

Analytical Pluralism in Phenomenological Research: Exploring Coach Psychological Flexibility During COVID-19

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Abstract: This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of coaches who integrated Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) principles into their professional practice and personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research examined how this integration influenced psychological flexibility, self-development, self-practice, and well-being amid the pandemic's uncertainty and disruption. To account for the conceptual and experiential complexity of the inquiry, an analytically pluralistic approach was adopted to enable multiple interpretive lenses. A layered design combined reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) for breadth and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) for depth, aligning the epistemological stance of critical realism with the functional contextualist assumptions underpinning ACT. Twelve experienced ACT-informed coaches from diverse global contexts were purposively recruited via professional networks and social media. Each participant, with at least 100 hours of coaching experience, engaged in a 60–90-minute semi-structured online interview that incorporated reflective prompts to elicit rich narrative accounts in a supportive environment. Data were initially inductively coded using NVivo, following the phases of RTA with a semantic focus. Subsequently, three data-rich transcripts were analysed using IPA, involving descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual noting, leading to the development of personal and group experiential themes. The integration of RTA and IPA findings provided nuanced responses to the research questions, enriching interpretation by distinguishing between explicit and hermeneutic, and between pragmatic and existential dimensions. Although methodologically demanding, this dual-analytic approach deepened understanding of how ACT principles, integrated into coaching and personal life, supported psychological flexibility and well-being during a global crisis.

Keywords: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Psychological Flexibility, Phenomenology, Analytical Plurality, Analytical Triangulation

1. Introduction and Background

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly changed the daily lives of large numbers of people around the world in ways that would have been unimaginable at the start of 2020. Restrictions imposed to contain the virus, including lockdowns and quarantine measures, shifted the context in which people lived worldwide. Daily routines were disrupted, social isolation increased, economic uncertainty grew, interpersonal relationships changed and free movement was limited. These conditions usually serve as protective factors for mental health, yet their disruption left populations widely vulnerable to psychological distress (Ettman et al., 2020; Shepherd et al., 2022). During prolonged times of stress, many individuals understandably tend to manage distress through avoidance, distancing, or engaging in a range of safety behaviours that limit their ability to participate in valued activities (Panayiotou et al., 2021). For many, the prolonged uncertainty also led to worry and rumination, worsening the psychological toll (Shepherd et al., 2022). Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, global reports have revealed a substantial increase in psychological distress across the general population (Ettman et al., 2020; McCracken et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2022), with growing evidence that these effects have persisted well beyond the acute phase of the crisis (Yu & McCracken, 2025). Importantly, the distress related to Covid-19 was widespread across the population and did not affect only those working with or suffering from the virus. It reflected the pervasive nature of the disruption itself (Pakenham & Stafford-brown, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2022).

2. The Research Problem

Coaches played an important role during the pandemic, providing clients with support and a safe space to reflect at a time of extraordinary disruption (Irving, 2021; Terblanche, 2021). Many organisations made coaching available to leaders and key workers, and the work often extended into crisis management as the pandemic met the criteria of a disaster as defined by the International Federation of Red Cross (Terblanche, 2021). Writing after the 2008 recession, Whitmore (2011) observed that there is much to learn about coaching in uncertain times, given the ever-present possibility of large-scale disruptive events. The pandemic circumstances offered an opportunity to explore how coaches and the resources they draw on hold up under extreme conditions.

Coaching during the pandemic was especially demanding as coaches and clients faced the same pressures around job security, work–life balance and personal wellbeing (Irving, 2021). The nature of coaching requires

high levels of awareness and emotional resourcefulness, as the work takes place in complex and adaptive systems that are dynamic, interdependent, and constantly evolving (Irving, 2021; Passmore, 2014). Yet many coaches work independently in competitive markets with limited access to support; they frequently navigate tensions between clients' developmental goals and organisational priorities. Clients often seek coaching around difficult or threatening issues; the pandemic intensified this, with coaches more likely to feel personally affected or inadequate. Despite these challenges, the literature provides limited guidance on how coaches might manage such experiences (Graßmann et al., 2019).

As members of the helping professions, coaches must maintain their wellbeing and practise effective self-care to remain resilient and effective. Wellbeing may diminish gradually, and coaches can find themselves in a downward spiral before changes are fully noticed (McEwen & Rowson, 2022b). While burnout is well recognised in therapeutic and counselling roles, it is seldom discussed in relation to coaches themselves (Bachkirova, 2016) and coaches' own wellbeing, self-practice, and self-care are seldom formally addressed in training or supervision.

3. The Purpose of the Study

ACT was widely adopted during the pandemic to support wellbeing and psychological flexibility, including within coaching. A central tenet of ACT is that practitioners apply its principles to their own lives, not only to model the approach but to develop their own psychological flexibility (Luoma & Vilardaga, 2013; Tirch, 2019). Research on ACT self-practice has, however, been conducted largely with clinical psychologists and trainees, whose practice is typically embedded in supervised, structured settings. Conversely, coaching practice is often independent, without the embedded support, and how coaches engage in ACT self-practice has rarely been examined, particularly under conditions of crisis. Furthermore, coaches who do not develop their own psychological flexibility risk modelling and reinforcing the very processes of inflexibility they seek to address in their clients (Luoma et al., 2007). How coaches experienced and practised ACT under these conditions therefore mattered for their well-being and for their practice yet remained largely unexplored. The study addressed this gap through three research questions: firstly, how did coaches experience psychological flexibility during the COVID-19 crisis? Secondly, how did ACT-informed self-practice influence their wellbeing and professional functioning? And, thirdly, how did they make sense of their lived experiences collectively and individually?

4. Literature Sensitisation

Phenomenological studies emphasise the exploration of lived experiences and are open to emergent, authentic meaning rather than fitting into pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Smith et al., 2022). In keeping with this approach, literature is used to sensitise the inquiry rather than determine analytic outcomes, allowing participants' accounts to remain central to the research process.

Psychological flexibility refers to the capacity to remain present and act in accordance with values despite distressing thoughts and emotions (Hayes et al., 2011). This made ACT particularly relevant in the pandemic context, where uncertainty required adaptive, values-based responding (Prudenzi et al., 2023). Psychological flexibility is the central mechanism of change targeted through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and it was identified as a protective factor for psychological health during the pandemic (Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020; Prudenzi et al., 2023). ACT-based interventions and coaching approaches were widely adopted during this period to promote wellbeing and enhance psychological flexibility (Berger et al., 2021; Daftary et al., 2021; Gillard et al., 2021; Kronberg et al., 2021). Consistent with the approach in ACT that practitioners applying its principles to themselves, studies with clinical psychology trainees found that ACT training positively influenced self-efficacy, self-care, and psychological flexibility (Pakenham, 2017), and guidelines for self-care in clinical psychology training include support for ACT as an approach for managing stress (Pakenham & Stafford-brown, 2020). Despite increasing interest in ACT-based coaching (Hill & Oliver, 2018; Skews, 2018), this type of guidance is virtually absent from coaching literature. While existing studies highlight the benefits of ACT-based interventions, there is limited research on how practitioners embody the principles in crisis conditions, which this study sought to discover.

5. Methodology Selection

The exploratory nature of this study, conducted during the pandemic, made it well-suited to a qualitative approach. Qualitative research involves a deep understanding of the topic in its context (the circumstances and environment) and requires the ability to describe, explain, and communicate the perspectives of research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Qualitative methods further enable in-depth exploration of

individuals' experiences, thoughts, feelings, and sense-making, all of which are less amenable to quantitative methods, which are better suited to cause-and-effect studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Willig, 2013).

Methodology selection should align with the research questions, the data type, and the analysis (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). While alternative approaches such as case research, ethnography, grounded theory or narrative analysis each serves a distinct purpose, viz. to explore phenomena through detailed cases, explore cultural patterns, build theory from scratch, and construct life narratives respectively (Creswell & Poth, 2018), phenomenology was selected because it provides a sound methodological framework for investigating the subjective dimensions of the lived experience of coaching under conditions of uncertainty and disruption (Englander & Morley, 2023). It also aligns with the study's purpose to understand how coaches experienced, made sense of, and utilised psychological flexibility during the COVID-19 crisis. Phenomenology is well-positioned to learn from others' experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019); it is an overarching term that has a central aim to explore the embodied, experiential meanings of the world as it is directly experienced (Finlay, 2013).

The epistemological position of critical realism, which underpins this study, states that there are essential truths in the world, but individuals perceive and experience these differently depending on their history, social processes, beliefs and expectations (Smith, 2017). There is alignment between critical realism and functional contextualism, the latter being the philosophy that underpins ACT. The underlying assumption of contextualism is that human actions or events are active, dynamic and developmental moments of an ever-changing reality (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988; Pettigrew, 2018). Functional contextualism in ACT holds that context is fundamental to understanding the function and purpose of individuals' behaviours.

Because qualitative data can be complex, an approach allowing the data to be viewed through multiple lenses was chosen. This analytical pluralism (Clarke et al., 2015) aims to develop a multidimensional understanding of the interacting elements within a data set. To explore both breadth and depth, RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024) and IPA (Smith et al., 2022) were chosen.

RTA requires full awareness of philosophical sensibility, theoretical assumptions and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). An inductive, critical realist position was adopted because it shares an epistemology with IPA; as a result, findings from the two analyses complemented one another (Spiers & Riley, 2019).

Phenomenologically, the study adopted a Heideggerian stance, recognising that understanding is inherently interpretive rather than descriptive (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Giorgi, 2007). Accordingly, reflexive engagement rather than strict bracketing informed the analytic process. The idiographic focus of IPA is its most distinguishing feature: a commitment to a full analysis at the individual level, completing each case in turn and examining convergences and divergences between cases (Smith et al., 2022) was undertaken.

6. Triangulation in Qualitative Research

The choice of analytical pluralism (Clarke et al., 2015) was threefold: to explore the scaffolding technique using complementary processes; to enrich findings on psychological flexibility; and to address both the collective (shared) and the idiographic (individual) dimensions of experience. RTA enabled identification of patterned meanings across participants, while IPA facilitated in-depth exploration of individual sense-making, providing complementary analytic lenses (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Triangulation in qualitative research is primarily aimed at enhancing credibility, depth, and richness of findings by integrating multiple perspectives or methods (Noble & Heale, 2019). Rather than seeking convergence for validation, contemporary scholarship emphasises triangulation as a way to embrace complexity and nuance in lived experiences, acknowledging contradictions and layered meanings rather than forcing uniformity (Frost & Nolas, 2011). This design aligns with methodological triangulation, which involves using multiple analytic methods on the same dataset to deepen interpretive insights (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020; Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

7. The Sample and Data Collection

The study focused specifically on the experience of coaches who had adopted an ACT-based approach during the pandemic; eligibility to participate was determined by inclusion criteria to ensure appropriate, information-rich cases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The sample prioritised coaches who used ACT, had more than 100 coaching hours of experience, and were actively coaching during the pandemic between 2020 and 2021.

Twelve participants were purposively recruited through professional networks, social media, and snowball sampling; the final sample comprised three men and nine women from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Spain, and Austria. The sample size is in line with other phenomenological studies, where data saturation is not essential, but meaningful patterns could be recognised (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Three particularly content-rich transcripts from more experienced coaches (>5 years' experience) were selected for IPA analysis after the RTA was completed. The homogeneity of this small sample was consistent with the IPA approach, allowing analysis at greater depth (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011).

Data collection was primarily through 60-90-minute, semi-structured interviews, which elicited rich, varied experiences from participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The interviews began with general questions, followed by coaching-style reflections, summaries, and prompts to enter the social and psychological worlds of the respondents, who were encouraged to tell their story in detail (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

8. Two-Phased Data Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the sequential analysis processes; RTA first, utilising all the transcripts to generate codes and themes per Braun and Clarke (2024). Subsequently, the three most detailed transcripts were selected for IPA analysis, and finally, the two analyses were integrated for reporting purposes.

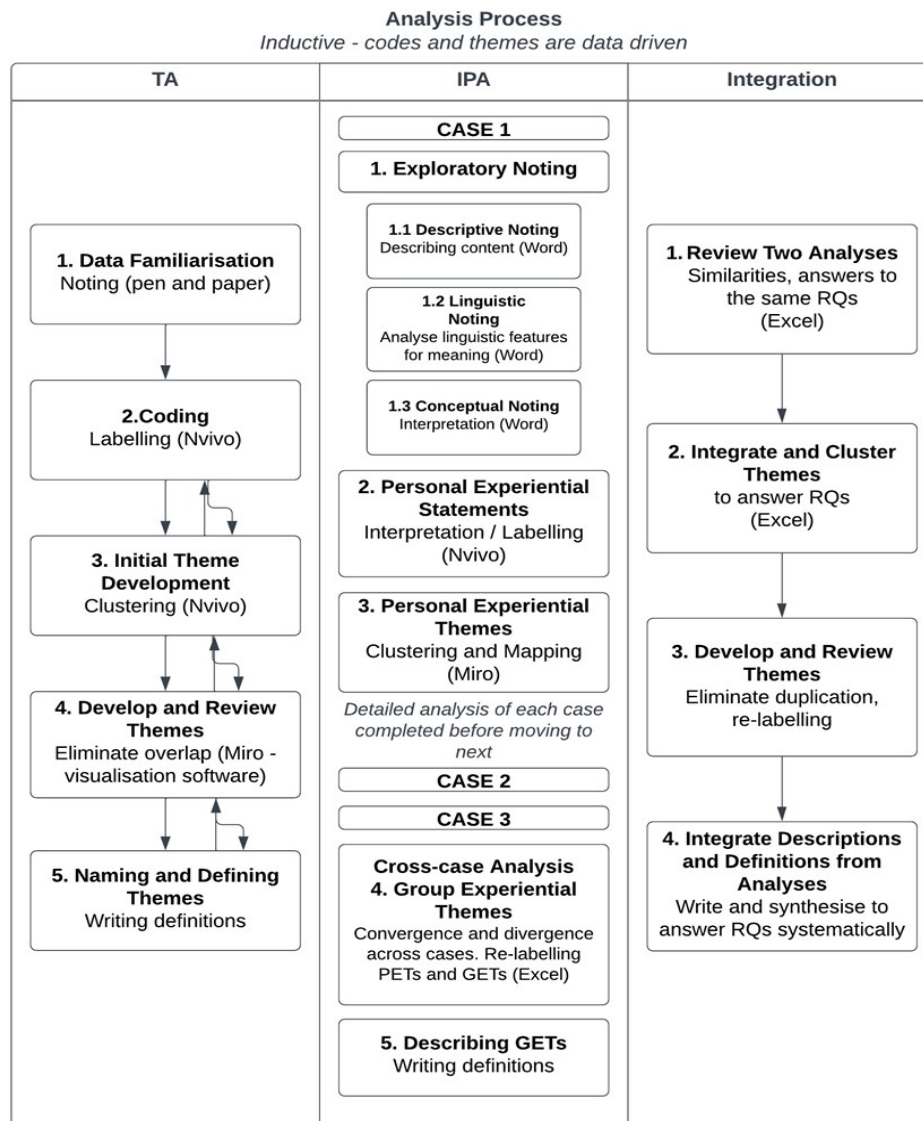


Figure 1: The dual analysis process

8.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024) was used to explore the experiences of all the participant coaches to identify and analyse patterns and themes across the data, in relation to the research questions.

The inductive thematic analysis was guided by the six phases of RTA (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Rigorous data familiarisation (phase 1) was followed by initial coding (phase 2) in NVivo software. Two levels of coding were used: semantic codes, which remain at the surface level, and latent codes, which capture meaning beneath the data through interpretation (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). As RTA provided breadth to the study, semantic coding dominated the analysis. This was followed by initial theme development (phase 3), which involved identifying meaningful patterns in the data and developing conceptual ideas through code clustering. Then, the themes were developed and reviewed (phase 4) to eliminate conceptual overlap. Miro visualisation software was used as a visual aid to identify meaningful patterns and relationships (Terry et al., 2017). Phase 5 involved naming the themes and creating definitions and descriptions, moving beyond a summative position to interpretation.

8.2 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The IPA phase (Smith et al., 2022) focused on existential, idiographic elements to explore coaches' deeper meaning-making of their experiences. It was also deployed to focus on sections of research questions where individual meaning-making enhanced the understanding of the topics. These meaning-making elements included emotional reactions to the pandemic, the nature of self-practice, what PF means to coaches and individual explorations of the influence of ACT on the coaching practice.

The IPA process started with exploratory noting to allow deep engagement with the data, linguistic noting to examine specific uses of language and the nonverbal components of the experience, and conceptual noting to move toward the interpretive and interrogative components of IPA (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This noting was followed by the formulation of Personal Experiential Statements (PETs) to capture each participant's experience and its meaning. These statements were transferred to NVivo to ensure accurate individual records. Upon completion of all cases, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify the Group Experiential Themes (GETs). This required identifying commonalities and links at the conceptual level, paying careful attention to the convergence and divergence between cases (Smith et al., 2022). The final phase required describing GETs to explain common experiences for the subgroup of respondents. An iterative process was followed, with constant refinement.

8.3 Integrating the Analyses

Having followed an abductive process thus far, the approach shifted to a deductive one, specifically to answer the research questions (Figure 1) in an integrated way. Here, the findings were integrated and the themes were clustered before consolidation to eliminate duplication. Data from both analyses were included for breadth (RTA) and depth (IPA) in answering each research question. Finally, descriptions and definitions from the analyses were synthesised to produce the written report.

In qualitative research, studies with larger samples usually yield broader findings, whereas smaller-sample studies tend to yield deeper findings (Spiers and Riley, 2019). This trend is evident in this analysis, with the RTA revealing broader themes applicable to most coaches, as reflected in the theme titles. The IPA led to more personal exploration, illustrating differences in experience among coaches. This is typical of IPA studies, which are committed to an idiographic focus (Smith and Nizza, 2022).

In addition to the breadth-versus-depth focus, the dual analysis added explicit-versus-hermeneutic insights. Spiers and Riley (2019) explain utilising RTA for explicit semantic analysis, rather than the hermeneutic IPA lens, which employs multiple layers of interpretation at an individual level. Finally, the dual analysis allowed both pragmatic and existential responses to the research questions.

9. Findings From Each Phase

9.1 Findings From the Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Although the findings per se are not the focus of this article, they are outlined briefly to demonstrate the value of the dual analysis in extracting both breadth and depth from the data. It might appear that the RTA themes are closely linked to the research questions, suggesting a deductive coding approach. However, this was not

the case because ACT usage was a selection criterion for respondents, so it was embedded in the research from the outset. The open-ended, reflective interviews allowed respondents to respond without ACT being imposed; it was necessary to be open to ACT-related language because this made the study methodologically consistent with its critical realism stance and its phenomenological meaning-making.

The analysis exposed divergence, tension, lapses in self-practice, and inconsistency, with some coaches describing avoidance, over-commitment, and self-criticism despite their fluency in ACT language, principles, and practices. The questions were designed to explore how ACT constructs were interpreted, embodied, resisted, or enacted in practice, while preserving phenomenological integrity throughout the interpretive process (Irving, 2021). The variations expressed by the coaches were fundamental to their lived experiences as they wrestled with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic context. Table 1 provides a code-to-theme illustration of the RTA analysis. The themes align with the study's research questions.

Table 1: RTA analysis codes and themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code
Pandemic context	General pandemic context	Contextual shift
		Mental wellbeing decline
	Coaching themes during the pandemic	Mental wellbeing
		Lifestyle and work impact
		Reassess values and purpose
	Pandemic impact on coaches	Personal growth
		Lifestyle impact
	Coaches have human problems	Aversive mental experiences
		Mental wellbeing challenges
		Relationship challenges
Changes in the coach due to ACT	Ways of being	A new way of life
		Clarity on values
	Ways of doing	New habits
		Self-practice neglect
		Practice what you preach
ACT effect on coaching practice	Difference in coaching	Authenticity
		More process, less outcome
		Intentionality, more choice
	Translating ACT	

9.2 Findings From the IPA

The IPA findings were extracted more inductively than the RTA codes, which were abductive and interacted continuously with the data (transcripts). The focus was on individual meaning-making from data-rich transcripts, and coding was, frankly, data-driven. Analysis involved identifying individual experiential themes, grouping them, and elevating the strongest themes to a more abstract level by converting them into group experiential themes. These group themes and the original IPA themes are presented in Table 2.

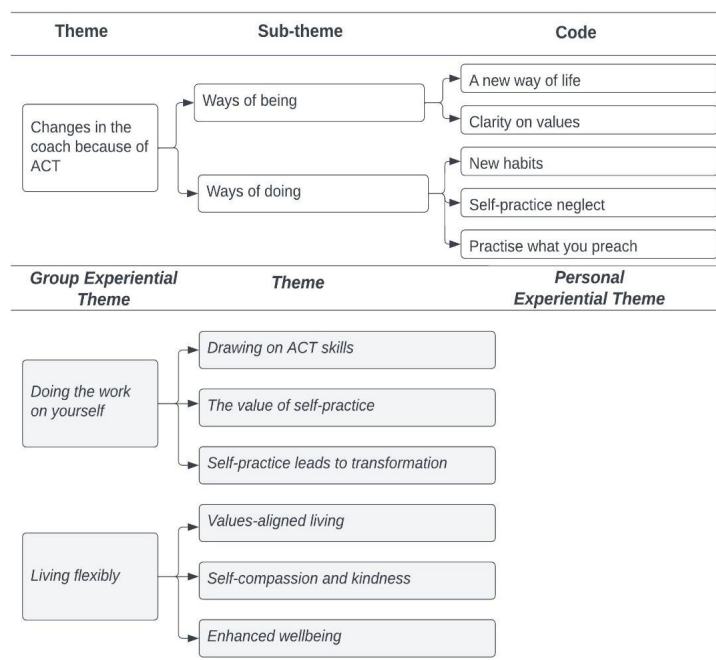
Table 2: IPA findings; themes and group experiential themes

Group Experiential Theme	Theme
Survivor's guilt and the response	Survivor guilt
	Varying acceptance levels of the resultant exemptions
	Different ways of responding to the guilt
Doing the work on yourself	Drawing on ACT skills
	The value of self-practice
	Self-practice leads to transformation
Living flexibly	Values-aligned living
	Self-compassion and kindness
	Enhanced wellbeing
ACT enriches coaching	Coaching as co-creation
	Willingness to be in the messiness
	Values-centred coaching
	Being alongside the client
	The self as an instrument

9.3 Integrated Findings

The integrated findings were presented in relation to each research question in turn, ie the effects of the pandemic context on coaches and their practices, how the coaches responded personally to implementing ACT in their own lives, and how their coaching practices shifted through using the ACT framework under pandemic conditions. The first-level themes and sub-themes from the RTA were allocated to the appropriate research question and discussed within the context of the literature; the related group experiential theme was then incorporated into the discussion, giving greater depth to the broader RTA theme.

For example, for Research Question 2, “How did self-practice influence the psychological flexibility and wellbeing of ACT-trained coaches during the pandemic?”, the RTA theme of “Changes in the coach because of ACT” was the main contributing theme to the response, and the two Group Experiential Themes, “Doing the work on yourself” and “Living flexibly” were incorporated for greater depth and richness in the response to the research question. The relationships are illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Integrated findings in response to Research Question 2**

10. Limitations of the Study

The relatively small sample size is consistent with phenomenological research, which prioritises depth of understanding over breadth of coverage (Englander & Morley, 2023). Phenomenological inquiry seeks to generate rich, detailed accounts of lived experience, requiring intensive engagement with each participant's narrative (Smith et al., 2022). This applies particularly to IPA, where the idiographic commitment necessitates detailed individual analysis. The aim in qualitative research is not statistical generalisation but analytical transferability of findings to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Findings should therefore be understood as contextually situated insights into the experiences of ACT-informed coaches during the COVID-19 pandemic and open to further, more generalisable investigation.

11. Conclusion

The integration of RTA and IPA reflects a methodological triangulation strategy aimed at enhancing credibility and interpretive richness. Rather than seeking mere convergence, triangulation was employed to embrace complexity, allowing for both thematic breadth and idiographic depth. This approach aligns with contemporary calls for methodological pluralism in coaching research, particularly when investigating complex phenomena such as ACT-based interventions during global crises.

Both analytic methods share phenomenological underpinnings but differ in scope: RTA captures patterns of meaning across participants, while IPA interrogates individual existential sense-making. Sequencing these methods ensured coherence with the study's phenomenological orientation and leveraged complementary strengths to provide a layered understanding of experience. The study contributes methodologically by demonstrating how analytical pluralism can generate both breadth and depth within a phenomenological design.

Ethics Declaration

Ethics clearance was obtained from Henley Business School, University of Reading for the Master's dissertation on which this paper was based

AI Declaration

The paper is based on the first author's Master's dissertation with grammatical corrections from Grammarly and structural suggestions from Copilot

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