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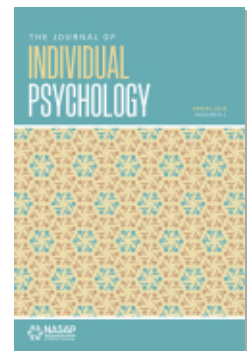
Exploring Classical Adlerian Practitioners' Professional Identity Development: A Phenomenological Study

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Exploring Classical Adlerian Practitioners' Professional Identity Development: A Phenomenological Study

Xiaoxuan Qu and Derek X. Seward

ABSTRACT: This qualitative study examined the classical Adlerian practitioners' experiences of developing professional identity. Classical Adlerian practitioners are a group of individuals who operationalize from classical Adlerian depth psychotherapy, one of the divergences from Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, data were gathered from two classical Adlerian practitioners using individual semi-structured interviews. Findings presented four themes, including influences on developing their professional identities as classical Adlerians, congruency between professional and personal selves, the intertwined learning and applying process, and theoretical divergences within Adlerian Psychology. Implications for training and continued education are suggested.

KEYWORDS: Classical Adlerian, professional identity development, lived experiences, postgraduate training, interpretative phenomenological analysis

PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING ACCREDITATION AGENCIES EMPHASIZE THE importance of professional identity development training through core content areas such as counseling and helping relationships, which include theories and models of counseling, case conceptualization, treatment, and intervention (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2016; Master's in Psychology and Counseling Accreditation Council, 2017). Research has demonstrated the need for practitioners to operate from a theoretical orientation or framework, because counseling and psychotherapy theories help inform and guide practitioners in how to assist clients in the change process (Fall et al., 2010; Holm et al., 2018). Scholars have argued that practitioners develop personal theoretical orientations that fit their predisposed notions of human growth and change (Bernard, 1992; Guiffrida, 2005; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Nilsen, 2015).

Practitioner development of a strong professional identity is a critical issue in mental health disciplines (Chang et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2021). Professional identity is defined as an ongoing process of integrating personal attributes with professional training in the context of a professional community (Moss et al., 2014). Counseling practitioners develop their professional identities over time as personal characteristics combine

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with their counseling attributes, such as skills, ethics, and decision-making processes (Moss et al., 2014; Prosek & Hurt; 2014). Professional identity can be shaped by modeling and training methods (Langrehr et al., 2017), mentoring (Murdock et al., 2013), and the interplay of experiential learning with real-world learning (Luke & Goodrich, 2010).

Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology is taught in mental health trainings and programs (e.g., Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2018; Wedding & Corsini, 2018). However, different theoretical underpinnings exist in the Adlerian community but have received little attention in Adlerian discourse (Griffith, 1988; Mansager & Griffith, 2019; Qu & Luke, 2022). For instance, Adler (1956) claimed that a primary motivation of life is "a striving from a felt minus position toward a plus situation" (p. 1). Rudolf Dreikurs (1971), one of Adler's well-known students and expositors, held that "the basic social motivation of each human being is the desire to belong" (p. 116).

The classical Adlerian approach as a theoretical branch of Individual Psychology follows Adler's stance on primary human motivation. Classical Adlerians undertake postgraduate professional training in classical Adlerian depth psychotherapy (CADP). The classical Adlerian approach, based on Adler's original clinical writings and work of other classical Adlerians, such as Sophia de Vries, Alexander Mueller, and Lydia Sicher, trains practitioners in Adler's original teachings and style of treatment in a one-on-one mentorship (Mansager, 2014; Stein, 2018). There are questions regarding how classical Adlerians develop and foster their classical Adlerian approach of Individual Psychology. Literature indicates that the professional identity development of practitioners converges with the development of a theoretical orientation (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Couch 2020; Jackson, 2010; Strobe, 2019; Weber, 2020; Werries, 2015). To that end, the authors sought to understand how classical Adlerian practitioners develop their professional identity. The primary research question for this study is this: What are classical Adlerian practitioners' experiences of developing their professional identities?

There is no literature or research discussing classical Adlerian practitioner professional identity development experiences and perspectives. Hence, this study aims to address this gap by exploring how classical Adlerian practitioners navigate developing their professional identities. This information may provide practitioners in-depth descriptions of professional identity useful for their own growth. Additionally, educators and supervisors may find that the information facilitates working with counselor trainees seeking to develop or advance their theoretical orientation and professional identity.

METHOD

As the researchers' intent was to examine the essence of the lived experience of classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development, a phenomenological qualitative method was chosen. To better understand classical Adlerians' lived experiences, the authors employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis, or IPA, which focuses on how people make sense of their lived experiences in details (Smith et al., 2009). This study also focused on classical Adlerian practitioners' attempts to make meaning out of their experiences of developing professional identity.

Researcher Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers do not ignore their own assumptions; instead, they engage in the process of reflexivity to understand the lens through which they conduct their studies (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007). Addressing reflexivity allows the reader to assess the degree to which researchers' assumptions influenced a study (Creswell, 2007). The primary researcher is a Chinese female international doctoral student in a Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs counselor education program at a private university and has pursued a few courses in CADP training. The second researcher is a Black American male counselor educator at the same institution. Before collecting data, the researchers reflected on their interests in researching classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development, their positionality in this research, and perceived notions regarding professional identity development. For instance, the researchers assumed that participants would identify themselves more strongly as classical Adlerians than as mental health professionals. The researchers held biweekly check-in meetings and discussed and reviewed the initial noting, descriptive, and linguistic comments and their biases throughout data collection and analysis to ensure adherence to research protocols (Smith et al., 2019).

Participants and Procedures

After receiving institutional review board approval, the researchers adopted a purposive sampling method to recruit participants. The primary researcher sent a recruitment email to classical Adlerian practitioners at the Classical Adlerian Depth Psychotherapy Institute (CADPI), formerly the Alfred Adler Institute of Northwestern Washington (AAINW). The CADPI is the only institute providing training for the classical Adlerian approach in the United States. Moreover, the primary

researcher took courses at CADPI and had existing relationships with potential participants. Potential participants could feel uninhibited or restricted in sharing their experiences. To address any reluctance, participants were reminded at each stage of the research process that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any penalty. For phenomenological studies, researchers recommend a sample size between two and 25 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, the primary researcher sent a recruitment email to two certified classical Adlerian depth psychotherapists and/or individuals in the process of completing their CADP training. Participants were informed about the study (e.g., purpose, participation criteria, potential risks and benefits) via the informed consent. On the recruitment email and informed consent, participants were encouraged to contact the researchers with questions about the study. Both participants came forward and gave consent to participate. Participants mentioned the small number of CADP practitioners; to protect their identities, confidentiality, and privacy, the researchers chose not to disclose their demographic information. Both participants were adults who self-identified as classical Adlerian practitioners. They had completed a master's degree in counseling and had practiced counseling and/or psychotherapy in the previous 3 years.

Data Collection

The two study participants completed a web-based demographic questionnaire with 15 questions ascertaining participants' age, biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, racial identification, ethnic identification, time of starting the CADP training, time of completing the CADP training, self-identification as a CADP practitioner, time duration of being a CADP practitioner, current engagement in delivering counseling and psychotherapy services, and types of counseling and psychotherapy services that participants provide.

Each participant also took part in two semistructured (Barriball & While, 1994) web-based interviews; each lasted approximately 30 minutes. Initial interview questions were developed by the first author from the professional identity development literature (e.g., Carillo & Rubel, 2019; Dollarhide et al., 2013; Locke, 2021; Moss et al., 2014) but were sufficiently general to allow for articulation of divergent experiences. The initial interview questions in the first-round interviews were the following: (a) How do you define professional identity? (b) How do you enact aspects of your professional identity? (c) Where do you nurture your professional identity? and (d) How do you do that in relation to the

classical Adlerian depth psychotherapy training and/or certification? Follow-up questions (e.g., Can you say more about that?) were asked for clarification on participants' experiences and interpretations.

The first author conducted all interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim; both participants engaged in a member-check process for each interview transcript as soon as it was produced. The data collection procedures occurred using Qualtrics Survey Software and HIPAA-Compliant Zoom Software through a private research university. Interviews were video recorded. All data collected were hosted on a secure website where access was limited, encryption was optimized, and the system included firewalls to protect participants' confidentiality. For the second interview, the first author generated questions from the initial data analysis of the first-round interviews. Question examples included: Why is it important? What made you say that? The same procedure was carried out for producing transcripts and engaging participants in a member-check process.

Data Analysis

The researchers followed Smith et al.'s (2009) six steps for analyzing study participants' description of their experiences. First, the researchers started with data from one participant and immersed themselves in the data by reading and rereading. Second, the researchers engaged in initial noting by examining semantic content and language use while maintaining an open mind and noting anything of interest within the transcripts. The researchers utilized descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments as analytic tools to explore data with a clear phenomenological focus on an interpretative level. Third, the researchers developed emergent themes from the initial notes as they engaged in a synergistic process of description and interpretation. Fourth, the researchers searched for connections across emergent themes. Fifth, the researchers moved to the data of the second participant and repeated the process. Sixth, the researchers looked for patterns across cases and translated them into a narrative account.

Ethical Requirements and Trustworthiness

To comply with ethical and professional standards in research and publishing, the researchers made every effort to ensure the accuracy of scientific findings, protect the rights and welfare of research participants, and protect intellectual property rights. For instance, the demographic information of participants in this study is not disclosed given the small number of classical Adlerian practitioners worldwide.

Moreover, trustworthiness is a critical component in qualitative research to enhance the quality and legitimacy of findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); thus, the researchers attended to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, the researchers promoted study credibility through triangulation and member checking. Triangulation was achieved through the interviews, a literature review, and conducting a member check. Transferability was promoted by providing a thick description of study procedures to help the reader determine the usefulness of the results. The researchers maintained an audit trail to accomplish dependability and confirmability, including an ongoing narrative of the analytic process, evolving interpretation of concepts and experiences, and supporting data from each interview round.

RESULTS

The researchers identified four themes from analyzing participants' interviews. Both participants made sense of their professional identity development from the following four domains: influences, congruency between professional and personal identity, reciprocity of learning and applying, and theoretical divergence within Adlerian psychology. Participant voices are included with pseudonyms in each theme.

Theme 1: Influence on Developing Professional Identity

Influence on developing professional identity was the first theme researchers identified. This theme demonstrated the participants' meaning making of what had influenced their professional identity development as classical Adlerians, which included theoretical orientation, clinical supervision, continued learning and training within and outside the classical Adlerian community, and differences between counseling and depth psychotherapy. Theoretical orientation was reported as the primary factor in developing their professional identity as classical Adlerians. Participant 1 said, "We simply have a different level of understanding or a *way* of understanding rather the same problems that we might be trying to conceptualize in case studies or case consultations, for example." Participant 2 noted:

The classical wants you as a practitioner to understand Adler and what he has written and how it applies. Not that Adler had all the answers, but he taught us creativity and we want to understand creatively how a human person works. And then creatively how this person in front of me works.

Likewise, the CADP training largely influenced classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity. Participants' sharing evinced a studious and lengthy process of pursuing CADP training. A component of the classical Adlerian theoretical approach—personal study analysis—was emphasized as a strong, valuable influence in the participants' professional identity. The participants noted that the personal study analysis is a required component in the CADP training. They said the purpose is to experience the classical Adlerian therapeutic process with a mentor who exhibits Adler's teaching and philosophy. Participant 1 described study analysis as "a marriage of supervision and personal therapy." Participant 2 narrated, "I value that highly that if something has been bothering me personally, finally getting it straightened out in my mind and being able to proceed without hampering the progress of my client or our interaction." Participant 2 was explicit about the usefulness and nurturance of study analysis on his professional identity development.

Another example was clinical supervision, which the participants described as a professional endeavor to elicit professional input and critique on the ongoing clinical work as classical Adlerians, interact with other classical Adlerian colleagues, and seek insights and guidance on personal blockages in the therapeutic processes. Participant 2 described seeking supervision to receive professional input and critique on their therapeutic interactions as a classical Adlerian so they could tackle case difficulties and refine clinical competence and mastery. Participant 1 also described the instrumental effects of clinical supervision delivered by a classical Adlerian practitioner on developing their professional identity:

I find it extremely useful . . . because you're receiving supervision that is directly relevant to your personal circumstances. And you are experiencing firsthand an approach that you are striving to embody as a professional who identifies as a classical Adlerian practitioner.

In contrast, Participant 2 shared that they provided clinical supervision to practitioners interested in Adlerian therapy and those not necessarily interested in the Adlerian framework but trusted their clinical competence in supervising clinical work.

Moreover, continued professional development within and outside the classical Adlerian community was reported as influencing classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development. Participants named examples such as annual classical Adlerian experiential workshops, national and international conferences and presentations, and scholarly endeavors in a wider Adlerian community or the mental health

field at large. Participant 1 expressed that the few CADP practitioners affected the number of opportunities to nurture professional identity, given the small size of the current classical Adlerian community. Participant 2 also noted: “The classical Adlerians are a small, small group and the annual training is professionally intimate and impactful. . . . [K]nowing each other, supporting one another, and caring for one another over many years makes for a different training experience.”

Furthermore, differences between counseling and depth psychotherapy were noted by participants in relation to their professional identity development. Participant 2 elaborated on such differences in practice. Participant 2 said that clients who tried to manage their lives and stresses with a lack of interest in resolving their style of life fall under the counseling category. For counseling clients, Participant 2 provided what was needed at the level the clients could digest. As for clients interested in going deeper and resolving their style of life, Participant 2 considered them to be seeking depth psychotherapy services and provided services, the depth of which matched the client’s interest, openness, and willingness. Participant 1 spoke about an overall hierarchical ranking in which psychotherapy is more dominant and counseling more marginal. Participant 1 talked about how the hierarchical differences between different titles have financial and practical implications, such as clientele population and client access to mental health services.

Theme 2: The Congruent Professional and Personal Self

Next, the researchers identified the second theme of the congruent professional and personal self. This theme reflected participants’ expression that theoretical orientation was not only a conceptual, psychological framework for counseling but also a philosophy of living. The congruency between the professional and personal self is deemed crucial to classical Adlerians’ identities. Participant 1 explained, “It is important for me—as a practitioner—to have a cohesive philosophy of living that informs one’s work.” Participant 2 similarly described their experience of developing a professional identity as inseparable from developing personal identity, stating: “I don’t put on an Adlerian *hat*. Rather, it’s more like I wear an Adlerian *skin*, I feel.” For Participant 2, congruency and genuineness are paramount. They noted: “I want to be consistent. My presentation. If Adler means something, and I want to exhibit Adler, and feel that spirit of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* whether I’m in a session or not.”

Participants believed that theoretical orientation should be compatible with personal values. Speaking from their professional identity as

an Adlerian, Participant 1 reported that the coherence of Individual Psychology necessitates that practitioners live the philosophy of their theoretical orientation: “If we were to consider a theoretical orientation as a philosophy of living, then what might follow from that is that the therapist would ideally be living one’s philosophy.” Participant 2 explained that the shared features between professional and personal identities included attitudes and manners regarding how one would approach people and tasks. Participant 2 also described distinctive features such as professional mandates, responsibilities, standards, boundaries, and limits between professional and personal identities.

Theme 3: Intertwined Learning and Applying

Next, intertwined learning and applying was reported to be an ongoing process for participants to develop professionally. Participant 2 noted that professional identity would develop via a cyclical process of learning and applying as well as receiving and giving. Participant 2 expressed the belief that this back-and-forth process developed not only their professional identity but also their understanding of professional identity, which, in being inseparable from their personal identity, became clearer. Participant 2 addressed that one’s understanding of who they are—a global identity—became more evident, offering: “I think my identity flows here in receiving information and giving information. It always helps me understand who I am a little bit better, you know.”

Similarly, Participant 1 stated that the practice of counseling was the most critical enactment of one’s professional identity. Participant 1 also shared that continuous training was vital to their professional identity development. Participant 1 stated: “It’s important to make sure that one is up to date with the developments in one’s chosen field of practice” to “meet new challenges that practitioners are faced with.”

Theme 4: Different Expressions of the Same Theory

Last, the researchers identified the fourth theme of different expressions of the same theory. This theme mirrored participants’ assertion that theoretical divergences within Adlerian psychology, such as classical Adlerians and Dreikursian Adlerians in the United States and globally, were a significant factor in developing their professional identity. Participant 1 noted:

Many students of Adler have taken what they’ve learned from him, have developed their own theories that are not unrelated but are not strictly limited to what Adler had to say, and through their own

practice, have offered new insights or different insights into the work of the Adlerian therapist. And while they may call this work Adlerian, it's likely that they're referring to a derivative of Adler's work that could be most readily be labeled Dreikursian.

Several differences between classical and Dreikursian approaches were described. One example is the different theoretical underpinnings manifested in classical and Dreikursian approaches. Participant 2 noted that classical Adlerians look for a client's psychological movement, inferiority feeling, and fictional final goal, whereas Dreikursian Adlerians look for a client's mistaken ideas. Additionally, Participant 2 expressed that Adler's original constructs, such as the fictional final goal and counterfiction, do not appear to be in the Dreikursian conceptualization. However, Participant 2 noted that these constructs are explicit in Adler's seminal original works and that Adler's followers have also been explicit about the original constructs.

Moreover, personal study analysis as a distinctive feature to the classical Adlerian approach was mentioned. Participant 2 narrated:

As classical Adlerians we have learned Adler well, but we do not forget to apply our own talents creatively in the process. In our own healing process, through the study analysis, we learn to use our personality on the positive side of things. And that's why you can be creative and why no two classical Adlerians are the same.

Participant 2 also shared that unlike the classical Adlerian approach, they did not believe that Dreikursian Adlerians emphasize personal analysis in their professional development.

Furthermore, Participant 2 reported that the therapeutic goal and process of the classical Adlerian approach distinguished it from other divergences, such as the Dreikursian approach. Participant 2 explained that the classical Adlerian therapeutic goal is to resolve the repetitious movement or lifestyle. Participant 2 noted that for Dreikursian Adlerians, a therapeutic goal is be aware and control or manage one's lifestyle. Participant 2 also spoke about the differences in therapeutic stages between the 12-stage classical Adlerian approach and the four-stage Dreikursian Adlerian approach.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore classical Adlerian practitioners' experiences of developing their professional

identities. The two participants discussed influences on developing their professional identities as classical Adlerians, congruency between professional and personal selves, the intertwined learning and applying process, and the theoretical divergences within Adlerian psychology. Each theme is discussed as reflective of the experiences of the two participants.

Influence on Developing Professional Identity

The results support the idea that classical Adlerian practitioners regard theoretical orientation as the primary factor in developing their professional identities. An examination of the literature suggests that the professional identity development of practitioners converges with the development of a theoretical orientation (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Couche, 2020; Jackson, 2010; Strope, 2019; Weber, 2020; Werries, 2015). Scholars claim that theoretical orientation should help inform and guide practitioners in assisting clients in the change process (Fall et al., 2010; Sommers-Flannagan & Sommers-Flannagan, 2012). These findings confirm the literature positing that a practitioner's theoretical orientation serves as a guidebook within and outside of session regarding case conceptualization, treatment planning, and therapeutic goal establishment (Fall et al., 2010; Holms et al., 2018).

The theoretical orientation adhered to by participants in this study is the classical Adlerian approach acquired at the CADPI. These findings suggest that the classical Adlerian theoretical approach significantly influences their professional identity development. Participants invested in their CADP training through time and diligence. Participant descriptions of their trainee experiences are congruent with information disseminated by the CADPI (CADP, n.d.). The training certification requires a minimum of 20 courses, covering a vigorous study of theory and practice, a mandatory personal study-analysis, and extensive case supervision. Typically, each course on theory and practice entails 5 weeks of instruction, including 6 hours of audio instruction per week, and self-study of specific published materials and unpublished manuscripts from the institute. This is followed by 1-hour one-on-one telephone or virtual discussion with a training analyst each week to discuss the study content to deepen one's understanding of theory and practice. Certification usually takes 4–5 years and recognizes a sufficient level of knowledge and skill in the practice of CADP in students (CADP, n.d.).

Messina et al. (2019) reported that theoretical interest and personal and professional development were three of the motivations for starting postgraduate psychotherapy training. Results indicated that theoretical interest reflected a motivation related to interest and curiosity, such as

curiosity about the functioning of the human mind and human relationships. Messina et al. (2019) also reported that trainees were motivated to understand their personal functioning and development as persons and to improve their professional abilities as practitioners. Classical Adlerian practitioners' motivation to start a postgraduate training aligns with Messina et al.'s (2019) results. And yet the present study shows that the postgraduate training in one's chosen theory contributes usefully to the practitioners' professional identity development.

Moreover, participants in this study strongly emphasized the value and importance of their personal study analysis, a component of the classical Adlerian theoretical approach. Personal study analysis runs concurrently with other courses and requires a minimum of 50 hours. The purpose is to experience CADP firsthand from a highly experienced mentor whose character is congruent with Adler's philosophy in order to absorb the complex therapeutic process so that the classical Adlerian-in-training can duplicate it with a client. To optimize personal and professional growth, personal study analysis is an essential process, with perceived benefits directly to students (CADP, n.d.). The result is consistent with the literature that experiencing the classical Adlerian therapeutic process firsthand from a self-actualized mentor is conducive and nurturing to classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity.

The study results suggest that clinical supervision is influential in developing professional identity among classical Adlerian practitioners. Clinical supervision is not only a professional endeavor where classical Adlerian practitioners seek insight, guidance, and critique on clinical work from classical Adlerian supervisors but also a connective space where social and professional interactions take place. Equally important is witnessing and experiencing classical Adlerian supervisors in action. The effects of modeling are deemed instrumental to developing professional identity as classical Adlerians.

Classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development is also influenced by continued learning and training within and outside the classical Adlerian community. Many scholars point out the need for ongoing professional development for high self-efficacy for counseling and better client outcomes (Moss et al., 2014; Mullen et al., 2015; Purswell et al., 2019; Ratts et al., 2016; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). However, the small size of the current classical Adlerian community has advantages and disadvantages. For instance, the depth of community members' caring and support is efficacious. However, the small number of classical Adlerian practitioners limits opportunities for continued professional development and, thereby, professional identity. Nonetheless, in this

study, underpinning classical Adlerians' experiences and narratives was a wish for a bigger classical Adlerian community.

Last, the findings suggest that classical Adlerian practitioners perceive differences between counseling and depth psychotherapy in practice and society. Conceptual and empirical differences between counseling and psychotherapy are still open to debate in the literature (Osagu & Benjamin, 2013; Zlatchin, 1955). In this study, classical Adlerian practitioners perceived differences, which may potentially affect ways of developing their professional identities. For instance, they might choose a classical Adlerian supervisor or prefer to attend classical Adlerian continuing education if they have a choice.

The Congruent Professional and Personal Self

The findings suggest that the congruence between professional and personal selves is highly important to the classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development. The desire for professional and personal identity integration is not new in the literature. Theoretical orientation should be congruent with personal worldview. Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) suggested that integrating the personal self into the developing professional self is vital to forming and developing one's professional identity. In the lifespan developmental model (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) for counselor development, integration of the professional and personal self is one of the 14 themes for development. The extant literature also supports the finding that theoretical orientation is not only a conceptual, psychological framework for counseling but also a philosophy of living. Practitioners search for a philosophical system that reflects their beliefs and personality (Weber, 2020). They select theories and techniques because of who they are as persons, and the therapeutic interventions are manifestations of the practitioners' personalities (McConaughy, 1987). Schmidt et al. (2019) explained that the process of professional and personal identity integration could become challenging for the beginning professional counselor as new questions of personal identity begin to surface. In this light, the experience of living one's philosophy remains to be further investigated among classical Adlerian practitioners.

Intertwined Learning and Applying

More recent literature illuminates that professional identity development is a multifaceted and multilayered process (Attia, 2021; Locke, 2021) in comparison to the described linear process in the earlier literature (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2010; Moss et al., 2014). The

results from this study underscore the complicated process that classical Adlerian practitioners develop professional identities through intertwined ongoing learning and application. This result supports the literature in that professional identity continuously develops in the professional context (John, 2021). The cyclical process of learning and applying is supported by the literature in that professional identity development involves a transformative learning process through cycles of reflections in the realms of interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives (Auxier et al., 2003; Dong et al., 2018).

Different Expressions of the Same Theory

Participants in this study acknowledged theoretical divergences in Adlerian psychology, such as the classical and Dreikursian Adlerian approaches, which seemed relevant to the classical Adlerian practitioners' development of professional identity. The theoretical underpinnings and therapeutic applications between the classical and Dreikursian Adlerian approaches are rarely found in the literature. However, a challenging discourse on the theoretical difference between two influential figures—Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs—in Adlerian psychology can be traced back more than three decades (Griffith; 1988; Mansager & Griffith, 2019; Qu & Luke, 2022). Adler and Dreikurs differed in their ideas on the primary motivation for individuals: for Adler (1956), it was “a striving from a felt minus position toward a plus situation” (p. 1) versus Dreikurs's (1971) “desire to belong” (p. 116). Nonetheless, Mansager and Griffith (2019) noted that this difference between Adler and Dreikurs receives little attention in the North American Adlerian discourse.

The current research yields distinctive features of the classical and Dreikursian Adlerian approaches. However, awareness of theoretical differences and their effects on professional identity development within the wider Adlerian community remains under-researched. The asynchronous representation in the literature begets the following questions raised by Qu and Luke (2022): What is the awareness of different theoretical underpinnings within the Adlerian community among practitioners, supervisors, and educators? How are the theoretical underpinnings of Adlerian psychology addressed in counseling, supervision, and counselor education?

The effects of theoretical divergences within Adlerian psychology on professional identity development among classical Adlerian practitioners also lend themselves to the possibility of developing a collective identity among Adlerians, regardless of branches. A recent issue of the *Journal of Individual Psychology* centered on the varieties of Adlerian

experiences. The entire issue celebrated the self-identified Adlerians, including Adlerian counselors and consultants, psychologists and parent educators, who shared their professional journeys and sometimes profoundly personal stories about what and who influenced them most in their Adlerian identity (Mansager & Pienkowski, 2022). Scholars claim that a cohesive collective identity for a group of professionals, such as counselors, is important for the viability of that group (Calley & Hawley, 2008; Carrillo & Rubel, 2019; Gale & Austin, 2003; Reiner et al., 2013). Is there a collective Adlerian identity? Or would one be possible? Such questions remain.

LIMITATIONS

This interpretative phenomenological study had several limitations. First, the present study intended to investigate the lived experience of classical Adlerian practitioners in depth; hence, no claim can be made about the generalizability of the findings. Second, the small sample size might have limited the diversity and scope of classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development experiences. Last, interviews were conducted using teleconference software; although participants used videos for data collection, the difference in location and lack of in-person contact might have created a physical barrier for the researchers to capture a dynamic, holistic view of any expressive and subtle bodily movements.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from the current study have broad and concrete implications for practitioner training and continued education. Practitioners-in-training are recommended to be mindful of the different theoretical branches within Individual Psychology and to seek to understand the approach that they tend to use. Practitioners-in-training would benefit from instructional activities to reflect on personal values and philosophy while learning counseling and psychotherapy theories throughout the program. For instance, the theoretical orientation scale (TOS; Smith, 2010) can be used to promote theoretical reflection. During and after formal training, developing a robust professional identity can be approached multidimensionally; examples are clinical supervision, postgraduate training, conferences, and research. More specifically, practitioners are advised to be intentional in their choice of clinical supervisors. Practitioners as supervisees could seek to initiate discussions with supervisors on their approaches to clinical supervision

(Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Although general areas of foci can be intentionally cultivated to foster professional identity development, individual characteristics should also be considered. Current research focuses on the experiences of classical Adlerian practitioners' professional identity development. Future research could employ a more extensive and diverse sample to address professional identity development among classical Adlerians. Researchers could also conduct experimental quantitative and qualitative research to investigate the awareness and effects of theoretical divergence within Adlerian Psychology. Furthermore, it is important to study a collective Adlerian identity from the perspectives of self-identified Adlerians.

CONCLUSION

Professional identity development is multifaceted and multilayered (Attia, 2021; Locke, 2021). Understanding how practitioners develop their professional identities is integral to better educating, training, and guiding current and future practitioners. This article presents an interpretative phenomenological study by exploring classical Adlerian practitioners' experiences of developing their professional identities. The study identified salient themes and illuminated them in the directions of practitioner training and continued education. To the authors' knowledge, this essay is the first to examine classical Adlerian practitioners' experiences in developing professional identity, contributing to the understanding of professional identity development in relation to pursuing a chosen theoretical orientation aligned with personal values and philosophy.

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