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Innovative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach in a coaching research project: implications for future qualitative coaching research and beyond

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an innovative use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within a coach development research project. Since its introduction, key authors of IPA have been inviting researchers to innovate within the methodology. However, the response to the invitation has, to-date, been limited. In this paper, we address this absence by reflecting on the methodological choices within a recent global coaching study. This study is innovative compared to many IPA studies due to (a) the relatively large sample size; (b) involvement of multiple researchers and analysts; (c) researchers being part of the community and having direct experience of the phenomenon being investigated and (d) introduction of additional analytical steps. These individually and taken together within one project, provide a unique IPA research design. Our innovation facilitated a detailed account of the participants' experience and a clear research output with implications for practice and research. This novel approach to IPA may help improve the scholarly confidence to innovate within qualitative methodologies in general, but particularly within IPA studies. The benefits of our approach – such as richness and enhanced understanding of the diversity of the phenomenon – may encourage scholars to explore bolder research designs to uncover hidden phenomena.

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Qualitative research; IPA; methodological innovation; coaching research; phenomenology; hermeneutics

Implications for practice

- The practitioner-researcher engagement in conducting this study will inspire many practitioners to engage and become consumers of research to improve their practice.
- This paper will develop scholarly confidence of coaching scholars to go beyond published guidelines of conducting qualitative studies and be innovative and creative in their use of a particular methodology.

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- Our emphasis on subjective humanist ways of knowing and transparent communication of the research process will stimulate more qualitative coaching research.

1. Introduction

The starting point of our study was an online paper (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2011) on a 'tentative concept of coach maturity'. Eight researchers and practitioners formed a team to investigate this concept. Members were based in the UK, France, Portugal, Hungary, and the USA. Considering this 'tentative concept,' we wanted to understand coach development from the perspective of experienced coaches, by asking: '*how do experienced coaches make sense of their development?*'

The subjective nature of our research question influenced us to approach the project inductively and explore the first-hand experiences of highly practiced coaches with the aim of understanding 'the meanings and interpretations that (...) the participants give to their behaviour, events or objectives' (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 9). Our interest in the human experience (phenomenology) and how individuals (idiography) make sense of their experience (Hermeneutics) influenced us to choose IPA as the research methodology.

IPA was originally a psychological research methodology but is now a popular multidisciplinary methodology. Using IPA for coaching research is also becoming increasingly popular (Rajasinghe, 2020). Informed by IPA guidance (Smith et al., 2022; Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Rajasinghe, 2020), we used purposive sampling to recruit thirty-two experienced coaches from different countries, including Australia, the UK, the USA, Germany, Brazil, Spain, India, Portugal, and Russia. Each researcher interviewed 3–5 participants and transcribed the interviews using Otter transcribing software and then analysed the data following an IPA-informed data analysis approach.

In this paper, we discuss the innovative adaptation of the IPA methodology to produce a design that led to a deepened understanding of the coaches' development. First, we provide an overview of our 'position of knowledge' for this study, followed by a summary of IPA methodology. We then discuss how we conducted the study, comparing and contrasting our approach with theoretical positions of IPA. The critical exploration of research design, sampling, data collection and analysis provides readers with an understanding of how innovation within established methodologies helps us to deepen our qualitative understanding of a phenomenon. We conclude the paper by emphasising possible contributions from our approach to the qualitative research paradigm as a whole and to IPA methodology in particular.

2. Our position of knowledge for the study

Our aim was to understand the perceived subjective realities of our participants' development as coaches. We believe that human understanding is constructed through social interactions, interpretations, and engagements in our lived spaces (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Flick, 2014; Robson, 2011). This position endorses the view that the 'focus of the social constructionism is on individuals rather than the group, where the interest is how individuals construct and make sense of their world' (Robson, 2011, p. 24). This justifies our focus on human experience and on how different actors interpret their experience, as a route to deepening our understanding of a particular phenomenon. Our position complies with Robson's (2011; p. 24) notion that 'meaning does not exist in its own

right; it is constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in interpretations' and with Bachkirova and Kauffman (2008; p. 110) who argue that 'researchers who are interested in the exploration of subjective data believe that reality is not in all ways pre-determined and 'out there' but in some significant ways is a construction, or an interpretation'. Based on these arguments, we consider the form of knowledge to be fluid, subjective and experience-based: it is grounded in unique personal and experiential insights (Flick, 2014; Gill, 2014; Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Rajasinghe et al., 2021). Therefore, we needed to gather the meanings given to their experience by our participants in order to generate deeper knowledge (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) of the subject matter. We acknowledge that both we – the researchers – and the researched play an active role in developing such understanding (Shinebourne, 2011). These philosophical assumptions distance our research from Burrell and Morgan's (1979) 'objectivist' scheme which claims an external reality independent from the researcher and the researched (Hennink et al., 2011; Flick, 2014). Our assumptions drive our arguments, conceptions, data collection and analysis and the credibility of the research rests on those assumptions (Farquhar, 2012). Therefore, it is important to carefully consider one's world views prior to commissioning research projects and committing to a particular methodology. We spent a considerable time discussing these issues and we concluded that, our interest in the experiences of our participants and in how they interpret their experience as a valid source of knowledge (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008; Rajasinghe, 2020) which closely link with IPA research methodology.

3. Interpretative phenomenological analysis

IPA is a health psychology research methodology developed by Prof. Jonathan A. Smith in 1996. It is now well-established (Nizza et al., 2021) and increasingly popular as a multi-discipline qualitative research methodology (Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2014). IPA explores how people make sense of their experiences to deepen the understanding of a particular phenomenon (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Larkin et al., 2011). It adopts McLeod's (2001, p. 56) position that 'understanding is always from a perspective, always a matter of interpretation'. IPA focuses on and provides priority to individual experiences of social actors (coaches in our study) and considers human experience as a source of knowledge development (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2008; Rajasinghe, 2020; Rajasinghe et al., 2021). IPA is informed by three theoretical underpinnings, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. This methodology can be of interest to qualitative scholars who have an interest in individual human experience and theories of interpretations to uncover the meaning and deepen our understandings of those experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

In general, IPA studies are conducted by purposively recruiting a relatively small, homogeneous sample who represent the phenomenon of interest (Larkin et al., 2019). With some exceptions (e.g., focus groups, diaries, participant observations), the data collection is usually done through semi-structured interviews with individuals who represent a single perspective, for example, a coach. The other most popular data collection method is diaries. These two methods facilitate 'the elicitation of stories, thoughts and feelings about the target phenomenon' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 53). The data analysis is usually guided by Smith et al.'s (2009) approach, for example see, Aluthgama-Baduge et al., (2023); Cope (2011); Rajasinghe and Garvey (2023). This guidance has been helpful to

develop scholarly confidence for novice researchers. However, there is a dearth of innovation within the methodology despite the founding authors continuous requests to innovate within the methodology.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive description of IPA. However, the above overview lays a foundation for our discussion of how we innovated from the general guidance of conducting an IPA study. For more detail on the IPA methodological guidance readers may refer to the key IPA literature (Smith et al., 2009, 2022).

4. Our study design

Considering our research interest, research question, and feasibility of the study, we kept our research design 'simple' (Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Simple in this context means that the study focused on the single perspectives of the coaches by conducting one semi-structured interview with each participant. Each interview was approximately 1 hour in duration.

The stages of the project were as follows:

1. Identify potential participants and invite them via email to participate.
2. Create a semi-structured interview schedule.
3. Interview participants and record via Zoom
4. Generate verbatim transcriptions with the help of Otter transcribing software and conduct four phases of analysis (with added layers of analysis compared to Smith et al., 2009 guidance)
5. Write up.

The involvement of a team of eight researchers, and the multi-analyst contribution to data analysis, shifted our study from the popular 'simple design' concept introduced by Smith et al. (2009). As a resourceful research team composed of professors and established practitioners within the field, we critically debated our research decisions and reflected on them. Such critical scholarly engagement, where we questioned and challenged each research decision (e.g., data analysis steps, returning to the transcript during analysis step 4) suggested by team members and our openness to learn helped us to make informed and innovative decisions (see sections 6–9). This is a positive response to Smith et al. (2022, see p. 120) where they advocate potential 'advanced' and 'innovative' approaches such as: single cases; multiple perspectives; mixed methods; group discussions; online data collection; longitudinal approaches; multi-model approaches; co-production, and user involvement (see p. 120), dedicating a whole chapter to the subject compared to a brief section on 'bolder designs' in their first edition (Smith et al., 2009).

This suggests that the IPA is currently evolving within the broader design possibilities. According to Smith et al. (2022), such innovative approaches have the possibility of extending what an IPA study can do. This recent acknowledgement from the creators of the methodology endorses our effort to use IPA more innovatively compared to established, more popular forms. We completed our data analysis before the publication of the 2nd edition of Smith et al.'s (2022) book, so it was the scholarly experience and confidence of our team members that led us to follow an innovative approach, as called for by Smith

et al. (2009) despite the relative lack of detailed academic support for such approaches within the literature.

By innovating within the methodology, we wanted to develop a more detailed account of participants' experiences to enhance our understanding of coaches' development. Our approach may inspire many other researchers to extend the possibilities within qualitative research methodologies, particularly with IPA, in order to help uncover some new knowledge within their fields. It will challenge the implicit assumptions about the composition of a research team and structure of a project that are evident in the research methodology literature (Smith et al., 2022).

The following sections outline how this study was conducted and the approach followed helped us to develop a deeper account of the experience of participants. This is followed by a reflective discussion that highlights our contribution to IPA literature.

5. Sampling

We placed emphasis on 'perspective representation' over 'population representation' when selecting our participants (Gray, 2014; Smith et al., 2022). Informed by the IPA literature (Larkin et al., 2011; Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022) we employed a purposive sampling strategy to choose individuals who represented our phenomenon of interest. We did not employ an exclusive purposive sampling strategy such as theoretical, quota and stratified sampling (Robinson, 2014). Therefore, our approach to purposive sampling was more holistic: our criterion for selection was that the participants were known by the research team to be 'experienced' coaches to whom we could apply the notion of 'coach maturity' introduced by Clutterbuck and Megginson (2011). We did not consider their age, gender race, nationality, current location or qualifications and professional recognitions, self-claimed years of coaching experience, CPD, coaching or supervision hours as crucial factors to be included in our study.

We understand that the homogeneity of the sample is important for an IPA study (Wagstaff et al., 2014), and in IPA, homogeneity 'refers to a probable shared perspective upon the phenomenon of interest' (Larkin et al., 2019, p. 182). We acknowledge that a fully homogeneous sample is impractical (Rajasinghe, 2020) and respect the diversity of the participants whilst endeavouring to recruit a sample as homogeneous as possible to be practical.

Our next focus was to determine the participant number for the study. In selecting the number of participants, we pondered practicalities and the purpose of the research (Silverman, 2020) whilst following IPA guidance for the number of participants (Smith et al., 2022). We were aware that there is a general tendency to look for population representation where recruiting larger samples is the norm. We understand that this results from dominant positivist influences in research (Gray, 2014; Marshall, 1996). We consider that the notion of large samples in qualitative research should come with an informed rationale rather than simply reflect assumptions or unexamined expectations informed by positivist literature.

IPA literature (Larkin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2022) recommends that recruiting small samples helps researchers to provide sufficient attention to each experiential account during data analysis. Qualitative research literature (Gray, 2014; Silverman, 2020) also

supports the notion of having small samples and emphasises the possibility of conducting research with a single case ($n = 1$) (Gray, 2014; Smith et al., 2022).

Despite having support from both qualitative research and IPA literature to employ a small sample for the study, we invited forty-six potential participants from our individual professional networks. The initial invitation emails were sent by the individual researchers who personally knew the coaches in order to connect the participants to another team member who did not know the participant personally. Out of forty-six potential participants, thirty-two agreed to be part of the study. Recruiting a relatively large number of participants is a rarity in the IPA literature and therefore could be considered as a deviation from IPA conventions.

It is noted that qualitative researchers tend to recruit larger samples ‘predicting criticism from their quantitative colleagues’ (Smith et al., 2022, p. 46). We also agree with Marshall’s (1996, p. 523) claim that ‘qualitative researchers often fail to understand the usefulness of studying small samples’. However, our intention was not to impress positivist researchers by recruiting a relatively large sample rather, to capture the richness and diversity of coaches’ experience and provide many coaches a voice because the coaches’ perspective is largely unheard in coaching research (Rajasinghe et al., 2022). We did, however, follow standard IPA guidance on sampling as closely as possible (see section 8).

IPA scholars may see our sample as relatively large (Smith et al., 2009). Given the number of researchers in our team, we were confident about our ability to provide sufficient attention to each participant’s experience (idiographic commitment). Therefore, we argue that our decision to recruit a relatively larger, unconventional number of participants stayed true to the spirit of IPA guidance about small sample sizes but also reflected the size of the research team. Each researcher analysed 3–5 transcripts of the interviews that they conducted and treated this first analysis as their ‘self-contained’ sample (see section 8). Smith et al. (2022, p. 46) suggested a similar approach when deciding participant numbers, for example in PhDs using IPA by conducting a few ‘self-contained but related studies’.

6. Data collection

It is ‘natural to understand something by engaging in a dialogue with the person who has experienced the event’ (Rajasinghe et al., 2021, p. 871) and semi-structured interviews, the most popular IPA data collection method, are known for enabling researchers and participants to engage in a purposeful conversation. Semi-structured interviews facilitate scholars to collect rich, detailed, first-person accounts of participants’ experience (Larkin et al., 2011). Given the locations of the participants and the covid-19 restrictions that were in place, we decided to conduct online interviews. This was the only way to make this study feasible. We were aware that ‘digital poverty (...) can exclude (...) participants’ (Smith et al., 2022, p. 126). However, technology had the reverse effect on our study as it widened our access to participants. Our participants were experienced, established coaches who were using similar technologies in their day-to-day professional activities. We were also very confident about our skills and knowledge of using technology for online meetings, research, and day-to-day professional activities. Synchronous video interviewing and recording were helpful in capturing the experience of the participants fully as we invited our participants to speak reflectively, freely and tell their stories at

some length. Our participants were appreciative of the interview questions such ‘how you have developed yourself as a coach?’ and ‘in what ways you have become a better coach and how?’ and considered the interview as an opportunity to discuss their experiences reflectively.

We were thoughtful about ethical issues that could arise due to the mode of the interviews (Lobe et al., 2022). Thus, we placed a strong emphasis on research ethics by first letting the participants know the nature and form of the study, stressing that their participation was voluntary and then ensuring the right to withdraw. We further considered the context of the study, our participants’ profiles, and the sensitivity of the phenomenon before finalising the data collection method. For example, it may be easier to understand participants and how they respond to interview questions face-to-face and take appropriate actions if they experience any distress (Smith et al., 2022). However, our participants’ and scholars’ familiarity with technology in their day-to-day professional activities helped overcome any barriers related to online interviewing.

Another novel approach to IPA data collection was that each researcher within the team interviewed around 3–5 coaches. This may appear contradictory to IPA’s position on Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation (Larkin et al., 2011). IPA acknowledges that the researcher and the participant play a role in interpreting the participant’s experience, which is the primary mechanism of deepening understanding (Clancy, 2013; Smith, 2004). This is where the notion of double hermeneutics, i.e., interpretations of the participants interpreted by the researcher, plays a role (Larkin et al., 2011). However, eight researchers interviewing participants could be viewed as conflicting with the concept of ‘double hermeneutic’ (Smith et al., 2009). We will attend to this in more detail in the Analysis section.

The researchers used the same semi-structured interview guide that we had collectively devised. A guide is not mandatory; however, it helps to set up a loose agenda for data collection and anticipate latent issues. The purpose of the interview was to address our agreed research question: ‘*how do experienced coaches make sense of their development?*’ therefore, any questions asked by the individual researcher were influenced by the participant’s interpretation of their developmental experiences, and clearly, these are unlikely to be the same across the sample. That meant that supplementary and follow up questions necessarily varied. Therefore, the direction of the interviews was influenced by the participant’s stories of their development journeys rather than the interview schedule. This helped participants to interpret their experience freely (which is the first form of hermeneutics in IPA’s advocacy of double hermeneutics) (Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2009).

7. Data analysis

The data analysis part was the most challenging and the more rewarding experience for us. As previously mentioned, the involvement of all the researchers in data collection posed some critical questions of developing an IPA-informed approach to data analysis. Despite our decision to recruit thirty-two participants for the study, we always aimed to be guided by the IPA’s philosophical tenets. In doing so, safeguarding our commitment to idiographic accounts, and staying within the framework of double hermeneutics (Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022) were challenging.

We were aware that the phenomenon (coach development) was there 'ready to shine forth, but directive work [is] required by the researcher to facilitate coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34). Therefore, the analysis starts with the data collection process, and this helps participants to interpret their experiences. This engagement helps researchers to familiarize themselves with each participant's experience and then to delve deeper into those experiences during the analysis process. Therefore, it is clear that 'for (...) IPA, unlike some other phenomenologies, to do the phenomenology you need to do the hermeneutics, you need to do the interpretation' (Smith, 2018b, p. 6), which confirms that our understanding occurs through culturally and socially mediated interpretations (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Therefore, in IPA, interpretation is central to our understanding (Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2022) and it involves 'the restoration of meaning' (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 8)

Informed by the above theoretical construct and the Smith et al. (2009) guidance on data analysis, it was appropriate for each researcher to analyse the interviews they conducted. Prior to the data analysis, researchers engaged with the IPA data analysis literature to understand the process (Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2009) and the research team had numerous critically reflective discussions. We then followed the analytical steps described below.

Step 1 – The interviews were transcribed using 'Otter' software. We were aware that IPA requires a 'semantic record of interview: that means a transcript showing all the words spoken by everyone who is present' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 69). Although accurate transcriptions were generated through the software, each researcher revisited transcripts whilst listening to the recordings. Continuous listening helped us to be closer to each participant's experience and correct any technology-related errors in capturing the experience.

Step 2 – Having each researcher concentrating on a small number of participants during the initial analysis was helpful in providing sufficient space for each participant's experience. Following Smith et al. (2009) data analysis guidance, each researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis of the experiential accounts of the participants that they interviewed. For each participant (individual case analysis), analysts first developed a theme table, then a cross analysis (first cross analysis) within their group of participants, and then developed a table of themes for each group. Through cross analysis, we aimed 'to highlight the shared and the unique features of the experience across the contributing participants' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100) which was vital for the understanding of the phenomenon. Data analysis was iterative from the initial steps till the end of the write up and it was inductive. This phase of the analysis was strongly informed by IPA tenets of phenomenology and double hermeneutics. It recognized that 'we hear, see, and feel aspects of (...) participants experience because the IPA researcher is not merely an observer or data processor, but is an active contributor to interpretation' (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 3).

However, during the individual case analysis, it was important to eradicate the influences that the researcher had from the first case analysis. Our acceptance that the analysis is a dialogue between the data and the researcher (Larkin et al., 2006; Rajasinghe et al., 2021; Smith, 2004), led us to take a positive approach to bracketing rather than delving into traditional beliefs of exploring the purest form of the phenomenon (Finlay, 2009).

Therefore, we placed emphasis on 'engaging with the participant more than the process of bracketing prior concerns, in the sense that the skilful attention to the former inevitably facilitates the latter' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). We experienced that getting closer to the data is less problematic compared to distancing oneself from it (Richards, 1998) which helps us to minimise the influences from previous case analysis and allow new themes to emerge from each case. Avoiding influences from the first case analysis is a skill that the IPA researchers should aim to develop by actively seeking to prioritise each experiential account in their analysis.

Step 3 – We drew on our capacity as a research team to deepen our sense-making of the experience of the coaches that we interviewed. During one of the meetings after the initial data analysis, one researcher volunteered to look across each group's themes resulting from the first step of the analysis (Step 1). This is another form of a cross-analysis (second cross-analysis) which is not common in IPA studies. This step may contradict commonly accepted data analysis practices of IPA and stretch the notion of double hermeneutics. We were aware that this is a novel form and layer of data analysis as one researcher was attempting to make sense of the interpretations of seven other researchers' interpretations. This step was a result of our discussions regarding the direction of our data analysis and how we might develop more focus. Our reflective discussions and our continuous effort to ground the findings within the participant experience and select themes in line with the research question (Rajasinghe et al., 2021), helped us to collectively agree on the ten themes that had been suggested by the volunteer. This step added another layer of hermeneutics to the analysis process which we began to call 'triple hermeneutics.'

Step 4 – In this phase, we selected four key themes out of the ten (see step 3). This was a subjective judgement, but it was informed by the research question and continuous reflective debates within the research team. We then, in pairs, went back to all the original transcripts but with a more focused aim of developing a deeper analysis of each theme selected. This step was the most detailed analysis where two researchers worked together, employing an empathetic hermeneutics that helps to explore the experience from the participants' perspective and a questioning hermeneutics which facilitates a deeper interpretative account of the participants' experience (Smith et al., 2009).

The paired researchers continuously reflected, questioned, and challenged each other's interpretations of the participants' experience. This added further, different layers of interpretation to our data analysis. This phase involved re-reading the transcripts line by line, keyword searches and extracting original data that were closely linked with each theme. We experienced the hermeneutic circle (Smith, 2007) throughout the analysis but even more so within this space 'where the original of the interview becomes a set of parts as (...) we conducted our analysis, but these then come together in another new whole at the end of the analysis' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). The analysis involved:

- 'Putting the likes with the likes' (abstraction),
- 'An emerging theme itself claiming a superordinate theme status' (submission),
- 'Attempt(ing) to identify contextual and narrative elements of the experience' (contextualisation),
- 'Frequency that a theme is supported by a participant' (Numeration),

- 'Exploration of oppositional relationship' (Polarisation), and appreciating both convergences and divergences (Smith et al., 2009).

Our continuous engagement with the original transcripts up until this phase of the analysis evidences our commitment to grounding the findings in the first-hand experiences of the coaches. It helped us to assure the quality of the findings. This phase of the analysis helped us to develop five super-ordinate themes.

Step 5 – The initial write-ups of these themes were done by the pairs involved in the final phase of the analysis. For each theme, we developed a very detailed write-up and a summary of it. This phase endorses Smith et al.'s (2022: 109) notion that 'as one begins to write a particular theme, one's interpretation of it can develop'. The authors also emphasise that the analyst might find 'going back and forth through (...) the analysis right back to the original data' (2022: 109), which was evident both throughout our writing up process and then as we prepared some journal articles for publication. Therefore, we reiterate Rajasinghe et al.'s (2021) position that analysis is not complete until the write up is. So, 'the division between analysis and writing up is, to a certain extent a false one, in that the analysis will be expanded during the writing up' (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 76).

We presented findings by linking the themes with the participants' words, thereby enabling readers to hear our participant voices. We ensured that the 'interpretative process (...) is transparent, grounded in the data, (...) more trustworthy; the reader is thus invited to join the hermeneutic circle and make sense of the participant's and researcher's sense making endeavours' (Nizza et al., 2021, p. 383). The readers' engagement with the findings may result in different interpretations that can be equally valid and relevant (Yardley, 2008). This should not be considered as a 'misinterpretation' of our findings as 'the analysis is of (...) our participant's sense-making is of no value unless your reader can make sense of it too' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 109). Therefore, the readers' involvement in the hermeneutic circle here is important and it makes the analysis more meaningful and encourages them to apply the findings.

Our approach to data analysis, and our collective reflective engagement with the data, facilitated a multi-faceted interpretation of the participant experience. The analysis moved from a descriptive account of individual experience to a highly interpretative but never-the-less experiential account. We believe that this helped us to deepen our understanding of the realities of coach development.

The analysis process, as previously mentioned was iterative and inductive in nature which is common in qualitative research data analysis (McLeod, 2011). It was informed by IPA data analysis guidance and its philosophical underpinnings. Our reflective engagement with the data helped us to give priority to the participant experience throughout the analysis process which spread over a year from the data collection to the first draft of our first publication. As mentioned, we experienced 'double hermeneutics' when the individual researchers analysed the data from the coaches they interviewed, then a layer of interpretation that we call 'triple hermeneutics,' and in the fourth phase we experienced multiple levels of interpretation.

We consider that our innovative and bolder approach to IPA helped us to actively engage in a dialogue with the participants and develop a more interpretative account

of their experience thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Our transparent reflective and iterative engagement with the data helped us to develop a clearly visible analysis process. That addresses Paley's (2017) contention that in many phenomenological studies, the meaning-making process is invisible. Although the analysis was an intense, time consuming and conceptually challenging exercise, as acknowledged by Smith et al. (2022), it was unique, insightful, and rewarding.

Our deeper engagement with the data and the amount of time that we spent on each case analysis reminds us that 'less is more' in qualitative research and IPA in particular (Rajasinghe et al., 2021, p. 887). Therefore, for IPA studies, the number of participants should be carefully selected with an informed rationale. We were also similarly careful and very transparent in expressing how we conducted our analysis. Prior understanding and experience of IPA data analysis and guidance (Rajasinghe et al., 2021, pp. 874–876; Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82–101) will help readers to make sense of our analysis process and how we conducted an IPA informed data analysis and grounded our findings within the experience of the participants.

In the following section, we reflect on our experience. What can we learn? What are the implications for future research? How could the uniqueness of the project, innovating within the methodology, using a team approach to research, hearing unheard voices help develop our understanding of various phenomena that are, as yet, hidden?

8. Discussion and practical implications for research

8.1. Research design

Our approach to research represents a very natural way of understanding people, that is, by engaging in a dialogue and making sense of those conversations (Rajasinghe, 2020). Such approaches are closely aligned with our position of coaching as a social process (Garvey, 2011; Rajasinghe & Allen, 2020; Rajasinghe & Mansour, 2018) grounded in engaging conversations. Therefore, we invite scholars who are interested in IPA and innovating within the methodology to explore their position on the phenomenon along with IPA's philosophical stance. The ontological and epistemological positions of the researchers involved, and dominant societal ontologies may play a part in either appreciating or rejecting our humane approach to knowing (Silverman, 2020; Gray, 2014). Therefore, a researcher's philosophical position, IPA's philosophical stance, and how they complement and/or contradict each other, is an important consideration at the inception of a project.

This study stands out from many IPA studies due to (a) the relatively large sample size; (b) involvement of multiple researchers; (c) researchers being part of the community and having direct experience of the phenomenon being investigated; (d) introduction of additional analytical steps. These ensured iterative engagement with the data, deeper challenges from a larger research group who occupied different positions on the academic to practitioner spectrum, and diversity of perspectives within the research group who were aligned around a common goal and methodological values. These innovative features, along with our frequent meetings to interrogate our interpretations and emerging analysis, resulted in greater rigour. Moreover, the larger sample size enabled many coach voices to be heard. This combination also led to deeper interpretations grounded in participants' experience leading to rich and the identification of significant experiential themes.

We have not seen any study that combines these four elements in the wider IPA literature, and we are certain that in coaching research ours is the first of such studies. Therefore, our study extends the list of innovative approaches introduced by Smith et al. (2022, p. 120). Out of eight listed possibilities by these authors, our study used online data collection rather than the most common approach of face-to-face data collection. We do not consider online data collection to be an innovative anymore given our familiarity with such approaches following the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is rare for coaches to research coaches' experience using IPA as 'many IPA researchers are not members of the communities they are studying and may not have direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 131). Moreover, the combinations of the above four elements in a single study expands the potential for insightful interpretation and expands the ambit of IPA studies by introducing a novel, bolder design.

8.2. Data analysis

The data analysis process we followed makes another significant contribution to the IPA literature (see section 8). As discussed, we followed IPA data analysis guidance until we reached 'step 3' of our analysis process. We added some extra layers of interpretations, shifting from the notion of double hermeneutics. Our continuous return to the transcripts helped us to ground our interpretations within participants' experience and respect IPA's phenomenological position.

The added layers of interpretations in our research are exceedingly rare in IPA studies. The notion of 'double hermeneutics' (Smith et al., 2022) is popular in IPA data analysis, and we acknowledge the researcher's role within the hermeneutic process (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). However, the involvement of multiple analysts expands IPA's notion of double hermeneutics. One researcher was involved in interpreting other researchers' interpretations and then paired researchers went back to the transcripts to deepen our understanding of four selected themes. This process was innovative and, without a doubt, was helpful in developing a more insightful and actively interpretative account of the participant experience.

We named this layer of interpretation the 'triple hermeneutics' process (see step 3 in section 8). We continuously endeavoured to ensure that participants' experience was fully reflected in the researchers' interpretative work (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). To achieve this, our continuous reflexive and reflective discussions were essential. We re-emphasised the notion that 'we no longer question the need for reflexivity: the question is how to do it' (Finlay, 2002, p. 211). Therefore, more emphasis on reflexivity and enhanced understanding and experience of reflexivity helps researchers to enable participants' experience to shine forth (Nicholls, 2019). The point is not to eradicate the presence of the researcher, as IPA acknowledges the active role of the researcher who helps the phenomenon to shine forth by conducting some detective work (Clancy, 2013; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009) but to provide participant experiences the space that they deserve.

From our experience of conducting this study, if a researcher is conducting an IPA study with a complicated research design and analytical process, discussions around how their research decisions fit within the tenants of IPA and how to ensure that the interpretations are grounded within the participant experience, are vital. We emphasise

that such reflective open discussions were the source of our innovative approach. Employing ‘hermeneutics of empathy’ and ‘hermeneutics of questioning’ helps researchers to ground interpretations within the participant experience (Smith et al., 2009) and to avoid bringing outsider perspectives, for example, by employing ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Ricoeur, 1970).

We acknowledge that to do the phenomenology, we should do the hermeneutics, as interpretations help us to restore the meaning (Ricoeur, 1970) and ‘without phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret, without hermeneutics the phenomenon would not be seen’ (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37). Therefore, the added layers of interpretation within our analysis process endorse the idea of employing hermeneutics to enable the phenomenon to be seen. Hence, innovating within the detective work, such as interviewing the participants and interpreting their experience, is vital to develop a deeper level of interpretation and understanding. Our study is an example of such innovation which goes beyond generic IPA research designs and analytical process (see Cope, 2011, p. 611; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 367; Rajasinghe & Garvey, 2023, p. 167). We truly experienced that the division between analysis and write up is hypothetical (Smith & Osborn, 2008) as our interpretations of the participant experiences further developed during the writing up process (Smith et al., 2009). We also returned to the transcripts during the writing up, continuously engaging with the hermeneutic circle throughout an iterative, nonlinear analysis process. Our awareness that ‘good IPA writing involves a dual attention to commonality and to particularity’ (Nizza et al., 2021, p. 383) helped us to explore patterns of affinity between participants and to highlight the specifics of their experience. This also emphasises the continuity of idiographic commitments of IPA studies.

8.3. Quality assurance

We placed a strong emphasis on quality assurance of the project throughout the process, first, informed by quality criteria suggested by Yardley (2000). The quality criteria employed should be aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of the study rather than, as often happens, attempting to interpret the relevance of quality and validity of qualitative research through a positivist perspective (Smith et al., 2022). Smith (2011) suggests that the following IPA data analysis guidance is ‘a way’ of ensuring quality in IPA studies. The term ‘a way’ denotes that it is not the ‘only way,’ reflecting the subjective nature of the quality of qualitative research (Flick, 2014).

Table 1 presents established criteria for IPA quality assurance. Like the data analysis guidance in IPA, quality assurance guidance is not prescriptive. For example, Smith (2011), and Elliot et al. (1999) keep the guidelines open by offering researchers an opportunity to justify their own criteria for quality assurance of qualitative research. We endorse the notion of appreciating the contextual and subjective nature of quality assurance of IPA studies and leaving it to the researcher/research teams to carefully decide their quality criteria. However, we re-iterate that understanding of the quality of IPA is important before initiating studies, and the quality should be embedded within the research process and initiated at the inception of the project.

In our research, we felt the above criteria were relevant. However, we embraced the notion that good methods and quality criterion make good research (Chamberlain, 2000) and endorsed a much broader approach to quality assurance in qualitative research. Our

Table 1. Quality criteria popularly appear in current IPA literature.

Elliot et al., (1999) – Generic criteria	Yardley (2000) – Generic criteria	Smith (2011) – IPA specific criteria	Nizza et al., (2021) – IPA specific criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owning one's own perspective. • Situating the sample • Grounding in examples • Providing credibility checks • Coherence • Accomplishing general Vs specific research tasks • Resonating with readers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitivity to the context • Commitment and rigour • Transparency and coherence • Impact and Importance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subscribing to the principles of IPA • Degree of transparency • Coherence, plausibility, and interest • Sufficiency of sampling and the density of evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping focus and offering depth • Presenting strong data and interpretation • Engaging and enlightening the reader

team approach to research, practitioner experience, and scholarly confidence within the research group, actively challenging each other's predispositions and interpretations, our continuous discussions – often returning to the transcripts – were vital to our quality assurance. Elliot et al (1999) emphasised the idea of 'using multiple analysts' as a way of checking the credibility of themes as they develop. However, the involvement of multiple researchers in our study was broader than Elliot et al.'s (1999) notion as our critical engagement happened throughout the project rather than narrowly focusing on the analysis stage. Furthermore, the practitioner and scholarly experience in coaching also helped us to become more open-minded and flexible enhanced our willingness to 'enter into, and respond to, the participant's world.' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 51) and led us to ask good questions of each other about our judgements. We also believe that multiple researcher-practitioner combinations facilitated internal verification checks throughout the research that helped ensure the quality of the study. Our approach helped us to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon and to increasingly focus on 'constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participants' words; (...) and attending to convergence and divergence' (Nizza et al., 2021, p. 369) which are hallmark of high-quality IPA studies.

Smith et al.'s (2009, 2022) encouragement to innovate within the methodology helped us to produce a novel approach to research, data analysis and quality assurance. It seems that Smith et al.'s. (2022: 121) observation that most IPA studies are based on the implicit assumption about the structure of a research team and project where 'a researcher (...) is supported by one or two supervisors or peers, and there are participants in the research'. We understand, this observation is true for general business research methodologies. However, this assumption appears to play a reductionist role and hinders researchers who wish to innovate and take unconventional research decisions. Therefore, we encourage the wider qualitative scholarly community to be open and innovative within IPA and beyond. Relying on, attempting to systematize, or producing universal good practice for conducting qualitative research may result in 'methodolatry' (Chamberlain, 2000) that can harm emerging, innovative, and potentially rich research approaches.

9. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed an innovative approach to conducting an IPA study that explored the learning and development of experienced coaches. First, the paper

described the source of knowledge, study design, data collection and analysis. Then we argued how our innovative approach contributes to the current IPA literature, and how some of our arguments might be transferable to the broader qualitative research repertoire. Our study design, which was emergent rather than pre-defined, combines (a) a relatively larger sample; (b) involvement of multiple researchers and analysts; (c) researchers being part of the community and having direct experience of the phenomenon being investigated; (d) introduction of additional analytical steps. This diversity embedded in our study presents a unique, innovative IPA study which helps researchers to develop a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of participant experience. Therefore, our study extends IPA methodology by presenting a unique IPA design and analytical procedure which also delivers greater rigour throughout the research process.

We also argue that our previous experience of conducting IPA studies along with the novel practices introduced were strengths of our study which helped us to produce quality outcomes. However, they can function as limitations if researchers do not place sufficient emphasis on their rationale for each research decision and their capacity (e.g., time, knowledge, skills, and confidence) to conduct an innovative IPA study. It is also important that the researchers be mindful of the limitations of IPA (see Rajasinghe, 2020; Rajasinghe et al., 2021). We encourage researchers to conduct IPA studies following both simple and innovative designs (see Smith et al., 2022). However, we are convinced that, if done appropriately, innovative designs present more opportunities to develop deeper interpretations, assure quality and ensure the validity of qualitative research.

In addition, our study presents a good example of practitioner-researcher engagement to produce and disseminate knowledge. We emphasise that IPA's humanist approach to knowing enabled us to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon without reducing it to a few predefined variables. Our position on truth and knowledge may contradict scholars who strongly adhere to the existence of objective realities external to social actors. However, we hope that the arguments within this paper encourage the wider scholarly communities and particularly qualitative research community to explore the possibilities of innovating within the methodology rather than following accepted norms. It will help us to illuminate the experience of social phenomena with deeper insights thereby contributing to the understanding of wider stakeholders of academic research such as practitioners, policymakers, and educators.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Conflict of interests

There is no conflict of interest to declare for this project.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly. Therefore, the data related to the project that this paper discusses as an example of a methodological innovation is not available publicly or upon request.

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