



An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experience of Social Workers as Psychotherapists in Greece

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Abstract

At present, Greece lacks a statutory framework regulating psychotherapy, creating some uncertainty regarding which professional groups may legitimately provide psychotherapeutic services. The present study explored how Greek social workers trained in psychotherapy experience and interpret their professional identity within this contested context. The study employed a qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It consists of six licensed social workers (n=6) -of whom three are women and three are men, aged between 38 and 60 years old- with formal/accredited psychotherapy training and at least five years of clinical experience. All of them participated in semi-structured online interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and analysed idiographically. The analysis showed three interrelated themes: (i) the

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perceived obviousness of psychotherapy as a legitimate specialisation within social work; (ii) feelings associated with the possible exclusion of social workers from authorised psychotherapeutic practice, including devaluation and uncertainty about the future; and (iii) the perceived deprivation of professional rights. The participants described psychotherapy as a key aspect to their professional identity and viewed potential exclusion/deletion as a threat to recognition, livelihood, continuity, and collective belonging. The findings of the study highly indicate that the present regulatory uncertainty has consequences extending beyond professional boundaries, as it affects participants' sense of meaning, legitimacy, agency, and existential security. In conclusion, psychotherapy constitutes a historically and personally meaningful component of participants' social identity, while regulatory decisions should therefore consider both competency standards and the psychosocial impact on affected professionals.

Keywords: *Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); lived experience; professional identity; psychotherapy; regulatory uncertainty; social workers; Greece.*

1. Background

Greece remains among the countries that lack a regulatory framework for psychotherapy. This gap has caused ambiguity and disagreements among mental health professionals regarding the credentials and qualifications of a psychotherapist. The general public is also affected as these debates create uncertainty about which professionals possess adequate training to provide psychotherapeutic services.

The debate whether social workers are eligible to practice psychotherapy is a longstanding one. Bar-On (1994) argues that social workers need to accept that their focus is advocacy and brokerage, and thus, their education should shift from client-centered interventions to strengthening the teaching of applied sociology and political science. Similarly, Specht (1990) suggests that social work should separate itself from the popular psychotherapies since its mission is to deal with the social problems, warning that if social work fails to do so, its function in the public social services will become negligible within the next 20 years. Although Wakefield (1992) agrees with Specht that psychotherapeutic interventions are justified in social work practice only if they contribute to the mission of social work, he challenges Specht's main conclusion that psychotherapy is incompatible with social work. Wakefield (1992) argues that Specht's understanding of the mission of social work is restrictive since he fails to distinguish the means used to pursue that mission and he also fails to distinguish psychotherapy as an independent profession from psychotherapy as a technology which can be used in the service of various professional missions.

These arguments seem to create a dichotomy between community-based and therapeutic work in the field of social work. Booyesen and Staniforth (2017) identify this dichotomy, noting that in different contexts and times, one perspective is privileged over the other one although both perspectives can be equally valid and supported. For example a study by Shah et al. (2013) with a sample of 88 clients, shows that social workers adequately deliver CBT as measured by the Cognitive Therapy Scale, concluding that the approach seems to be a natural fit for social workers and highlighting that social work is recognized as a key discipline in the delivery of mental health system. Lieberman (1987) recognizes social work's historical and long involvement in psychotherapy which has resulted in many significant contributions, highlighting though that special educational preparation is required in order to the practice of psychotherapy since it is considered a specialty in social work. Likewise, Wakefield (1988) argues that psychotherapy is a legitimate part of social work practice and any attempt to deny this reality or to portray social work and psychotherapy as fundamentally different create confusion about the profession's identity.

These debates move beyond questions of practice legitimacy and directly influence the development of social workers' professional identity which, as Webb (2017) argues, still remains a very important and highly contested issue. This is particularly relevant in the Greek context, where forthcoming psychotherapy legislation may have important implications for the recognition of social workers as psychotherapists, placing a significant aspect of their professional identity under threat. According to Park (2018) the development of increasingly integrated, multidisciplinary organisational settings along with rapid economic and political transformations, has led social workers to experience multiple and shifting professional positions, directly affecting the construction of social workers' professional identity. According to Papadopoulos and Egan (2023), this decrease in social work departments and positions replaced by more generic jobs and duties can be attributed to neo-liberal ideology.

Moorhead et al. (2025) further explain this view by attributing these internal tensions to external socio-political forces that constantly influence the occupational boundaries, conceptualisation and the scope of social work practice, directly affecting professional identity.

Indeed the development of professional identity nowadays constitutes a complex process affected by the interplay of priorities, organisational contexts and individual interests (Harrison & Healy, 2016) but not only restricted to that. For example, Ibarra (1999) suggests professional identity construction starts developing prior to formal training through socialization processes that affect their career pathway. Many studies have focused on the factors that shape and maintain social workers' professional identity. Yao and Flynn (2026) found that personal agency, recognition and external validation play important roles in the development of social workers' professional identity since through exercising agency in practice they developed confidence in their ability to effect change whereas recognition and validation from others reinforced their identification with the profession, contributing to both their individual professional identity and the shaping of a collective professional identity. Likewise, Salifu (2023) found that social workers' professional identity is shaped by the statutory legal framework and professional principles governing practice. Within this broader understanding, professional identity seems to be shaped through what Tripp (1993) describes as "critical incidents", reflecting how key experiences during training can significantly influence and redirect future career paths.

In the case of psychotherapy as an aspect of social workers' professional identity, the absence of a statutory legal framework governing psychotherapy undoubtedly has a negative impact and places social workers in a state of continuous re-evaluation of their professional role and identity. In such cases where the professional identity is endangered, the process or re-evaluation may extend beyond the professional capacity and may also have an impact on personal capacity with negative consequences on the self (Egan, 1989; Loseke & Cahill, 1986). This is also supported of a qualitative study conducted by John et al. (2014), who found that social workers' subjective well-being is shaped by the dynamic interaction between their personal and professional identities, rather than these being separate entities determined solely by workplace factors or technical competence. This is further supported by Pullen Sansfaçon and Crête (2016) who indicate that professional identity is not only shaped, but continues to evolve through interactions with others and through integration of personal, professional and organisational values.

Other factors that affect social workers' professional identity include the shared values, attributes, and sense of belonging that connect members of the profession (Daly et al., 2024), professional socialisation (Webb, 2017) which underscores the integration of academic and practice-based knowledge since identity is shaped through both formal and informal learning contexts (Merton, 1957) and ongoing debates regarding social work's professional status and legitimacy, which are considered important foundations of professional identity (Baylis, 2004; Long et al., 2018). Therefore, professional associations play a significant role in nurturing professional identity of social workers by supporting communities of practice across diverse fields (Moorhead et al., 2025).

At the same time social workers have to re-evaluate and adapt their professional identity in response to new professional standards (Faulk et al., 2010) while social workers try to deal with time pressures, ethical dilemmas, stress, uncertainties and conflicting legislative and policy demands (Afrouz et al., 2025). Professional identity may be particularly challenging for social workers who practice psychotherapy, since the limited guidance available on implementing evidence-based interventions means that their professional role largely develops through clinical training and field placements (Weissman et al., 2006). This finding aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner", suggesting that professional identity is formed through practice based knowledge rather than solely through abstract theory. At the same time, the reliance on training and placement experiences supports a social constructionist understanding of professional identity, according to which professional roles are shaped through local practices and discourses rather than universally defined standards (Burr, 2015). This is further supported by Hafferty (1998) who suggests that unofficial learning signals shape professional expectations, reflecting the operation of a hidden curriculum.

Organisational factors also contribute to identity formation, with increasing caseloads, limited resources, high levels of stress and highly structured service delivery highlighting the multiple challenges for social work (Morley et al., 2019). These challenges are often intensified in multidisciplinary settings, where social workers must continually define and assert their professional role and expertise (Bark et al., 2023). Indeed, the devaluation of social workers as mental health professionals due to ineffective representation at scientific and professional levels has been observed before as a professional identity issue within multidisciplinary teams,

where social workers' authority is frequently challenged (Hugman, 2009). Furthermore, the frequent underestimation of social workers on the basis of their undergraduate qualification, reflects both overt and covert power differentials within interdisciplinary practice contexts (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). In addition, a lack of recognition of social work as a profession from the public or other professions (Hunt et al., 2017; Long et al., 2024) along with being employed in generic roles can further affect professional identity. In hence, as Afrouz et al. (2025) suggest, social workers are always in a process of negotiating their position within organisations and they are constantly challenged by hierarchical dynamics, organisational demands and the medical model that undermine social work's values and principles.

Although all studies demonstrate the structural, organisational and discursive dimensions of professional identity, it seems mandatory to also take into consideration the lived, experiential and existential dimension in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact, particularly in contexts where professional legitimacy is contested. After all, professional identity is not only something that someone obtains as constructed or negotiated externally, but also something that is embodied and existentially experienced. In this sense, phenomenological and existential perspectives offer a deeper account of what it means for social workers to inhabit a professional role that is continuously questioned and redefined in relation to others, norms and hierarchies.

At a personal level, the destabilisation of professional identity can be further understood as a collapse of the professional lifeworld, where previously meaningful structures such as professional identity lose coherence and recognition, leading to an existential crisis (Husserl, 1970). These conditions reflect a fundamental disruption of being-in-the-world as described by Heidegger (1962), referring to the way individuals make sense of their existence through lived engagement with their world and others. Therefore, when professional identity is destabilised, it no longer provides a coherent or stable framework for experiencing and understanding one's professional existence. This may result in what Frankl (2006) defines as existential alienation, characterised by a loss of will to meaning and the emergence of feelings of emptiness and purposelessness, or in what Heidegger (1962) describes as anxiety (*Angst*) since already familiar structures of meaning become destabilised and future does not open as a horizon of possibilities but as a threatening unpredictability. This intensified existential distress creates an ontological insecurity, in which a profound lack of a stable sense of self and being prevails (Laing, 1965). In some cases, this may ultimately lead to what Kierkegaard (1980) describes as existential despair, namely a disturbance in the self's relation to itself, arising when individuals cannot reconcile who they are with who they are becoming or are allowed to become.

The devaluation and marginalisation that social workers have experienced in multidisciplinary teams or from the public can also be interpreted through a phenomenological lens. These others that provide the judging gaze resemble to Heidegger's (1962) concept of "the They" (*das Man*), who constitute public opinion and making decisions removing all responsibility. In that case, it seems that social work, has fallen "victim" to the "dictatorship" of no particular person allowing to be trusted and guided by the impersonal and anonymous "the They" (*Das man*) (Onwuaturigwu, 2022) who devalue social work, establishing the norm of a profession of lower status. Such conditions reflect what Sartre (2003) describes as the tension between facticity and agency, where facticity refers to the objective realities imposed upon individuals and agency to their freedom to define themselves and act accordingly. Here, the devaluation of social work constitutes the objective reality that constrains the possibility of self-definition and self-expression. Consequently, professional identity and self are experienced through the judging eyes of others, echoing Sartre's (2003) concept of the gaze which creates oppressive social conditions that lead to objectification and constrain the possibility of freedom. Furthermore, the questioning of the value resembles what Camus (1955) describes as the absurd confrontation between human efforts to create meaning and institutions that fail to recognise or validate that meaning.

The devaluation from other professionals in multidisciplinary teams in particular, also disrupts the notion of Being-with (*Mitsein*), which describes the coexistence with other human beings, suggesting that human existence is fundamentally relational based on the care (*Sorge*) for each other (Heidegger, 1962). From this perspective, the constant devaluation of social workers reflects a failure to recognize the other and authentically care for each other, resulting in a fragmented form of Being-with. Such failures of recognition move beyond interpersonal relationships and reach the public sphere as well. This kind of exclusion is fundamental to human existence as a political being according to Arendt's (1958) and echoes de Beauvoir's theory according to which certain groups are constructed as less legitimate in relation to dominant groups that constitute the norm (de Beauvoir, 2011). In this case the public, along with other professionals and institutions, portray social workers

practising psychotherapy as “the Other”, questioning their legitimacy and restricting their possibilities and opportunities. Although thrown into these restrictive and uncertain conditions, social workers still hold the responsibility, both individually and collectively, to act against these circumstances not only for themselves but also for future generations. This resonates with Levinas’s (1969) ethical position that responsibility extends beyond the self towards others, including those who are not yet present. It also reflects Heidegger’s (1962) understanding of historicity, according to which human existence is shaped by inherited meanings and future possibilities. In this sense, social workers hold an ethical responsibility to preserve these inherited professional meanings and values, to resist the erosion of historicity and to keep the horizon open for future generations of social workers. In hence, even when all possibilities and meanings collapse, Frankl (2006) emphasises that the human search for meaning remains, even under conditions of continuous suffering. After all, as the poet Hölderlin observes, “where danger is, also grows the saving power” (as cited in Heidegger, 1971).

Taking into consideration the longstanding debates about the legitimacy of social workers practising psychotherapy, the ongoing uncertainty regarding the status of psychotherapy in Greece and the huge impact on professional identity that goes beyond discursive dimensions and reaches an existential level, this study seeks to investigate the lived experience of social workers practising psychotherapy in Greece. Despite studies of the factors that shape professional identity, there is limited understanding of how social workers themselves experience and interpret their identity as psychotherapists in Greece. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to explore in-depth how social workers in Greece experience and make sense of practicing psychotherapy, including how they construct their professional identity in institutional contexts and understand their therapeutic role under the absence of a regulatory framework and on the threshold of forthcoming legislation. Hence, the main objective of this study is to investigate social workers’ experience of potential exclusion from psychotherapy practice as a result of the forthcoming legislation in Greece. The main research questions are:

- How social workers make sense of the prospect of exclusion from psychotherapy practice
- How they experience and emotionally respond to the prospect of exclusion from psychotherapy practice
- What they perceive the personal and professional consequences of potential exclusion from psychotherapy practice
- How they envision their future professional identity and career in light of the proposed legislation in Greece

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

A qualitative research design was adopted as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals’ subjective experiences and meanings they attribute to them. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate when the aim is to understand complex social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them directly (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were employed as they allow researchers to explore participants’ experiences in depth while maintaining a flexible structure to guide the conversation. This method enables participants to elaborate on their perspectives and introduce issues that are meaningful to their lived experience, thereby generating rich and detailed data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In the context of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), semi-structured interviews are commonly used because they support the exploration of personal meanings while allowing the researcher to probe significant themes that emerge during the discussion (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interview protocol included 10 open-ended questions and prompts.

2.2 Analytic Approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is considered a suitable method for this particular study as its goal is to explore how an individual constructs meaning from his/her own personal and social experiences (Smith, 2004). The origins of IPA are credited to Jonathan Smith, a health psychologist in the United Kingdom and its epistemology is based on three theoretical underpinnings which are: a) phenomenology b) hermeneutics (and double hermeneutics) and c) the idiographic approach (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology

is a philosophical approach, initially articulated by Husserl, which aims to produce an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The hermeneutic component is introduced by Heidegger (1962) who addresses the ontological question of existence itself. The analytical process of IPA is a double hermeneutic loop (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) since the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The last theoretical underpinning of IPA is idiography. IPA is idiographic in its commitment to examining the detailed experience of each case in turn (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA as an idiographic approach resists to the principles of empirical research as it allows itself to learn something from both the subjects and from the narrative world of the participants while telling their stories by focusing on individuality and analysing unique and subjective phenomena (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). The analysis was conducted according to the analytic steps of IPA as described by Goffman (1963) which are: 1) Reading and re-reading 2) Developing emergent themes 3) Searching for connections across emergent themes 4) Moving to the next case 5) Looking for patterns across cases and 6) Taking interpretations to deeper levels.

2.3 Sample

Participants were selected through purposive sampling in order to ensure that they had substantial experience of the phenomenon under investigation. To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) hold a degree in Social Work, (b) have completed formal training in at least one recognized psychotherapeutic approach and (c) have a minimum of five years of professional experience practicing as psychotherapists. These criteria were established to ensure that participants possessed sufficient clinical experience to provide rich and reflective accounts of their lived experience as social workers practicing psychotherapy. Social workers who had not completed a full psychotherapeutic training program or who had less than five years of therapeutic practice, were excluded from the study. This approach aimed to maintain a relatively homogeneous sample consistent with the idiographic focus of IPA. Six participants (3 females and 3 males) aged between 38 and 60 years old ($M = 49$ years old) participated in the research. They all were social workers licensed to practice and had been trained in at least one psychotherapeutic approach. According to Turpin et al. (1997) having six to eight participants is appropriate for an IPA study. Having a sample as such gives an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals. At the same time, the amount of qualitative data gathered is not overwhelming (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

2.4 Procedure

The recruitment process began with the identification of potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Participants were approached through professional networks, social media groups of mental health professionals, professional associations of social workers and psychotherapists in Greece. Individuals who expressed interest in participating were provided with an information sheet outlining the aims of the study, the procedures involved, and ethical considerations. After obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for the participants and conducted via a secure online platform. Each interview lasted approximately 40–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Following the interviews, recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to protect participants' identities.

2.5 Ethics

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Prior to participation, individuals were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from interview transcripts. All data were stored securely and handled in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human participants as well as the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union (Regulation (EU) 2016/679), ensuring that personal data were processed lawfully, stored securely, and used solely for the purposes of this research. Particular care was also taken to ensure that no information disclosed during the interviews could lead to the identification of clients, workplaces, or other third parties (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

3. Analysis

Theme 1: The obviousness of specialization in psychotherapy

Extract 1:

"I knew about it before I started my undergraduate studies. My mother is a psychologist. She has colleagues who are social workers and psychotherapists. So, wanting to get into this field... finishing sociology and wondering how I could get into it... she told me "either through psychology or through social work." And I decided to get into social work... because I felt it was more of an applied scientific field. At that point, I wanted something that would provide me with immediate practical tools. I didn't want something theoretical again. I felt the other [psychology] was more theoretical" (Charlotte, lines 8-14)

Charlotte presents psychotherapy as an already known and accessible career pathway prior to her studies since her mother and her professional network has already normalized social workers as psychotherapists. Charlotte's choice is a strategic one since she is already seeking to become a psychotherapist through her studies in social work. The above reflects anticipatory professional identity construction, where individuals form career identities prior to formal training through socialization processes (Ibarra, 1999). An implicit comparison between social work and psychology is also obvious in this extract with social work being perceived as more practical and less theoretical. This is evident through the use of words like *"applied"*, *"immediate"*, *"quickly"* and *"not theoretical"*, thus emphasizing a preference for action over abstraction. The emphasis on applied knowledge aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of the *"reflective practitioner"*, privileging practice-based knowledge over abstract theory.

Extract 2:

"My first contact with psychotherapy was in the fifth semester, if I remember correctly, the 4th or 5th semester of studies, when I came into contact with a therapeutic community for addicts, where essentially the core of the work [of social workers] was psychotherapy. This became a professional goal of mine" (Aaron, lines 13-16)

Aaron identifies a specific moment of his first contact with psychotherapy during his studies and he highlights psychotherapy as the *"core"* of social workers' role within that setting. Here psychotherapy gains legitimacy through direct exposure in practice, reinforcing its perceived natural fit within social work since in this setting, psychotherapy, as a practice delivered from social workers, is dominant. This internalized belief that psychotherapy is inherent to social work may be understood through discursive constructions of professional identity, which are shaped by local practices rather than universal definitions (Burr, 2015) although this may later clash with broader institutional or legislative definitions. Aaron's experience seems to be a turning point which shapes psychotherapy into a clear professional goal, reflecting the role of *"critical incidents"* in professional identity formation, where key experiences during training shape future career paths (Tripp, 1993).

Extract 3:

"In my practice placement there were social workers... who were trained in psychotherapy. They were the first professionals I came into contact with, who were themselves psychotherapists. But also from the undergraduate degree... I knew about psychotherapeutic approaches... because we had modules on that; for example, the module 'social work with families' had the basic principles... of systemic therapy. The book we had in the module of clinical psychology was a cognitive psychotherapy manual. From my undergraduate studies and my practice placements there were colleagues who were also psychotherapists, so I had the knowledge [that I could train in psychotherapy]" (Tomas, lines 4-14)

Tomas describes two vital points of exposure to psychotherapy. On one hand during his placement social workers were trained and working as psychotherapists and on the other hand through his academic curriculum including courses and textbooks. His awareness of the possibility of becoming a psychotherapist through social work is a knowledge constructed through converging sources which strengthens the perception that psychotherapy is an expected trajectory. The integration of academic and practice-based knowledge reflects

professional socialization, where identity is shaped through both formal and informal learning contexts (Merton, 1957). The presence of psychotherapy content in his curriculum can be interpreted as institutional validation, even if not formally codified. The implicit institutional validation connects to hidden curriculum theory, where unofficial learning signals shape professional expectations (Hafferty, 1998). However, these signals create a strong sense of legitimacy which contrasts the current debates, suggesting potential future identity disruption.

Theme 2: The feelings regarding the potential exclusion of social workers from healthcare professionals authorized to practice psychotherapy

Subtheme 1: The devaluation

Extract 1:

"I am torn. Part of me feels sad because I consider it [the potential exclusion] undermines our scientific field, and another part of me feels that this was expected given that as professionals and as scientists we have not claimed equal status at a collective and union level. We have not fought for our status as equals amongst mental health professionals" (Tomas, lines 46-50)

Tomas narrative reveals a deeply ambivalent experience regarding professional devaluation where sadness prevails with an internalized critique of collective inaction. The devaluation of social workers as mental health professionals as a result of ineffective representation at scientific and professional level has been observed before as an issue of professional identity in the context of multi-disciplinary teams, where social workers' "authority" has been challenged (Hugman, 2009). The "torn" experience can be interpreted as a dialectic between hope and inevitability, reflecting the struggle between desire for recognition and the internalized systemic marginalization, although the latter was expected. His sadness is not just personal but tied to the erosion of the profession's status. The fact that they did not fight suggests an internalized blame within the group of social workers or even guilt for standing idle as the abduction of their profession's legitimacy unfolded. The ambivalence reflects what Sartre (2003) frames as tension between facticity and agency, with facticity focusing on the objective facts of one's situation whereas agency representing the subjective freedom to define oneself and act upon it. In this case, facticity is the external legislative reality and agency the perceived failure to act collectively, resulting in either bad faith which indicates the acceptance of the situation or in an anguish which may torn you apart.

Extract 2:

"That's where the difficulty and frustration we mentioned before comes in. That someone must constantly have to prove that they have sufficient knowledge of the subject, that they have the right education, and that because of the title "social worker" you immediately fall into another category. I think it comes at a great cost for us all" (Gregory, lines 248-251)

Gregory highlights a recurring difficulty and frustration regarding social workers' constant effort to prove their professional identity which is devaluated in mental health professions. This frequent underestimation of social workers due to their undergraduate degree when compared to other professionals who are trained in psychotherapy, aligns with overt and covert power differentials (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016), as there is an apparent competition in relation to who is "worthy" of being a therapist. This legitimacy deficit seems to be chronic, reflecting a symbolic devaluation of social work in general and marking the field as one of lower status. At an existential level, the experience of "having to prove oneself" resonates with Sartre's concept of the gaze according to which the self is experienced through the judging eyes of others, leading to objectification (Sartre, 2003). The continuous effort for being for others in order to establish an authentic professional and social identity leads to the loss of being for itself. These others that provide the judging gaze resemble to Heidegger's "the They" (*das Man*). "The They" are those who constitute public opinion and making decisions removing all responsibility (Heidegger, 1962). It seems that social work, just like existence in phenomenology, has fallen "victim" to the "dictatorship" of no particular person allowing to be trusted and guided by the impersonal and anonymous "they" (*Das man*) (Onwuatuegwu, 2022) who devalue social work, establishing the norm of a profession of lower status.

Extract 3:

"It has already been disappointing [when social workers were excluded from the category of health professions]. I felt and still feel that there is no recognition of what I have studied, of what exactly I do, who I am [as a professional]. It is like there is a sloppiness around the concept of being a social worker. You graduate from university to secure a position in the public sector, so okay, take it, nobody cares. I don't know how to describe it, a sloppiness. As if we are not scientists. As if we were trained to be secretaries, and that is how it feels we are treated in general" (Simone, lines 206-213)

Simone describes a lingering disappointment from the past that still haunts her to this day for other reasons. The lack of recognition appears multidimensional including education, identity and practice, thus creating a crisis at an epistemic, professional and existential level. This reflects a huge disruption of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962) since professional identity does not constitute anymore a stable mode of existence. The metaphor of "sloppiness" suggests a perceived vagueness and lack of rigor in how the profession is socially understood, resulting in marginalization, whereas the phrase "nobody cares" reflects institutional indifference and invisibility. This indifference seems to cause what Frankl (2006) defined as existential alienation where will to meaning is lost and feelings of emptiness and purposelessness emerge. The comparison to "secretaries" reveals a symbolic downgrading of expertise close to humiliation. Overall this extract, as Husserl (1970) would put it, reflects a collapse of the professional lifeworld since previously meaningful structures such as professional identity lose recognition and coherence leading to an existential crisis.

Subtheme 2: The uncertainty of the future

Extract 1:

"Uncertain. As tomorrow is, anyway. But with a lot more anxiety now... Yes, with a lot of fear, with a lot of anger about the injustice that I see might happen [the exclusion of social workers from psychotherapy]. And it makes me think... What will I do, what will I call myself, how will I be able to survive professionally?" (Gregory, lines 207-212)

Gregory frames uncertainty and injustice as core feelings towards the potential exclusion of social workers from psychotherapy. Although uncertainty constitutes an inherent aspect of life as indicated in the phrase "as tomorrow is, anyway", when shifted in professional identity triggers anxiety. According to Heidegger (1962) anxiety (*Angst*) emerges when already familiar structures of meaning become destabilised and future does not open as a horizon of possibilities but as a threatening unpredictability. This intensified existential distress resonates with Laing's concept of ontological insecurity, where a profound lack of a stable sense of self and being prevails (Laing, 1965). In this case, threats to identity create feelings of instability and fear regarding one's place in the world. The prospect of a total collapse of professional identity is evident in the questions at the end of the extract which reflect a profound identity rupture. Gregory's future-oriented questions indicate an inability to imagine a stable professional identity and the future is experienced as unsafe and uncertain, producing existential paralysis. In light of this possible future scenario feelings of anger and fear dominate since an injustice might occur. The word "injustice" indicates that the proposed legislation is interpreted as invalidating moves beyond an intrapsychic aspect and introduces a relational and a sociopolitical dimension to the issue.

Extract 2:

"I don't know practically. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know. I'll be desperate if this ends up happening. I don't know practically how we [social workers] who work privately and work with people, how we're suddenly going to say, "Oh, we can't say we're therapists." So what have we been doing here all this time?" (Simone, lines 158-161)

Simone's uncertainty leads to a disorientation and finally to an existential despair. The repeated phrase "I don't know" reflects this disorientation which in turn, indicates emotional overload and difficulty in symbolising and absorbing the experience coherently. The emphasis on the word "practically" suggests that the anticipated legislation does not only threaten identity but everyday functioning and professional survival. This struggle to survive leads to a desperation which aligns with Kierkegaard's existential despair where a disturbance in the

relationship between the self and itself emerges when individuals cannot reconcile who they are with who they are becoming or are allowed to become (Kierkegaard, 1980). Here, Simone struggles to reconcile her identity as a therapist with the possibility of institutional invalidation but she realizes that her identity will be lost, leaving her in limbo, wondering what she has been doing all this time. The questioning regarding the meaning of years of therapeutic work, resembles Camus's absurd confrontation between lived human effort and institutions that fail to validate human meaning-making (Camus, 1955).

Extract 3:

"I certainly feel helpless in all that is happening. That I have no ability to influence things. But if I had to come up with a title, I would say: the end of an era. Because if we manage to lose the right to offer psychotherapy it will be the end of an era for us. Similar to losing our right to vote. It would be the end of an era" (Charlotte, lines 225-229)

Charlotte highlights helplessness as a core mood in the face of potential exclusion of social workers from psychotherapy. Her inability to influence things reflects an existential passivity as Charlotte no longer considers herself as an active agent able to shape her professional world. This resonates with Sartre (2003) who argues that freedom, although always present, can be experienced as constrained under oppressive social conditions. In this case, freedom is experienced as a blocked intentionality where world no longer responds to action. Charlotte's comparison to "losing our right to vote" can be perceived as a symbolic annihilation of professional identity. The exclusion from public sphere which is currently under threat, aligns with Arendt's (1958) theory of political life according to which participation in public life is fundamental to human existence as a political being. Here, exclusion from psychotherapy reflects the exclusion from public sphere, invisibility. The phrase "the end of an era" is a poetic metaphor that intensifies not only exclusion but also annihilation, suggesting a cruel discontinuity in collective professional identity and a collapse of temporal coherence since past (professional history), present (current identity) and future (possibility of continuation) no longer align.

Theme 3: The deprivation of their rights

Extract 1:

"A struggle for survival, I would say. That's how it feels, emotionally. Because I feel that these, in relation to all that we discussed before, in relation to how colleagues in other specialties, not all of them, a minority, may treat us, in relation to access to training, in relation to what people know and what people expect who may come to a therapist. So, yeah, all of the above are, I think, some of the main aspects that bring out this struggle for survival, professionally" (Gregory, lines 255-261)

Gregory describes his professional life as "a struggle for survival" suggesting that his daily experience as a social worker-psychotherapist is filled with constant insecurity, emotional strain and the need to defend his professional existence again and again. The exclusion that Gregory experiences does not constitute just a frustration but stands as a threat to his existential sense of self and belonging within his professional world. Gregory seems to experience himself as "the Other" within the psychotherapeutic community since his professional identity is shaped through exclusion and marginalization. The "Otherness" echoes de Beauvoir's (2011) theory according to which woman is constructed as "the Other" in relation to man who holds the power and act as a default human standard. In this sense, dominant groups that hold the power such as other professionals or trainers exclude social workers as psychotherapists and consider them as less legitimate, depriving their rights and freedom. However, within this suffering, Gregory keeps searching for purpose and professional authenticity, reflecting Frankl (2006) who suggests that humans do not stop looking for meaning even under conditions of continuous suffering.

Extract 2:

"A small group of people is trying to claim something very big, autistically. But it is not only an inherent problem. Sometimes the environment deprives you of this opportunity and directs you to confine yourself in this clique. Yes, I think that this tendency is strongly presented in the professional body. And it has been there for years and for me it started from the moment it ceased to be a scientific association, and downgraded to a union body. Because you can only claim these scientifically. You have nothing to claim as a union" (Aaron, lines 239-245)

Aaron describes “a small group of people” attempting to claim professional legitimacy while at the same time becoming confined within a “clique”. This effort which is labelled as autistic, echoes the myth of Sisyphus, where endless effort toward recognition turns into a repetitive cycle without genuine liberation or fulfillment. The exclusion from their own professional field reflects a tension between the need for belonging and the experience of marginalization. Thus the notion of Being-with (*Mitsein*) is disrupted. Heidegger (1962) uses the term Being-with (*Mitsein*) to define the coexistence with other human beings, suggesting that human existence is fundamentally relational based on the care (*Sorge*) for each other. Here, coexistence is disrupted reflecting a fragmented Being-with (*Mitsein*) where one does not authentically cares for the other. Aaron also criticizes the profession’s transition from a “scientific association” to a “union body” reflecting deep disappointment. This transition seems to seal the deprivation of the profession’s rights, evoking a connection with Oedipus, who ultimately blinded himself.

Extract 3:

“I think it shouldn't end for us [if social work is excluded from psychotherapy]. It's not easy when you lose a right to regain it, compared to not losing it in the first place. But I think we should fight the disappointment and anger, because I imagine that's how we'll feel. At least I'll feel that way. And we should continue to fight because it concerns us. It's not just about us... The next ones won't have this right. Why should we deprive them of the right? It's a very beautiful space, a very beautiful world. So I think it wouldn't be just for me but it would be because I want others to have it too. And even if they don't choose it, that's freedom, to have something and not take it”(Charlotte, lines 301-311)

Charlotte refuses to accept the potential exclusion of social work from psychotherapy as finalized or lost. She holds the responsibility to fight for the future generation reflecting Levinas’s (1969) ethical stance where responsibility extends beyond the self toward the others who are not yet present. Charlotte’s concern for “the next ones” stands as a final call to halt the erosion of historicity. As Heidegger (1962) argues, human existence is historical in the sense that it is shaped by inherited meanings and future possibilities. Charlotte’s narrative constitutes an effort to preserve these inherited meanings and to keep the horizon of psychotherapy open for the future. Psychotherapy is experienced as a historically meaningful “world” that has value and attributes meaning. In this extract, the “old ones” understood as the ancestors, are invoked to fight for and guard their rightful place in psychotherapeutic practice so that the “the next ones” will be able to enjoy this freedom of choice and this world.

4. Discussion

This study explored how social workers in Greece who are trained in psychotherapy make sense of their role and professional identity in a context that lacks regulatory framework, while taking into consideration a possible upcoming piece of legislation that may exclude social workers from being allowed to practice psychotherapy. Through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), participants demonstrated a belief that psychotherapy was not viewed as an aspect of their professional identity but as an integral and historically meaningful one of who they are as clinicians. The participants’ accounts suggest that the rumoured exclusion is being interpreted as a profound threat to their professional existence, generating experiences of devaluation, uncertainty, and deprivation of rights.

The first theme, “the obviousness of specialisation in psychotherapy”, demonstrated that participants experienced psychotherapy as a self-evident and legitimate part of their role, one that inherently belongs to social work practice. It was discussed that the understanding of psychotherapy as a specialisation emerged through different pathways, including other professionals’ opinions, practice placements, their academic curriculum, as well as contact with social workers already practicing psychotherapy. Rather than presenting psychotherapy as a contested professional territory, participants described it as a natural progression that was embedded within their understanding of the profession and their anticipated professional future, sometimes even before starting or completing their undergraduate studies, and definitely long before undertaking formal psychotherapeutic training. This finding aligns with literature on professional identity formation suggesting that identities are constructed through interactions between educational, social, and practice environments (Ibarra, 1999; Merton, 1957). From an IPA perspective, something that carries particular significance is the perceived nature of this trajectory. Participants did not describe a process of questioning whether they could become psychotherapists. Instead, they gave examples of different ways it was obvious to them that psychotherapy was

going to be a potential career pathway, as there were clear examples of social workers already occupying such roles. In addition, the presence of psychotherapeutic theory and concepts within undergraduate curricula and placement settings served as a form of institutional validation, which contributed to a sense of legitimacy and belonging. The findings put an end to the longstanding debate of whether social workers should practice psychotherapy, aligning with studies that endorse the role of social workers in psychotherapy and regard it as an integral aspect of their professional identity (Wakefield, 1988; 1992). As a result, the possibility of being excluded from psychotherapy appears particularly strange and disruptive because it challenges assumptions that have structured participants' identity and sense of self since the beginning of their careers.

The second theme, "the feelings regarding the potential exclusion of social workers from healthcare professionals authorised to practice psychotherapy", revealed the emotional impact that such a development would have on the participants. This was divided into two subthemes, one of devaluation, and the second that of uncertainty for the future. The concept of devaluation highlighted how participants experience the proposed exclusion from psychotherapy as a denial of their knowledge, which would seemingly downgrade their expertise and professional worth. Participants' accounts suggest that this experience extends beyond concerns about legal recognition and enters the realm of identity validation. Findings show that constant justification of participants' competence and legitimacy to practice psychotherapy, creates negative assumptions attached to their role. Such narratives resonate with previously documented findings of social workers fighting for recognition within multidisciplinary mental health settings (Hugman, 2009; Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). Hence, it seems that indeed social workers are always in a process of negotiating their position within organisations and are constantly challenged by hierarchical dynamics (Afrouz et al., 2025). Participants did not merely report frustration with professional hierarchies but they described experiences that challenged their sense of who they are as professionals, reflecting how institutional and societal representations are being internalised and experienced as attacks on social workers' professional identity.

The subtheme of uncertainty of the future further demonstrates the existential impact of anticipated exclusion. Most participants expressed fears regarding their professional survival and the continuity of their careers. The findings suggest that uncertainty was experienced on multiple levels. At a practical level, participants appeared to be worried about employment, professional titles, legitimacy and future opportunities. At a deeper level, however, uncertainty appeared to concern the collapse of an established narrative about who they are. Participants had difficulty imagining a future in which years of training, experience, and professional commitment could suddenly become institutionally invalidated.

These findings can be understood through Heidegger's (1962) conceptualisation of anxiety, which happens when familiar structures of meaning become destabilised. Participants' accounts reveal that the possibility of exclusion disrupts the continuity between past, present, and future that ordinarily supports identity formation. The anticipated exclusion appears to produce a disruption in which established meanings can no longer be taken for granted. In this sense, participants' experiences resemble what Laing (1965) described as ontological insecurity, where a potential threat to someone's identity generates uncertainty about their place in the world.

The third theme highlights how participants are not only concerned at a personal level, but have moved toward broader concerns such as collective identity, injustice, and the impact on future generations of professionals. "The deprivation of rights" shows that participants foresee their potential exclusion as a struggle for survival, emphasising the need to continuously defend and uphold their professional existence against dominant groups who hold the power. Their narratives suggest that exclusion is experienced not merely as a regulatory decision but as an act of symbolic deprivation that removes opportunities, recognition, and freedom. The use of words like rights, survival, and struggle show the significance of this upcoming change not just in professional terms, but also in moral and political terms. The above can be interpreted as an effort to preserve the historicity of the profession which underscores social workers' commitment to defend their rights, reflecting Frankl's (2006) suggestion, that even under conditions of continuous suffering, humans still search for meaning.

In addition, it is mentioned that the professional body of social workers in Greece tends to be confining its members to a more restricted role. Perhaps this shows a preference in community-based social work rather than therapeutic work. The latter demands a scientific presence instead of a representation that is similar to what a trade union would offer, according to one of the interviewees. Such experiences can make social workers feel isolated and unsupported, affecting in turn their professional identity and legitimacy.

Participants focused on helplessness, disappointment and despair. A concern about the next generation of professional social workers, who may not have access to the “world” of psychotherapy was highlighted, illustrating Levinas’s (1969) ethical position that responsibility extends beyond the self towards others, including those who are not yet present. This orientation toward future others suggests that participants were engaged in protecting not only a professional role but also a meaningful professional heritage. Such accounts highlight the relational and ethical dimensions of professional identity, demonstrating that participants' concerns were rooted in responsibility, continuity, and care.

Overall, the findings suggest that psychotherapeutic practice holds a central position within participants' constructions of their professional identity. The possibility of exclusion is therefore experienced as a threat to existential continuity, professional legitimacy, and collective belonging. Discussions regarding professional boundaries in the mental health field usually focus on competencies and regulations, however, the findings from this study indicate that these debates also have existential and psychosocial consequences to the professionals affected by them. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how professional regulation can be experienced as a challenge to one's sense of self, meaning, and future possibilities.

Although this study is situated within the specific sociopolitical context of Greece, the findings have broader implications for social work internationally, especially in countries where regulatory frameworks for psychotherapy are not yet established or in countries that social workers are already excluded from practicing psychotherapy. Although across different countries, social workers have historically engaged in psychotherapeutic practice, the recognition and regulation of their role as psychotherapists remain contested. The findings underscore that decisions regarding professional regulation move beyond administrative or legal processes, influencing practitioner's sense of belonging, professional identities and perceptions of legitimacy. Therefore, policymakers should take into consideration the historicity of the profession and the psychological impact of professional exclusion so to ensure that decisions are informed by evidence of education, competencies and clinical experience rather than solely by disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies. Furthermore, professional organisations internationally may need to engage more actively in supporting social workers' role in psychotherapy and in protecting their professional rights and the visibility of their contribution to mental health care system.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study highlights that the participants experience psychotherapy not merely as an additional professional activity, but as a central and historically meaningful component of their professional identity. The possibility of exclusion from psychotherapeutic practice in Greece was associated with feelings of devaluation, uncertainty, helplessness and deprivation of professional rights. These experiences suggest that regulatory debates concerning psychotherapy practice in Greece extend beyond questions of qualifications and professional boundaries, as those affect practitioners' sense of legitimacy, continuity, belonging and professional future. Furthermore, the findings of the present study demonstrate participants' commitment to protecting psychotherapy as a possible career pathway for future generations of social workers. The study also presents an in-depth account of the existential and psychosocial consequences of regulatory uncertainty. Therefore, future legislation should be informed by transparent competency-based criteria and meaningful consultation with all affected professional groups.

6. Limitations

The study has limitations that should be acknowledged. Although the sample of six social workers is consistent with the idiographic focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, its small size limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, participants were interviewed during a period of uncertainty regarding the potential regulation of psychotherapy, meaning their accounts may reflect anticipated fears of exclusion and concerns about possible legislative changes rather than responses to finalized regulations. Future research should examine how professionals make sense of actual legislative developments and explore the experiences of a broader range of professional groups who practice psychotherapy.

7. Reflexivity

The forthcoming legislation regarding psychotherapy regulation in Greece and the debates surrounding the potential exclusion of social workers from psychotherapy influenced the researchers' interest in exploring how social workers make sense of their professional identity within this uncertain context. The researchers acknowledge that their professional backgrounds shaped their engagement with the research topic and the interpretative process. The primary researcher occupies a multiple insider position as a social worker, psychologist, and psychotherapist, sharing professional experiences with participants. This position facilitated a nuanced understanding of participants' accounts regarding the topic and the meanings they attributed to experiences of recognition or exclusion. At the same time, the primary researcher acknowledges that her own professional trajectory differs from that of participants, particularly as her identity as a psychologist may shape her relationship to issues of professional regulation and recognition in distinct ways. The analysis required ongoing reflexive attention to assumptions related professional boundaries, legitimacy, and the role of social workers' in psychotherapy.

The research team consisted three researchers with backgrounds in social work and psychology, including expertise in psychotherapy. While this shared professional proximity supported meaningful engagement with participants' experiences, the researchers remained aware of the potential for shared assumptions. Reflexive discussions throughout the analytic process enabled the researchers to critically examine interpretations, explore alternative meanings, and identify how their own professional perspectives influenced the construction of themes. Consistent with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), reflexivity was not viewed as a process of eliminating researcher influence. Instead, it was understood as an ongoing practice of acknowledging and critically examining the researchers' role in interpreting participants' lived experiences.

Consent

All participants received detailed information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study before their participation. Written informed consent was obtained for participation, audio-recording of the interviews, and the use of anonymised quotations in research publications. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. All identifying information was removed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and any third parties mentioned during the interviews.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical approval from the Dasein Research Committee of the Hellenic Society of Daseinsanalysis, Greece. The research was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants and the requirements of the European Union General Data Protection Regulation.

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Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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