Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a Coaching Research Methodology

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Abstract

This paper suggests that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a valuable research method for coaching research. The paper positions coaching as a social activity and highlights its subjective and contextual nature. It aims to establish clear guidance by drawing on both the author's recent research experience and others' scholarly work. The author encourages scholars with a similar interest (phenomenology, hermeneutics, ideography) to explore IPA as a potential methodology for coaching research. The clearly laid out guidance here on how to conduct an IPA study will be attractive to the wider qualitative research community. The paper contributes to coaching research by promoting IPA as a methodology that helps to develop subjective understanding within the field.

Practice Points

1. To which field of practice area(s) in coaching is your contribution directly relevant?

The outlined methodology helps to explore the practice of coaching qualitatively across all fields and will be particularly useful for those who consider the analysis of sense-making of experience as a valid way of knowing.

2. What do you see as the primary contribution that your submission makes to coaching practice?

The paper will improve practitioner understanding about the contextual and subjective nature of coaching practice. The set guidelines within the paper encourage more qualitative research within the field which enhances the current evidence base for practitioners.

3. What are its tangible implications for practitioners?

The encouraged subjective understanding throughout this paper helps coaches to acknowledge the subjective nature of coaching and facilitates them to better understand their coachees in practice.

Key Words

Coaching Research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Introduction

Coaching has become an increasingly common phenomenon in a number of fields, including business and adult learning. However, while the research base is growing, the coaching literature remains largely practitioner-led (Garvey et al., 2014). In order to achieve its full potential, some researchers (Gray et al., 2016; Myers, 2017) emphasise the importance of wider coaching research. One such important research element is to engage with studies that enable a deeper understanding of how coaching is able to, for example, contribute to leadership development, business growth, stress relief and performance enhancement (see Garvey, 2011). Due to the dominant positivist approaches within coaching research, there is a need to generate deeper understanding by using recognised qualitative approaches (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). This paper addresses this demand by proposing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an appropriate methodology for coaching research.

IPA is a psychological research methodology that has been widely used in health psychology (Roberts, 2013; Callary et al., 2015). It offers cross-disciplinary applicability due to its comprehensiveness as a qualitative research methodology (Wagstaff et al., 2014). IPA is introduced by Smith (1996) as a qualitative, dynamic research methodology which derives from phenomenological psychology (Smith, et al., 2009) and is a relatively new methodology for most other disciplines (Wagstaff et al., 2014; Aluthgama-Baduge, 2017). The paper discusses IPA's potential as a coaching research methodology that seeks to develop contextual understanding by exploring human experience.

Coaching

Coaching emerged from several independent sources and spread through relationships and social networks; thus, it is a contextual social activity (Garvey, 2017; Shoukry and Cox, 2018; Rajasinghe and Mansour, 2019). Coaching takes many forms and occurs in many different contexts. Therefore, coaching has no universal realities and definitions appear to vary according to the circumstances (see Bennett and Bush, 2009; Maltbia et al., 2014; Lofthouse, 2018; Lai and Palmer, 2019).

This situation results in diverse meanings being attributed by coaching stakeholders to the term, 'coaching' (Walker-Fraser, 2011; Passmore et al., 2018). The diversity within definitions is highlighted by Hamlin et al., (2008), who identify 37 definitions within the literature. Bachkirova and Kauffman's (2009) statement that most definitions fall into one of four groups, depending on whether they place emphasis on process, purpose, context or clientele, complies

with the above argument that the definitions vary according to the circumstances due to the subjective and contextual nature of coaching (Garvey, 2011; Du Toit, 2014; Gray et al., 2016; Rajasinghe, 2018).

Therefore, individuals have the authority to give meaning and shape their understanding (see Garvey, 2017) and the meanings attributed to coaching by individuals are informed by the philosophy of approach, focus, and purpose of the specific coaching activity (Walker-Fraser, 2011). This is further confirmed by Passmore et al's (2018, p.121) observation from reviewing definitions over 30 years, that 'coaching has been refined and redefined continually over this period'. Therefore, the 'Wild Westness', a metaphor used by Sherman and Freas (2004) to explain the unregulated nature of coaching rather than seeking universal definitions, is acknowledged within this paper.

This stance may appear contradictory to the dominant positivist views and for professional bodies as they continue to seek universal understanding, but the author holds to the above notion that coaching can be interpreted differently by different individuals and thus different meanings can be embedded into the term 'coaching'. This position also supports the author's argument that exploring how people make sense of their subjective experience is a valid way of knowing (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Rajasinghe, 2018). For this purpose, IPA appears to be a relevant research methodology. Prior to furthering the discussion of IPA's relevance, the section below develops a brief narrative of coaching research.

Coaching Research

Coaching research dates back to 1937 (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011) and the field had a slow pace of growth. There is a positive sign of scholarly development in coaching recently (Garvey, 2011; Gray et al., 2016), however the area is still in need of more research (Bachkirova, 2017).

The stakeholders of coaching also continue to demand research evidence to justify their investment (Grant, 2012; Lawrence and Whyte, 2014). Some authors (Western, 2012; Gray et al., 2016) argue that the established positive perceptions of coaching amongst coaching communities remain largely unchallenged despite its increasing popularity (Garvey et al., 2014; Bachkirova et al., 2017). Thus, a sound evidence base is vital if coaching is to be seen as a more credible and 'knowledge based discipline' (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 23).

Coaching is generally seen as a practitioner-dominant intervention (Garvey et al., 2014; Korotov, 2017) in which theory often struggles to keep up with practice (Page and De Haan, 2014). The popular opinion-based practitioners (see Rogers, 2012; Whitmore, 2012) tend to focus on the models and observations that have worked for coaches. The popularity of these models seems to encourage others to accept them without critique; thus, coaching has become a socially contagious process. However, wider research and more critical and diverse approaches are needed to investigate and provide evidence for the positive claims made by practitioners. IPA is a good methodology that facilitates deeper critical, contextual understanding of a given phenomenon. Critical understanding is established by closely engaging with human experience and employing empathetic and questioning hermeneutics.

In general, coaching research has been informed by positivist views and there is a demand to develop more generalisable knowledge. As a result, some coaching researchers have questioned the reliability of case-study led research based on self-reported data (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Grief, 2017). For example, Grant (2017, p. 64) frames the purpose of formal research into the discipline as being 'to produce more generalisable knowledge'. Apparent positivist dominance in coaching research has been led by the professional institutes with a commercial interest in the standardisation and accreditation of coaching but the heterogeneous nature of the phenomenon makes it contestable 'whether coaching outcomes can be studied in a scientific manner' (Grief, 2017, p. 569).

The demand for more positivist studies appears to be rooted in medicine, physics and psychology with an aim of developing laws that govern human behaviour (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009). The author's position challenges the notion of developing universally applicable theories and it is clear that little attention has been paid to the essence of the subjective nature of coaching (Fatien Diochon et al., 2019).

The development of subjective and contextual understanding is, therefore, both relevant and timely (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Fatien Diochon et al., 2019). It has been argued that 'all research paradigms (…) can have a space within coaching' (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011, p. 77); indeed a balanced perspective is important if the discipline is to avoid being reduced to a dry and mechanistic process (Bachkirova and Kaufman, 2008). Research that focuses only on developing universal knowledge may have very little to do with what actually happens within the coaching situation (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009; Bachkirova, 2017).

Therefore, subjective understanding can also be seen as a 'powerful a conduit to truth as objective information' (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009, p. 108).

Thus, 'focusing (…) upon how various individuals experience an event or process (such as a coaching encounter) is valid as an avenue of inquiry' (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009, p.108). Thus, 'qualitative studies using recognised techniques, such as IPA, grounded theory, (…) and discourse analysis, have a valuable role to play in helping us to understand the human interaction of coaching' (Passmore and Fillery-Travis; 2011, p. 80) at a deeper level. With the demand to conduct more qualitative studies within the field, coaching scholars are showing increasing interest in qualitative research. IPA is also developing a presence within coaching research (e.g. Passmore and Townsend, 2012; Nanduri, 2017; Lech et al., 2018; Rajasinghe, 2018). Most of these studies have sketchy methodological justifications and do not provide analytical procedures of sufficient depth. This paper addresses this gap by discussing how to conduct an IPA study and provides theoretical justification for IPA research decisions.

The following section explains IPA's suitability for coaching research, particularly those studies that seek to explore how social actors give meaning to their experience.

IPA for Coaching Research

Informed by Bachkirova and Kaufman (2008), this paper suggests that exploring how social actors (e.g. coachees, coaches, investors in coaching, policy makers) give meaning to their coaching experience is a valid avenue of inquiry, an approach that is in close alignment with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA. By placing particular emphasis on the personal coaching experience (Phenomenology) and meanings that individuals bring to their coaching experience (Hermeneutics and Ideography), IPA facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Smith, 2011). This paper's position also requires scholars to consider contextual and subjective elements to appreciate the humanist nature of coaching (Du Toit and Sim, 2010; Garvey, 2017). Through exploring the culturally and socially-informed subjective experience, IPA facilitates the capture of individual realities which are shaped by values, culture and context (Smith et al., 2009).

The methodology agrees with Heidegger's (1962) notion that phenomenological inquiry is the start of an interpretative process in which participants interpret their situated experience of a given phenomenon (coaching); in turn, these interpretations are interpreted by the researcher (Smith, 2011; Wagstaff et al., 2014). Thus, it requires both phenomenology (as it explores the

subjective experience of coaching) and hermeneutic insights due to the interpretative engagement with the experience by both the participant and the researcher. Both phenomenology and hermeneutics play a significant role in developing understanding, as 'without phenomenology there would be nothing to interpret; without hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37). Therefore, for coaching scholars interested in analysing the coaching experience of individuals in order to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, IPA can be an appealing research methodology. IPA facilitates deeper understanding of coaching's unseen subjective elements by exploring how it is experienced and understood by individuals within a given context (Larkin et al., 2011). This complies with Shoukry and Cox's (2018) highlighted need to analyse coaching as a social process.

Finally, IPA's acceptance as a good methodology for new and/or under-researched disciplines (Smith et al., 2009) makes it particularly suitable for the investigation of coaching as a relatively new and under-researched (Gray et al., 2016; Myers, 2017) field.

The following section aims to develop a sound understanding of how an IPA study should be conducted. The discussion may be relevant to wider qualitative researchers interested in human experience and sense-making. Researchers seeking to develop their knowledge of how IPA facilitates a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon are encouraged to reflect on the section (above) whilst reading the section (below).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Broadly, the focus of IPA is on 'being-in-the-world' and 'lived experience' (Larkin et al., 2011). IPA assumes that human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but active interpreters whose understanding of their world is shaped by their individual preconceptions and experiences (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). IPA aims to understand how individuals make sense of their particular experience (e.g. coaching relationship or the process) within a specific context (Wagstaff and Williams, 2014; Callary et al., 2015). The phenomenon of interest is thus explored from the participants' perspective, with priority being given to how they experience it and the meanings these experiences have for them (Larkin et al., 2011). However, IPA also acknowledges the researcher's role in co-constructing meaning (Wagstaff and Williams, 2014); it recognises that how the researcher interprets their findings will also be affected by their own lived experience and conceptions (Smith et al., 2009; Shinebourne, 2011).

IPA's comprehensiveness as a qualitative research methodology makes it applicable across disciplines (Wagstaff et al., 2014), but the author argues that it is particularly relevant to coaching researchers who agree with his position on coaching. To develop further understanding of IPA, the section below discusses its philosophical underpinnings.

Philosophical Underpinnings of IPA and Coaching

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience (Van Manen, 1997; Pernecky and Jamal, 2010). It is a powerful tool for examining 'how individuals subjectively experience and give meaning to a particular phenomenon' (Gill, 2014, p. 131). The goal of phenomenology is to fully describe a lived experience; it assumes that only those who have experienced a particular phenomenon can communicate it to the outside world. Phenomenology answers questions of meaning in understanding an experience from the subjects that have experienced it (Roberts, 2013). Therefore, it is highly relevant to any study that aims to explore the meanings that participants bring to their experience.

There are two main schools of phenomenology stemming from the German philosophers, Husserl and Heidegger (Smith et al., 2009). These two schools – descriptive and interpretative – underlie the diverse views of phenomenology that have been developed by researchers over the years (Gill, 2014). IPA 'appreciates the collective contribution of scholars such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Sartre, to develop a mature, multi-faceted, holistic phenomenology' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34).

IPA also acknowledges that the 'understanding is always from a perspective, always a matter of interpretation' (McLeod, 2001, p. 56). This is implied by Heidegger, who characterises human beings in terms of 'Dasein', which refers to the aspect of our humanness and nature (McLeod, 2011). Larkin et al., (2011) emphasise the importance of perspectival directedness by saying 'we are already out there in a meaningful world of this kind, and indeed, meaningfulness is a fundamental part of its constitution' (Larkin et al., 2011, p. 8). It appears that the giving of meaning to an experience is always context-sensitive (situated) and that human beings are an inseparable part of the world (Grbich, 2007; Palmer et al., 2010). Therefore, it seems that the nature of the existence can be revealed and understood through one's involvement in the world (Grbich, 2007; Larkin et al., 2011) which justifies the analysis of individual human experience to understand the lived world.

IPA follows Heidegger (1962) in seeing individuals as embedded in a world of objects, relationships, language and culture (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, 'understanding occurs through our socially (…) and historically mediated interpretations and relationships' (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010, p. 1064). This complies with the researcher's position that coaching is a social activity which is embedded in culture language and relationships. Therefore, to develop deeper understanding of coaching, IPA is interested in the exploration of individual experience rather than delving into any particular school of phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009).

Following IPA as a phenomenological research approach helps researchers to give priority to the first-hand experience of participants. This helps to avoid the tendency to lose sight of meaning which is the distinguishing feature of phenomenological studies (see Paley, 2017). Paley (2017) also argues that the meaning-making process of phenomenological studies is largely invisible. IPA addresses the issue by laying out a sound theoretical basis for the meaning-making process (see data analysis section) which also ensures the transparency and traceability of studies.

The author's experience of conducting IPA analysis (see Rajasinghe, 2018) suggests that having a robust analytical tool helps at least novice researchers to avoid generic descriptive methods of data analysis (see Smith, 2011; Smith, 2019) which some phenomenological researchers appear to rely on despite their claims of analysing human experiences at a deeper level (Paley, 2017). IPA also brings phenomenology and hermeneutics together to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Smith, 2019). Therefore, IPA offers the depth required to develop a sound understanding of how individuals make sense of their experience. However, readers are encouraged to critically explore phenomenological research (e.g. Heidegger, 1962; Crotty, 1996; Van Manen, 1997; Giorgi, 2009; Paley, 2017; Van Manen, 2017) and IPA's take on phenomenology in order to make sense of IPA's relevance to their studies.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the second major theoretical influence on IPA, is the theory of interpretation (Smith, 2011). Interpretation is considered central to understanding in IPA (Clancy, 2013), and involves 'the restoration of meaning' (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 8) by both the researcher and the participants. The researcher makes sense of participants' interpretation of their coaching experience (Pringle et al., 2011; Smith, 2011) (double hermeneutics). Ricoeur (1970) identifies

two schools of hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of empathy and the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970; Willig, 2014).

Ricoeur's (1970) hermeneutics of suspicion draws on an outside perspective (for example, psychoanalysis) to understand the phenomenon (Willig, 2014); however, this is incompatible with IPA which does not intend to draw an outside perspective into the phenomenon of investigation (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al., (2009), IPA combines the hermeneutics of empathy with the hermeneutics of questioning. The former helps the researcher to take an insider's view of the participant's experience (Smith, 2011), whilst the latter generates deeper understanding and supports the move from description to interpretation during the data analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA's interest in individuals and their sense-making makes it more ideographic (Smith et al., 2009) than nomothetic. The methodology focuses on particulars rather than generalities, although ultimately a cross-analysis is conducted to explore themes across cases.

Study Design

IPA does not explicitly promote any particular research design, a stance in line with embedded-openness and flexibility within qualitative research (see Flick, 2014; Bell et al., 2019), but most IPA-based studies tend to follow a similar pattern; that is, individual, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a small, homogeneous, purposively selected sample. Thus far, there have been relatively few deviations from this general trend (e.g. Clare, 2003; Wagstaff and Williams, 2014). The rationale developed for innovative designs within these papers may help interested parties to develop their understanding. The philosophical underpinnings and research interests play a role in design decisions in IPA, as in any other methodology.

Sampling and Sample Size

Sample selection is of paramount importance in qualitative research as it profoundly impacts the quality of the research outcomes (Gray, 2014). Since the emphasis is on representing the phenomenon rather than the population (Smith et al., 2009), qualitative research tends to employ non-probability sampling in the hope that carefully selected respondents will generate robust, rich, in-depth information (Grbich, 2007; Gray, 2014). The number of participants is not a major concern; what matters is the relevance and richness of the data they generate (Patton, 2002). That said, there is a general tendency, even in qualitative studies, to look for population representation (Marshall, 1996).

Marshall (1996, p. 523) observes that 'qualitative researchers often fail to understand the usefulness of studying small samples' because they appear to share the general misconception that generalisability is the definitive objective of any good research. Informed by Marshal (1996) and Gray (2014), it is emphasised that an appropriate sample size of a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question; IPA complies with this qualitative research tradition (see Smith, 2011). Unlike studies with nomothetic aims, those in the ideographic tradition are not reliant on sample size (Gray, 2014). Thus, there is the possibility of employing only a single case in qualitative studies because they do not attempt to construct value-free objective realities (Gray, 2014). In fact, recruiting a large sample to generate statistical representation undermines the rationale behind choosing IPA as it reduces the opportunity for in-depth analysis of individual coaching experience (Yardley, 2000).

Smith et al., (2009, p.48) emphasise that 'sampling must be theoretically consistent with the qualitative paradigm in general, and with IPA, this means that samples are selected purposefully'. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to access key informants within the phenomenon (e.g. coaching relationship) (Suri, 2011). It permits the selection of a sample that is broadly homogeneous, which is important for capturing the understanding (Smith, 2011; Wagstaff and Williams, 2014) embedded in the coaching experience of individuals. However, it is acknowledged that full homogeneity is not practical given the diversity within most sample populations (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

In IPA, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews tend to be the widely-used method for generating in-depth data (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Smith et al., (2009, p. 4) concur, saying that 'the data collection is usually (but not necessarily) in the form of semi-structured interviews'. Therefore, there is some direction for IPA data collection; however, the choice of the method should be driven by the required attributes (e.g. fluid, rich, complex, naturalistic, in-depth) (Richards, 2011).

Since IPA requires researchers to gain access to the first-hand experience of participants (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012), the chosen data collection method must give participants sufficient space to describe their experiences at length (Callary et al., 2015). Therefore, semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable but other methods (e.g. postal questionnaires, email dialogue, focus groups, diaries) may also yield rich data (see Smith et al., 2009). Particularly for coaching research, semi-structured interviews may be appealing due to the

experience of coaching stakeholders in conversational encounters and the positive perception of conversation in developing understanding.

Data Analysis

The IPA literature does not explicitly recommend any particular method of data analysis (Pringle et al., 2011). However, a thorough critical exploration of a range of studies (Fade, 2004; Smith and Osborn, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012; Jeong and Othman, 2016) reveals that most authors follow approaches similar to that suggested by Smith et al., (2009, pp. 82-101). However, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012, p. 366) emphasise that the guidelines are 'merely (…) illustrations of one possible way of analysing the qualitative material', thus encouraging researchers to innovate.

Data analysis in IPA is generally inductive; it is bottom up, with codes being generated from the raw data (McLeod, 2011). The main aim of the analysis is to give full appreciation to the experience of each participant, in accordance with the ideographic commitment of IPA (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

Analysis generally comprises a set of processes that move from the particular (account-specific themes) to the shared (common themes generated through cross-analysis) and from description to interpretation (by using empathetic and questioning hermeneutics). This is where the researcher's interpretations are incorporated into the data (double hermeneutics) (Smith, 2019).

Despite the urge to innovate within the methodology, the guidance offered by Smith et al., (2009) for data analysis appears to help researchers to produce more interpretative accounts of participants' experiences and to ensure the quality and rigour of studies (Smith, 2011). The guidance is said to have been instrumental in increasing IPA's popularity among qualitative scholars. It has certainly enhanced author's own scholarly confidence and has encouraged the consideration of IPA as a potential methodology in his personal coaching research (see Rajasinghe, 2018). Therefore, following the set guidelines may help researchers to conduct an accurate analysis (at least for novice researchers) in line with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA.

Writing Up

IPA analysis is not complete until the researcher writes up the findings (Smith et al., 2009); indeed, the writing up process itself may help the analyst to make further sense of the data,

themes and sub-themes. As part of the process of communicating individual stories, themes may be reduced or combined (see Smith et al., 2009; Jeong and Othman, 2016). The writing up process can also be seen as an interpretative engagement with the participants experience or a conversation with participants and the researcher. Therefore, '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 and Osborn, 2008, p. 6).

Smith et al., (2009, p. 109) suggest two ways of presenting findings. One is to present themes and 'present evidence from each participant to support each theme', while the other ensures stronger ideographic commitments as 'the participant is prioritised and themes for each person are presented together'. The first option is considered the norm, possibly because it is easier to organise themes to answer a particular question, but researchers are free to decide which approach best suits their purpose.

Quality and Rigour

Establishing validity and rigour is as important in qualitative as quantitative research (Flick, 2014). However, there appears to be a continuous dissatisfaction with the way the quality and validity of qualitative research are evaluated, largely because of the continuous attempts to use criteria taken from quantitative research (Marshall, 1996; Tracy, 2010).

The importance of choosing appropriate criteria for qualitative research is highlighted by Smith and Osborn (2008), who argue that the epistemological roots of qualitative methodologies differ from those of quantitative methodologies. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to consider their own ontological and epistemological positions when evaluating suitable criteria for quality and validity.

Elliott et al., (1999) and Yardley (2000), present general guidelines for assessing the quality of qualitative research. Elliot et al's (1999, p. 220) criteria, are described as '"publishability" guidelines especially pertinent to qualitative research'. Yardley (2000) suggests that quality and validity should be assessed against four criteria: (1) sensitivity to the context; (2) commitment and rigour; (3) transparency and coherence; (4) impact and importance. Meanwhile, Smith's (2011) criterion is quite specific to IPA. These criteria have been widely employed in IPA studies. However, the criteria espoused by the above authors may be interpreted differently by different researchers, and the decision of which criteria are most appropriate is a subjective one (Flick, 2014), even though, in practice, many appear to favour those suggested by Yardley.

Limitations and Potentials of IPA

IPA facilitates deeper understanding of the phenomenon and has the potential to generate transferable findings (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, it is understandable that findings generated through IPA studies cannot be generalised as they are 'assertions of enduring values that are context free' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 110), which can sometimes be an issue for positivist researchers.

IPA also leaves space for readers to develop their own understanding, potentially leading to equally valuable interpretations of the findings (Yardley, 2000). While some might view this as misinterpretation of the findings, IPA recognises that the reader, too, plays a role in the hermeneutic dialogue. Smith et al., (2009, p.109) argue that the 'analysis is of no value unless (…) the reader can make some sense of it too'. This is an acceptance of how understanding is generated through culturally and socially informed lenses in the naturalistic world (Flick, 2014; Haven and Van Grootel, 2019). Thus, rather than being viewed as a limitation, it can be considered as a strength of IPA as it acknowledges that understanding is always perspective-driven (McLeod, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews are a widely acknowledged data collection tool in qualitative research (Flick, 2014). The apparent dependence on semi-structured interviews within IPA is theoretically rationalised (see data collection section) and the promotion of understanding through conversation is natural, human and closely linked with coaching. Thus, IPA continues to demonstrate its ability to facilitate naturalistic inquiries (Smith, 2011).

Another potential limitation, not widely discussed in the literature, is that both audio recording and verbatim transcriptions are unable to convey the subtleties of participants' non-verbal communication. Placing too much emphasis on the reading and re-reading of transcripts can restrict the actual voices of participants being heard (see Rajasinghe, 2018). The author's experience suggests that having research diaries, transcribing immediately following the interviews, and assuring ideographic commitments, all help to address this limitation effectively.

The dependency on language to understand an experience may be considered a limitation. However, communicating experiences through language is human; therefore, how people construct meaning to their experience appears a valid way of knowing rather than a limitation and the interpretations of experience are inevitably 'shaped, limited and enabled by language' (Smith et al., 2009, p.194).

Self-reported bias may be seen as an issue during the interview process (Solansky, 2010; Berg and Karlsen, 2012) although the phenomenon is part of the natural lived world. However, it is important that IPA researchers continue to engage with their studies reflectively and reflexively (see May and Perry, 2017; Clancy, 2013). This helps to place participant experience at the heart of their research. Readers are also reminded that the author's experience of conducting IPA studies, including towards a PhD, may have had a significant impact on how he makes sense of IPA's appropriateness for coaching research. The author engaged with the London IPA group, presented his work at IPA London meetings, and continue to follow the group's Yahoo online forum in order to network and share knowledge with fellow IPA researchers. Furthermore, he has coached a number of IPA scholars over the last few years, facilitating them to develop their understanding of IPA as a qualitative research methodology. This has resulted in a somewhat positive articulation of IPA's appropriateness to coaching research; nonetheless, it should be viewed both critically and analytically. Similarly, the author's position on coaching is influenced by fellow colleagues' philosophical views on this issue, together with the experience gained through his personal coaching, research, teaching and practice.

Conclusion

Despite the continued growth of coaching research, as previously argued, dilemmas remain due to lack of understanding and development within the field. There is also a continuous demand for more positivistic research, but the contention of this paper is that researchers now need to develop a deeper understanding of coaching by positioning it as a social activity and by respecting its inherently subjective nature.

This paper discusses IPA as an appropriate research methodology for developing deeper subjective understanding within the field, particularly for those researchers who appreciate diversity and understand the subjective nature of coaching. The rationale developed within the paper may encourage scholars to look for a new way of investigating complex issues, both to take research forward and to enhance stakeholders' understanding of the phenomenon (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). However, by discussing how to conduct an IPA study in more general terms, the paper aims to encourage qualitative researchers within the wider scholarly community to explore the relevance of IPA to their studies.

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