions have some kind of effect?
- Are people basically good and simply in need of encouragement to flourish, or are they essentially bad and in need of control?
- What part do emotions play in who we are? Are they disturbances to rational thought, or do they contribute to our ability to move through life?
- Is there such a thing as an enduring reality, or is reality a subjective creation?
- Is there such a thing as free will, or are our lives determined by heredity, environment, or both?
- If there is no free will, how can we speak of responsibility or morality?

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- How independent are individual persons? Are people closely inter-related with their social and physical surroundings, or are they stand-alone entities?
- Does change happen in a line or in a circle—or in a spiral?

This initial chapter covers approaches to ontological questions that are embedded in a classical or mechanistic bedrock but that contain contributions to coaching:

Western philosophy  
New Age philosophy  
Anthropology  
Sociology  
Ontology as bedrock for coaching

## WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek word *philosophia*, meaning “love of wisdom.” Philosophy examines the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. Evidence of a foundation for coaching can be found in early philosophical thought. Consider whether it is better to ask a client for her ideas on how to improve her performance or to advise her based on what you think is best. Most approaches to coaching favor asking the client, based on the assumption that clients are sources of untapped wisdom. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates pioneered this approach several thousand years ago.

### HISTORICAL INTERLUDE

#### *Socrates*

Socrates (469–399 BC) is important for coaches to study. Socrates taught that each person is born with full knowledge of ultimate truth and needs only to be spurred to conscious awareness of it. He believed that people must acquire knowledge and wisdom for themselves, and so he engaged his students in a process of questioning rather than providing them with answers. His famous question, “What is the good life?” (Allen, 1991) is an

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example of what is called the Socratic method. The modern interpretation of this method includes these characteristics:

- Questioning to move a person forward
- Creating a structure around the process of questioning
- Pursuing meaning and truth
- Refraining from offering advice in the belief that answers can be found inside the individual, rather than in external sources of wisdom

### *Augustine*

The fourth-century AD monk Augustine (354–430) argued against a position that was gathering adherents in Rome. About the year 390, a cleric named Pelagius had come from Britannia in the north, claiming that people’s good natures should be celebrated. According to Pelagius, by their own efforts, people could reconstitute themselves and the world around them. Augustine was a brilliant logician who had made his mark with the emperor, the pope, and other clerics by opposing heretical views. He countered the Pelagian belief in the inherent goodness of people by insisting that all human beings carry the mark of “original sin” and have to rely on the church to intervene on their behalf. The fact that Augustine is better remembered than Pelagius tells us who won the argument. Original sin became the doctrine of early Christianity and largely held sway until the authority of the church was shaken by scientific discoveries during the Renaissance. A link with Pelagian “celebration of the natural” can be traced from the Romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) through to today’s New Age philosophies.

### *Descartes*

Another of the enduring debates in Western philosophy is whether we observe our way to the truth (empiricism) or think our way there (rationalism). The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), a major figure in rationalist history, proposed a materialist model of the human body. He believed that the mind was composed of different “stuff” from the physical body. In Descartes’ view, called dualism, the mental and the physical influenced each other, but he never explained exactly how that happened. Subsequently, a more complete separation into different realms offered a solution to the political conflict between the church and scientists. Science could claim dominion over the physical realm while the church could rule the “soul,” or mind.

This “solution” provided only a temporary truce and eroded as 19th-century scientists began to study the mind and thus encroach on the church’s territory. However, as long as science assumes that the mind is simply a by-product of “real” brain activity, the battle of dualism continues to be fought, as illustrated by modern philosopher of science Daniel Dennett (1991). Dennett’s claim that subjective consciousness is an illusion is in the tradition of mechanism, or the idea that human beings are reduced “to cogs in a giant machine that grinds inexorably along a preordained path in the grip of a blind causal process” (Stapp, 2007, p. 5). Such a view implies that each cog has no choice in what it will do or how it moves—that it is determined by past material causes—so how can we speak of responsibility for one’s actions or indeed morality at all? What use would coaching be in such a universe? In contrast, the universe that is emerging from contemporary physics and neuroscience not only provides a home for coaching but, as we claim throughout this book, is part of why coaching has come to be.

Galileo and Newton took up the empiricist program of discovering laws of the physical world. Newtonian physics, or classical mechanics, assumed that objective truth would be discovered by reducing all events to their elementary particles and developing laws that determined how these elements interacted. This line of research proved enormously successful. However, the implication of applying these assumptions to human beings leads exactly to the cogs-in-a-giant-machine conclusion drawn by Dennett and others. Why, then, should philosophers bother to philosophize and ethicists to ethicize and coaches to coach?

Philosophers ignored the mechanistic implication that their theorizing was illusory, and they continued to wonder about such questions as whether people would be at their best if left to nature, to whom principles of equality applied, and how people make decisions—rationally or emotionally?

Western philosophy has a long tradition stretching from the ancient Greeks (Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates) to modern philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Viktor Frankl. We will merely touch on those traditions that contain elements relevant to coaching.

When you coach, think of Socrates, in particular his method of questioning. New coaches often tend to violate Socratic principles by offering advice too early in the coaching dialogue. Often they do not probe deeply enough, settling for the first idea that comes up during

the session. More experienced coaches follow the lead of the client and explore issues in greater depth. An experienced coach may ask 10 or more questions to elicit useful insights, whereas a new coach instead may offer interpretations.

Socratic principles suggest that coaches refrain from offering advice, understanding that the client is the expert regarding his or her life. Whitworth and colleagues, in their influential book *Co-Active Coaching*, summarize this approach by insisting that the client is naturally “creative, resourceful and whole” (Whitworth, Kinsey-House & Sandahl, 1998, p. 3).

Many philosophers influenced the development of the social sciences, which were always suspected of not being “real science” in the Newtonian universe. The social sciences in turn contributed to the emergence of coaching. In 1911, Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933), wrote *The Philosophy of “As If”* (1911, 1925), a book that influenced the sociology of knowledge and constructivism in sociology, psychology, and psychotherapy. He suggested that acting as if a belief were true has real consequences in the material world, a claim that fits the systemic paradigm and that has been confirmed by social psychology and neuroscience. The ideas of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who is famous for questioning “the meaning of being” (1977), were echoed in cognitive psychology, another precursor to coaching.

### *Existentialism*

Existentialism is one of the major philosophical movements of the 20th century and one that explores territory outside the scientific objectivity demanded by logical positivism. Martin Buber (1878–1965), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and other thinkers of the existential movement paved the way for the humanist perspective in psychotherapy (Rader & Gill, 1990).

Buber focused on people’s immediate subjective experience. He was not attracted to the science of his day, a science that studied reality as a set of mechanisms. Buber was born in 1878 in Vienna but spent much of his boyhood with his grandparents in the Ukraine. His grandfather was a Jewish scholar, but young Buber was not attracted to abstract philosophy divorced from everyday life. By the time he went back to Vienna to enter university, he was exploring existential philosophy.

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Perhaps he could experience true meaning in everyday existence itself, in life embedded in community rather than in the dry observations of science. He wrote the book that is translated into English as *I and Thou* in 1922 (Buber, 1970). In it he describes two basic ways of interacting with the world—not just with other people but with anything. We can hold ourselves separate from whatever is in front of us, talking to ourselves inside our heads as if we occupy one universe and the “whatever” is a thing over there in another. Even if the “whatever” is another person, we do not interact so as to open ourselves to experiencing the other’s full, engaging presence. This is an “I-It” relationship. The other mode of relating is “I-Thou.” We enter a living, breathing dialogue with another person where the boundary between “I” and “Thou” is fluid, and we draw upon each other’s existence to enrich our own. As mystical as this description may sound, Buber’s ideas of two modes of processing are remarkably like what neuroscientists have discovered almost a century later. Our thinking process alternates between a “narrative” sequence where we talk to ourselves *about* our experience and a fully present sequence of engagement, or “flow” (Farb *et al.*, 2007).

There are deep links between existentialism and coaching. Existentialists call for passion and commitment. They emphasize here-and-now experience and the influence of dialogue. They encourage choice, taking actions, and being responsible for the choices we make. They recommend approaching each day as if it might be our last, truly engaging in life and in the pursuit of excellence, and not accepting mediocrity. Self-examination and honoring individuality are also two major themes associated with existentialism.

### HISTORICAL INTERLUDE

The appearance of Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) at the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference, held every five years to bring together the most influential psychotherapists in the world and attended by thousands of therapists, would be his last public appearance. Frankl looked frail sitting on the stage in the massive conference hall, yet he held the audience in rapt attention. He described his youthful interest in psychiatry, his connection with Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, and his development of an  
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approach he called “logotherapy.” But what moved the listeners was his story of being an inmate in a Nazi concentration camp from 1942 to 1945. It was not an abstraction for him to say that human beings can find meaning even in the most brutal circumstances imaginable. He discovered in his own experience that when all other choices have been taken away, choice remains. He reported later that when a prisoner could tolerate no more, “he found a way out in his mental life—an invaluable opportunity to dwell in the spiritual domain, the one that the SS were unable to destroy. Spiritual life strengthened the prisoner, helped him adapt, and thereby improved his chances of survival” (Frankl, 1984, p. 123). Such was true for Frankl himself. Frankl’s life and work can be related to Western philosophy because of his influence on the development of existentialism; to New Age philosophy based on his emphasis on a spiritual search for meaning; and to anthropology and sociology, as well as psychology, as a result of his keen observation of human behavior under the most difficult of circumstances.

The existential themes of self-examination and honoring individuality are nowhere more evident than in the work of Frankl, the founder of logotherapy and existential analysis. His most influential book, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1984), was first published in 1946. As a concentration camp inmate in World War II, Frankl relied on his interest in human behavior and psychology to find a reason to survive. He then applied his experience to psychotherapy, stating “I had wanted to simply convey to the reader that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones” (1984, p.12). His observation that concentration camp survivors were those who had embraced a core meaning in their lives led him to state, “I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge”(Frankl, 1984, pp. 12–13). To rail against external limitations is to ignore the responsibility that comes with choice. If all we can do is create something meaningful to us, then that becomes our responsibility as human beings.

Existentialism provides rich learning for coaches. The existential concepts of following one’s passion, pursuing excellence, and having choice are all relevant. Coaches help clients find their passion by following their “energy.” Coaches listen closely for what is said as well



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as for what is not said, striving to understand what has meaning for clients, what motivates them, and what commits them to taking action. And last, coaches encourage clients to expand their thinking, to look at all possible choices rather than focusing on only one or two. As mentioned in the section on Socrates, experienced coaches do not accept as final the first idea a client articulates. Instead, they probe for deeper meaning, more elemental insights, richer connections, and more solid ground for ongoing commitment and action.

### *Linking Western Philosophy and Coaching*

Some indications of the influence of Western philosophy on coaching include:

- The basic belief in human potential
- Placing the Socratic method at the heart of good coaching
- Acceptance of the existential emphasis on choice and taking responsibility for one's choices and actions

## NEW AGE PHILOSOPHY

You may wonder why a book about science and coaching would include a section on New Age philosophy, which is rooted in spirituality rather than scientific theory. However, the philosophy behind New Age practices has influenced the evolution of coaching, more from historical perspectives than scientific ones.

The concept of "New Age" originated with astrology, which in the last part of the 20th century claimed that the planets were aligned in an "Aquarian Age," a time of increased spirituality and harmony. The term "New Age" can refer to astrology, numerology, chakras, enlightenment, reincarnation, near-death experiences, crystals, rebirthing, human potential workshops, aromatherapy, tarot cards, the *I Ching*, color therapy, yoga, reflexology, palmistry, fire-walking, channeling, kinesiology, witchcraft, shamanism, acupuncture, *reiki*, and many other practices. These practices have widely varying degrees of mainstream acceptance, from aromatherapy massage, which you can find in most five-star hotels around the world today, to shamanism, which is more associated with "witchcraft."

New Age philosophy draws on Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism, Catholicism, occultism, and paganism. Adherents include transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Wordsworth in the early 1800s, and Theosophists such as Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891). New Age philosophy enjoyed resurgence during the 1960s and 1970s, when traditional values were being challenged. During this time, Eastern mysticism, Yoga, Zen, transcendental meditation, and mystical writers like Carlos Castañeda gained popularity.

New Age philosophy influenced the humanist psychology of Carl Rogers (1902–1987) and Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), which focused more on human potential and less on pathology, as compared with clinical psychology. Rogers and Maslow were part of what became known as the human potential movement that emerged in the 1970s. Erhard Seminars Training, also known as EST, which became Landmark Education in 1991, continues in this tradition. Werner Erhard is one of the most-cited influencers on the development of the coaching profession (Brock, 2008). According to the Landmark Web site, over 145,000 people in 52 countries attend Landmark programs every year. There are thousands of similar, although smaller, organizations, including Insight Seminars, the Silva method, Lifespring, and many others. Visit any health food store anywhere in the world and you will find dozens of notices for workshops to help you understand your inner child, your outer mask, or your growing middle.

Some of the ideas that are common to New Age philosophy include:

- A focus on consciousness and self-awareness
- Belief in human potential
- The power of suggestion, including the use of visualization
- The illusory nature of matter
- The cyclical nature of life
- Ideas of balance and harmony
- Belief in enlightenment
- Belief in the afterlife, spirits, and ghosts (not heaven and hell)
- Meditation or contemplation
- Pacifism
- Environmental awareness

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Many of these beliefs also form the core of certain coaching philosophies, in particular the emphasis on self-awareness, balance, and the belief in human potential. Some coaching models draw more heavily from New Age philosophy than from science. For example, “spiritual coaches” offer to identify the client’s life mission and purpose.

Big names in New Age philosophy include Deepak Chopra, Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer, James Redfield, Tony Robbins, John Gray, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Eckhart Tolle. Many coaches are fans of these thinkers. Despite their lack of scientific legitimacy, these people are influential philosophers of the present day. Millions of people read their books and follow the principles they espouse.

However, these approaches may still show the individualism of mechanistic thinking, despite their espousal of what might look like a systemic worldview. If the individual person only thought correctly or paid enough attention or spent enough time meditating, she or he could control life. However admirable it may be to encourage adherents in this way, it does leave them vulnerable to blaming themselves for difficulties, even when those difficulties are out of their control as individuals. Therefore, coaches would be wise to temper their admiration of New Age thinkers with the skepticism of a scientist. Contemporary science does not ignore the physical world; rather, it includes human beings as participants rather than as predetermined cogs.

### *Linking New Age Philosophy and Coaching*

A common theme in New Age philosophy is the belief in human potential and in innate human goodness. Coaches and New Age adherents both tend to agree with Theory Y (people need nurturing to develop) rather than Theory X (people need discipline to develop) (McGregor, 1960). It is advisable, however, for coaches to temper the New Age proposition that an individual’s belief can accomplish anything, so as to protect clients from being vulnerable to self-blame when things do not work out as desired.

Most coaches do look and listen for the client’s potential, in keeping with the view that clients are naturally creative and resourceful and that they are the expert in their life, not the coach. New Age philosophy agrees with the Socratic principle that coaches do not tell clients what

to do but rather believe in their potential to come up with the answers that work for them.

## ANTHROPOLOGY

The word “anthropology” literally means the study of human beings (in Greek, *anthropos* means “human beings” and *logia* means “the study of”). Therefore, it is directly relevant to the question “Who are we?”

Anthropology is made up of different subfields in different areas. In North America, anthropology includes cultural anthropology, archaeology, physical anthropology (or sometimes biological anthropology), and linguistics. In Britain, anthropology is limited to social anthropology. We will focus on cultural or social anthropology because its subject matter necessitates a subjective, value-focused, and community approach, and thus it is most useful to coaching.

Cultural anthropologists of the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries focused on documenting the many cultures that were disappearing as expanding empires decimated their populations, as happened for many of Ishi’s compatriots in California, or absorbed them into the modern industrial economy. The underlying attitude was similar to that of biologists who wish to catalog endangered species. Although anthropologists such as Alfred Kroeber, Ishi’s benefactor, held these cultures in great esteem, they nonetheless treated the people as objects of scientific interest rather than as subjects who had their own perspectives and rights. As part of the social movements of the second half of the 20th century, native people demanded their own role in determining their importance to science.

To be fair, anthropological fieldwork meant that anthropologists got to know their “informants” as fellow human beings, and their experience formed a strong counterbalance to 19th-century beliefs that “primitive” people were somehow inferior and incapable of becoming “civilized.” Anthropology has shown racial categories to be social creations; has established all human beings alive today as members of the same species; and has recognized the fact that any infant of our species will fully take on the language and customs of the culture in which it is raised, whatever its inheritance. Anthropological evidence supports the growing insistence of all people on the validity of their own culture,

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countering the ideology of “natural superiority” that has justified slavery and genocide.

In recent times, anthropology has turned its methods toward studying human behavior wherever it occurs, not just among “primitives.” The culture of contemporary organizations, the structure of modern families, the evolution of behavior, and the relationship of culture and personality have become of more central concern to anthropologists.

American anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1948, p. 35) made these three statements in discussing personality:

All people are the same.

Some people are the same.

No people are the same.

All three statements are true, so which perspective a coach takes depends on the needs of a particular client at a particular time.

### **Example: “I Still Feel Humiliated”**

*Harold was an energetic and successful salesman who had just been promoted to national sales manager of a retail electronics chain. Shortly after the very public announcement of his promotion, the chain was acquired by an international conglomerate that brought in a new management structure, and Harold was out of a job. “I got a great severance package,” he said in coaching, “but I still feel humiliated. What’s that about?” His coach explained the neuroscience finding that all people are sensitive to a loss in status. “Does this apply in any way to your situation?” the coach asked. Recognizing that the general finding applied to him helped Harold “normalize” and accept his feelings.*

In many cases, people are comforted by learning they are not alone in their suffering. Yet people can feel resentful when they think that their uniqueness as an individual is being disregarded. Many psychological assessments can be interpreted so as to treat the person being assessed as just a number or category. This experience of “ignoring who I am”—an example of “nomothetic” or all-or-some-people-are-the-same approach (Page, 2001), can motivate a person to seek a coach.

Clients sometimes bring their assessment results to a coach hoping that the coach's one-of-a-kind ("ideographic" or no-people-are-the-same) approach will reaffirm their unique characteristics and circumstances.

It is also true that the habits, ways of behaving, and the language that we share with some other people help us feel "at home" in a social group. That is, we share a culture with some other people. Culture is the "sets of learned behaviors and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society" (Lavenda & Schultz, 2003, p. 4). Cultural anthropology is concerned with how culture affects the belief systems and behavioral patterns of people living in different social groups.

### *Methods of Anthropologists*

A major characteristic of cultural anthropology is its emphasis on fieldwork. A cultural anthropologist may immerse herself in a community for years in order to learn about a group of people, participating as much as possible in their daily life. The anthropologist's goal is to study the behaviors and norms that occur within a living community rather than in a laboratory. In such a situation, "objectivity" is a hindrance to understanding.

"Holism" refers to the anthropological practice of observing all of the factors that influence human experience. Economics, religion, politics, biology, and customs are a few examples of the many different perspectives an anthropologist will consider when getting to know a culture. Thus, anthropologists have long recognized the necessity of considering context and diverse perspectives in their work, a decidedly systemic approach.

Anthropological practices of ethnology and ethnography, both introduced in the late 19th century, are particularly relevant to coaching.

[E]thnology is the attempt to develop rigorous and scientifically grounded explanations of cultural phenomena by comparing and contrasting many human cultures. By contrast, ethnography is the systematic description of a single contemporary culture, often through ethnographic fieldwork. (Barfield, 1997, p. 157)

Ethnographic fieldwork recognizes different subjective experiences as valid and valuable in order to understand the meaning people give to their activities. As in coaching, ethnographers listen for what their subjects *mean*, not just for what they say.

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### *Culture*

It is useful for coaches to be aware of how culture affects our clients' behaviors, thinking, and values. Different cultures have different values. For example, North American culture places great value on individual independence and initiative while Asian culture values considering the collective. Compare the North American expression "The squeaky wheel gets the grease" to the Japanese expression "The nail that stands out gets pounded."

Helping our clients identify the religious, economic, political, linguistic, value, gender, and behavioral systems in which they are embedded enables them to understand themselves better. It also helps identify the pressures that result when personal beliefs and practices differ from those of the dominant culture, whether in an organization or the larger society. This understanding is particularly useful in coaching a globally mobile workforce.

Gathering cultural information at the start of a coaching engagement can be very useful, although we must always ensure that it is the client who is being served rather than the curiosity or cultural education of the coach.

One application of anthropological principles to organizational coaching is the 360-degree feedback process. By interviewing several of the client's coworkers, the coach can get a more contextual picture of the client and illuminate blind spots he or she does not see. How work group or team members respond to a client's leadership, relationship skills, or delegation practices—or even the decision to conduct an assessment—can also reveal the organization's culture.

This list of general questions can help elicit information about a client's culture:

- What culture do you identify with?
- What are some of the cultural beliefs, values, habits, and customs that are unique to your culture?
- To what extent are you a typical member of your cultural group?
- What is the culture of the environment in which you work?
- How well or poorly does your cultural background fit with the environment in which you work? With the personal culture of the individuals you work with?

Another link with anthropology is the concept of shadowing. In order for an anthropologist to understand a culture, he or she will build trust and rapport with people by living among them for an extended period of time, paying close attention to every aspect of their lives. Shadowing, or literally following a client through the workday, is an effective way to obtain a more holistic view of clients and their environment. Shadow coaches spend considerable time observing the way their clients run meetings, manage projects, and go about their daily routines in order to identify the patterns they may wish to change, once they become aware of them.

If shadowing a client is not an option, a coach can gather information about daily life patterns by asking more specific questions, such as these:

- Tell me specifically what is involved in your workday, as if I were viewing a videotape: When and how do you arrive at work? Are you usually early, on time, or late? How do you greet your coworkers? How do they respond? What's the first thing you do when you get to your desk? And so forth.
- What language(s) did you speak growing up? What language(s) do you speak now? At home? At work?
- How do people socialize at work?
- What do you and your coworkers do to relax?
- What are the rules for business or work in your family? Your culture?
- How do you think that people should treat one another at work?
- How do you refer to your boss? To your supervisees?

Again, a coach must be careful not to spend the client's time on information that is merely interesting to the coach. But if a client is being coached about relationships and issues of "fit" at work, looking for patterns in the information just listed may reveal helpful approaches.

### *Values*

The word "values" appears many times in this section and indeed throughout this book. A value is a belief, mission, or philosophy that means something to an individual or group. Values, goals, meaning, purpose, engagement, passion, and motivation are interrelated concepts. When we



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value something, we move toward it. Our goals, or what we move toward or away from, reveal our values. Goals and values have to mean something to us, or we are unlikely even to notice them. Subjectively, we feel that striving for or reaching our goals is what gives our lives a sense of purpose. When our work provides an opportunity to fulfill a life purpose, we are highly motivated and engaged.

Every individual has a core set of personal values, whether aware of them or not. Anthropologists have discovered universal values in all societies they have studied, such as reciprocity and the importance of family. However, there are wide variations, for example, in the definition of family, in who is included in “family,” and in beliefs about how families should function.

For instance, a Hindu teacher told one of us (Linda) that he did not consider his son to be an adult until he was 30 years old. In India, preserving the family unit is valued more highly than in North America, where grown children are encouraged to seek independence. While anthropology emphasizes the values of social groups, psychotherapy and coaching have tended to focus more on individual values.

Values can be a central theme in coaching. Values are the unconscious filters used to make choices. Identifying, getting clear about, or crystallizing our personal values can help us make better decisions. A clear understanding of our values can even reduce stress. A study by UCLA psychologists (Creswell et al., 2005) found that “[r]eflecting on meaningful values provides biological and psychological protection from the adverse effects of stress” (p. 841).

Values assessments are often done in career counseling to help people identify career choices. For example, someone who values care giving might do better as a nurse than as an investment banker. Consulting firms, career firms, recruitment companies, and the like provide many values assessment tools. They are also used in leadership development programs to help leaders better understand themselves and others. Many of these tests have been carefully validated to provide dependable guidance.

### *Linking Anthropology and Coaching*

- To understand the individual, study the culture.
- Observe people in their natural habitat.

- Gather data from a wide range of sources to understand a client holistically.
- Do your best to see the world through the client's eyes.
- Investigate subjective meaning and values for a better understanding of clients' lives and motivation.

## SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is the study of human social interactions among individuals, groups, and societies. Sociology explores how human beings live together and are affected by economic, cultural, political, and religious factors. Sociologists focus on how social structures (class, family), institutions (education, military), and problems (crime, divorce) affect the individual and society.

### HISTORICAL INTERLUDE

In 1838 in France, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) invented the term “sociology.” This new science developed during the 19th century, when everything, including human behavior, was coming under scientific scrutiny. Comte analyzed the influence of cultural, political, and economic factors on human social development.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), an early British sociologist, adapted Darwinian evolutionary principles to human society, coining the phrase “survival of the fittest.”

German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) combined economics with sociology, describing and predicting the spread of a bureaucratic class. His contributions ran counter to those of fellow German Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose analysis of capitalism had a major influence on sociology. Marx developed a materialist interpretation of the more idealistic “dialectic” of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Marx's revision represents, according to British scientist Steven Rose, the only nonreductionist approach to science in Western history (2005, note, p. 189) and thus is a contribution to a systemic paradigm shift.

Most sociologists are concerned with an overall “macro” perspective, examining the forces that impact a whole social system, while anthropologists take a more “micro” look at what is happening within a

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specific culture. However, some sociologists have discovered patterns in two-person (dyads) and three-person (triads) groups that can inform coaching. For instance, a two-person group has the potential for greater intimacy than a larger group, while the pressure to conform is greatest in three-person as compared with larger and smaller groups.

Sociology studies specific jobs and professions. Its high-level perspective can help clients understand their career. Sociologists are also helping coaching define what characteristics would make it a full profession.

In their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann borrowed from the philosophy of William James and of Hans Vaihinger (mentioned in the Western philosophy section above) that human beings create reality by acting “as if” it were true. Through such tacit agreements, we create a social environment that becomes real in its consequences despite its origin as a mere concept, idea, or “fiction.” As Berger and Luckmann state:

Just as it is impossible for man [sic] to develop as Man in isolation, so it is impossible for man in isolation to produce a human environment. . . . Man’s specific humanity and his sociality are inextricably intertwined. *Homo sapiens* is always, and in the same measure, *homo socius*. (1966, p. 51)

This emphasis on the interdependence of individual and society informs systems theory, constructivist strands in psychology and psychotherapy, and the circular causality of the systemic paradigm. The idea of the brain as a social organ is gaining influence in neuroscience. Both coach and client benefit from the understanding that, while it may *seem* impossible to change the way a social group operates, nonetheless all social group norms are created by human beings and can be changed by them.

### *Methods of Sociologists*

The methods that sociologists use to gather empirical evidence include quantitative surveys that are statistically analyzed and qualitative interviews and observations, much like anthropological fieldwork. The resulting information is then summarized using rigorous techniques to discern underlying patterns. Coaches can use variations of these methods with clients. To understand the forces operating within a team, a leader might interview each team member to gather information from various

perspectives. Knowing team members' hopes, fears, goals, and constraints can help identify roadblocks to improving the team's performance.

Sociology is particularly relevant to organizational coaching. Clients operate within complex social webs at work and in their communities. Understanding the nature of these webs can help clients navigate barriers and achieve their goals. For example, a client who wants a promotion may need to address complex political issues in the workplace, including hidden issues of status and power. These factors have been intensely studied. In *The 48 Laws of Power* (1998), Robert Greene explains how a leader can acquire and hold power.

Sociology can help clients realize that their problems are not unique but shared with much of humanity. Some argue that even the personal impact of gender, race, and class inequalities can be better understood and remedied by taking a macro view. By stepping back from immediate examples of discrimination or prejudice, clients may see patterns that will help them deal more objectively with the effects they experience personally. Sociological studies can also provide information to help overcome stereotypes. Although they come from different academic traditions, sociologists share with social psychologists the recognition of the importance of social embeddedness.

Sociology teaches us that social forces have an impact on how people believe they should behave. One of most important gifts that coaches give their clients is helping them to be authentic, even when that goes

### **Example: “Not Feel Defensive or Apologetic”**

*One coaching client, Maria, is an ambitious lawyer and mother of three young children. After taking several years off to start a family, she decided to return to work four days a week. However, she met resistance from some members of her family and community, where women were expected to stay home to care for their children. Maria needed a coach to support her goal of returning to work. She told her coach that she received tremendous value from the coaching sessions because she could show up as the career person she wanted to be and not feel defensive or apologetic. Furthermore, the coach kept her new vision in focus, offering her needed support and structure until her intention became a reality.*

## Ontology as Bedrock for Coaching

against social expectations. A coach can offer clients support to break free from the preconceptions that others may have of them.

### *Linking Sociology and Coaching*

- Gather information from a number of sources, both quantitative and qualitative.
- Identify the social expectations that shape client beliefs and behaviors.
- Identify behavior patterns that present as unalterable givens in any social situation.
- Consider the social context in any coaching scenario, and be sensitive to issues of power and status.
- Remember that reality is socially constructed and can be reconstructed through coaching support and other co-constructive social relationships.
- Stereotypes are generalizations that must be verified before applying them to any particular person or group.

## ONTOLOGY AS BEDROCK FOR COACHING

Essentially, coaching is a series of conversations, a mutually respectful dialogue between a coach and a client for the purpose of producing identifiable results. Coaches help clients solve their problems by asking a series of questions and supporting and encouraging clients to formulate answers. Coaches examine and challenge their clients' basic assumptions (paradigms) with a view to what more is possible. Clearly, coaches assume that what people think makes a difference.

Coaching is a form of learning, but a coach is not a teacher and does not need to know how to do things better than the client. A coach observes patterns, sets the stage for new actions, and supports the client to put new, more successful actions into practice. Through various coaching techniques, including listening, reflecting, asking questions, and providing information, coaches help clients to become self-generating (to come up with their own questions and answers) and self-correcting (to identify and change their own ineffective behaviors).

Clients seek coaching when their paradigms no longer produce the desired results. Essentially, they seek a paradigm shift that will enable them to move more effectively toward their goals. However, this new paradigm must also be compatible with the network of paradigms imposed by the client's community, culture, and the larger society.

To work with clients in all these ways, coaching must tackle the question of what it means to be human. Its examination of this question is informed by a shift from Western and New Age emphasis on the individual to anthropological and sociological recognition of the importance of community and social context. Thus, the story of ontology can be told as the beginning of a shift in emphasis from individualism to community and context. Coaches reap the benefit of this shift by connecting personal beliefs with how individuals, groups, and organizations interact with each other and with society.

In summary, coaching has roots in Western philosophy, New Age philosophy, and the social sciences. Like bedrock that is composed of different geological deposits, these schools of thought provide part of the foundation for coaching. Each in its own way, these elements have struggled with the reductionism that predominated beginning in the 16th century. In the next chapter, we examine how three important developments of the 20th century provided a bridge or a pillar to uphold contemporary neuroscience: Globalization has introduced Eastern philosophy to Westerners steeped in individualism. Systems theory stresses how people are connected to one another and how their interactions relate to change. And quantum mechanics provides a scientific basis for the importance of human choice and activity. We continue our quest for understanding "Who are we?" by considering these developments and explaining how they serve as a bridge between mechanistic and systemic thinking.