Professional development of creative arts therapists: Foundations, experiences and paths

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ABSTRACT

Creative arts therapists are interdisciplinary professionals with diverse backgrounds and fields of intervention, required to be experts at integrating expressive-creative processes with the therapeutic process. Due to the complexity and duality of this work, and the multiple influences they experience, the professional identity of creative arts therapists has been under discussion, mainly in countries where the profession is recognized and professional institutions established. The objective of this study was to explore the foundations, characteristics and paths of the professional identity of creative arts therapists in a country where the profession is not yet recognized.

Method: Content analysis of semi-structured interviews with beginners and senior arts therapists working in Portugal.

Results: Six themes emerged: Training conditioning, Practice conditioning, Creative and Expressive path, Therapeutic path, Intervention, and Self-Reflection. Participants mentioned social and personal influences on their path, including family, creative-expressive aspects and personal therapy. Arts were the main theoretical foundations referenced by the participants, with emphasis on drama and movement, and within psychology, mainly dynamic and group approaches. The main guides of professional practice are the patients they work with, highlighting the therapeutic relationship. Other relationships are also highly relevant as motivators for self-reflection, especially those with colleagues. The main conflicts regarding professional identity occur in the art and therapy axis, while the main point of cohesion is between personal and professional life.

Conclusion: These results are crucial for shaping both academic training and professional practice, ensuring the continued growth and recognition of arts therapy as a vital profession in Portugal.

Introduction

Creative arts therapists are interdisciplinary professionals with backgrounds in fields such as the arts, education, psychology, social work and medicine. Working primarily in mental health settings, they integrate expressive-creative processes with therapeutic expertise to address emotional, psychological, or developmental issues. Given the complexity of this work, their professional identity has been under discussion since the initial consolidation of art therapies in the 1960s, alongside the establishment of the first professional associations (Phillips, 2016).

These professionals embody an artist-therapist duality, which influences education curricula and admission criteria, often balancing artistic skills with relational competencies (Feen-Calligan, 2005, 2012;

Orkibi, 2011). Employability varies internationally, contingent on national recognition of the profession—something still lacking in many countries, including Portugal (Goodman, 2011; Orkibi, 2019). Despite a historical trajectory of arts therapies since the late 1960s, developed by psychiatrists inspired by the movement of Education through Art (dos Santos, 1991; Santos, 1973), the profession remains unrecognized in Portugal, particularly within mental health and special education.

Currently, only two training programs exist in Portugal: a master's degree in music therapy in articulation with a professional association and a program in art therapy. Other developments include postgraduate courses and the inclusion of singular 'curricular units' of expressive therapies in the curricula of Psychology and Psychomotor Therapy programs. Professional associations have also emerged across modalities such as music therapy, art therapy, dance/movement therapy, and

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dramatherapy.

Training opportunities and professional associations are both crucial for a deeper understanding and enhanced consistency of the creative arts therapists' identity and professional development. In Europe, the training path of creative arts therapists has been somewhat heterogeneous (Jones, 2020), leading to confusion regarding the development of the artist-therapist dual professional identity and linked career trajectories. Understanding the factors shaping this duality can guide more cohesive training programs and enhance professional identity, potentially increasing job satisfaction and recognition (Junge & Newall, 2015; Malis, 2014; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Professional identity development

Professional development begins at graduation and encompasses both intrapersonal and social processes, being a lifelong process of constructing a cohesive sense of professional identity integrating knowledge, skills, values and interests (Ducheny et al.,1997; Kuther, 2008; Orkibi, 2011). For creative arts therapists, this process is influenced by factors such as specialization choices (unimodal or multimodal; Eyal-Cohen et al., 2020), mentorship and supervision (Dalley, 2007; Robb & Miller, 2017), personal creative practice (Malis, 2014; Moon, 2002; Ono, 2018), academic training (Granot et al., 2018), client relationships (Granot et al., 2018), and professional networks (McNiff, 2015; Miller, 2016; Orkibi, 2011).

Orkibi (2011) adapted the professional development model by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) to the context of creative arts therapy students. A key aspect is the early engagement with the arts, which shifts during training from a focus on aesthetic production to an emphasis on the expressive process. Prior training or work experience in helping professions also eases students' concerns about their therapeutic capabilities. The Rønnestad and Skovholt model (2003) outlines six phases of the professional development of therapists and counsellors: the first (lay helper) occurs during a pre-training period; the subsequent phases (beginning student and advanced student) take place during studies, while the last three (novice practitioner, experienced professional and senior) occur in the subsequent years of professional practice. Early academic stages are pivotal for shaping professional identity (Rønnestad et al., 2019). Several studies have specifically explored the first phases' development of the professional identity of creative arts therapies students (Cahn, 2000; Elkis-Abuhoff et al., 2010; Feen-Calligan, 2005, 2012; Fish, 2008; Levick, 1977; Ono, 2018; Orkibi, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Others explore challenges in later phases. The therapist's involvement in artistic and creative practices outside their professional context to strengthen their "artistic side" (Moon, 2002; Philips, 2016); the art therapist as an agent of social change (Junge et al., 2009); the online creative professional practice (Keisari et al., 2023); therapist self-esteem and professional satisfaction (Orkibi, 2019) and, the role of supervision in the development of professional identity (Dalley, 2007; Miller, 2016), are some examples of the above mentioned

All these professional identity issues are interconnected in practice (Philips, 2016) and resonate with the personal experiences of each therapist, contributing to a unique, single and subjective space (Bouchard, 1998; Santos, 2019). As Moon (2002) suggests, becoming a creative arts therapist involves sustaining an internalized, dynamic relationship with art that transcends the creation of objects, cultivating a poetic perspective that encompasses and integrates experiences, practices and professional identity. Continuous self-reflection is vital for professional identity development (Malis, 2014; Talwar, 2016). Rønnestad et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of self-reflection throughout a therapist's or counselor's professional years. They note that, over time, varying patterns and styles of engagement with work can shape perceptions, influencing professional development trajectories. These trajectories can either foster continuous and cumulative development or lead to exhaustion and disconnection. For these professionals, their experiences often form complex and interconnected cycles of engagement with clinical practice, which can sometimes feel ambivalent. Therapists' experiences often form cyclical and interconnected patterns, making reflective practice key to fostering growth, identity, and fulfillment.

Purpose of the present study

Considering that professional development is a long, subjective process of countless individual and contextual possibilities and experiences, the elements that can determine and shape the path of these professionals are still not clearly understood. Moreover, while recognizing the voice of professionals as an added value for this understanding, it would be particularly important to address the professional development of senior professionals in a country whose profession is not yet officially established and where the professional path is not naturally facilitated. In Portugal, despite a history of arts therapies, no studies have examined the professional development of creative arts therapists.

Therefore, the present study aims to understand how the professional development of creative arts therapists working in Portugal has unfolded. This will be achieved through the characterization of their personal, academic, and professional paths, as well as the conceptualization of their work, self-reflection habits, and the theoretical-methodological foundations that support their practice.

Method

Sample

The sample included twelve participants, eight women and four men. The total number of participants allowed consistent quality and diversity of the data obtained regarding the study purposes and fits under the recommendations for qualitative studies' sample sizes (Hill et al., 2005). The age range was 34–69 years old, with an average of 49 years old, with a diverse background in the areas of Psychology, Education, Humanities and others. Eight of them (66.6 %) had professional experience between 10 and 24 years and the remaining four (33.3 %) had more than 25 years of professional experience. Three of them (25 %) were music therapists, two (16.7 %) dance-movement therapists, two (16.7 %) drama therapists and five (41.7 %) of them had multimodal training.

Instrument

As this was a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were chosen because they are a flexible and detailed instrument that allows an in-depth survey of the participants' experiences (McLeod, 2001). Interviews were previously tested in two pilot applications, not included in the analyses. The sequence of the questions was designed so that the beginning would allow for more open questions, where the participant could share relevant experiences from their journey with minimal guidance from the interviewer. Thus, the specificity of the questions was increasing throughout the interview. Each question was based on the main literature in the field (Carless & Prodan, 2003; Jones, 2020; Cattaneo & Malchiodi, 1988; Malchiodi, 2012; Edwards & Wilkins, 2014; Levine, 2004; McNiff, 1993; Malis, 2014; Orlinsky et al., 2001; Talwar, 2016) and associated with the objectives of the study. Even though some broad answers have covered more than one objective, the interview was designed to approach the participant's journey and practice in art therapy or expressive therapies. In particular, six questions were made:

"How did you come to the field of art therapy or expressive therapies?"

This question explores the journey into the field, including the participant's theoretical and practical development, personal experiences, motivations, and the significant relationships that have shaped their career. Previous research suggests that professional development is deeply influenced by past experiences, with clarity about one's vocation

playing a crucial role in career commitment (Carless & Prodan, 2003; Orlinsky et al., 2001).

"Tell me a little more about your work."

This question delves into the participant's professional activities, including their approach to therapy (whether unimodal or multimodal), their target audience, and the theoretical and methodological foundations of their practice. It also touches on their interactions with colleagues and institutions. The way arts therapists perceive their role has a significant impact on their practice (Moon, 2002). Moreover, effective therapy requires considering the specific context and population with which they work (Jones, 2020).

"What is your relationship with your own creative process?"

This question investigates the therapist's personal connection to creativity, exploring whether they consider themselves artists and how they integrate their own creative process into their professional practice. Engaging in personal artistic expression has been shown to enhance technical skills, self-awareness, and confidence in therapeutic work (Cattaneo & Malchiodi, 1988; McNiff, 1993; Robbins, 1988; Wolf, 1990). Creativity is also recognized as an intrinsic resource that shapes the therapist's approach to their work (Malchiodi, 2012).

"What does it mean to be an art therapist?"

This question addresses the personal and professional meaning of the participant's work, asking them to reflect on the unique aspects of art therapy compared to other artistic or educational approaches. Continuous self-reflection is widely regarded as a key aspect of professional development for art therapists (Malis, 2014; Talwar, 2016). Additionally, the therapeutic space is seen as a place where self-discovery and interpersonal relationships are cultivated (Levine, 2004).

"What is the most important quality that needs to be nurtured in the training of a good expressive arts therapist?"

This question seeks to uncover the essential elements for training a competent arts therapist, based on the participant's own experiences and understanding of what is critical for professional development. Training in this field is multifaceted (Orkibi, 2012a), and prior artistic experience is often viewed as an important component of arts therapy education (Edwards & Wilkins, 2014).

"Do you feel any important topics were missing, or is there a relevant experience you'd like to discuss that wasn't covered?"

This final question provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on any additional thoughts, experiences, or perspectives that may not have been addressed in the previous questions.

The interview was carried out through Zoom. At the beginning of each meeting, as recommended by Salmons (2014), audio and video features were checked with questions like "Can you see and hear me well?". The first few minutes were dedicated to reviewing the study's objectives and addressing any questions participants might have. Once clarified, participants were informed that the recording would begin. On average, the interviews lasted one hour and twenty minutes. Each recording was transcribed verbatim, and to ensure participants' anonymity, their names were replaced with coded identifiers based on the chronological order of the interviews.

Procedures

An initial search for participants was carried out on the websites of national associations linked to each expressive modality. This search resulted in a list of art therapists with training in dance/movement therapy, music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy and multimodal art therapy, working in Portugal in various contexts (e.g., teaching, research, private practice and community work).

Art therapists who met the following inclusion criteria were invited to participate: a) having certified postgraduate training in one of the areas of Art Therapy (dance/movement therapy, music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy and/or multimodal art therapy), whether or not obtained in Portugal; b) having professional experience as an art therapist in Portugal for at least ten years. The certified postgraduate

training typically encompasses advanced programs designed for individuals who already hold an undergraduate degree. It provides theoretical, technical, and practical foundations for professional practice in art therapy, typically including a minimum number of training hours and supervised clinical practice. The second criterion guarantees that participants fit, at least, into the category of Experienced professional/experienced professional (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), a phase of professional development in which there is a more consolidated professional identity and, therefore, greater chances of obtaining more reliable indicators for understanding the factors that contribute to its constitution over time. Following, the snowball method was used, where participants indicated other professionals who fit the selection criteria. Participants filled out an informed consent before the interview.

Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed using Bardin's content analysis (2011), a method chosen for its interpretive potential in unveiling meanings attributed to experiences and human interactions (Silva et al., 2005). The analysis followed three main stages. In the pre-analysis phase, full interview transcripts were read multiple times to promote immersion in the material. Relevance to the research objectives was assessed, and initial notes were taken to guide further analysis.

In the exploration phase, data were segmented into thematic registration units, which are the minimal meaningful phrases aligned with the research objectives. These units were grouped and labelled into codes based on shared meanings and thematic similarities (coding), following the principles of mutual exclusion (each registration unit is assigned to only one category) and homogeneity (all units within a category share a common thematic core).

Codes with the highest number of associated units were grouped into broader categories. When categories demonstrated strong internal coherence, they were elevated to overarching themes; some initial themes were reclassified to categories or subcategories to enhance consistency. This iterative process led to successive refinements: from three to five, then eight, and finally six final themes, presented in the following section. The decision to retain six themes was guided by the need for conciseness and a clearer presentation of findings.

Throughout the process, judges met regularly to compare their individual analyses, reach consensus on registration units, interpret and name codes, and refine thematic structure. These discussions included defining thematic significance based on frequency, occasionally leading to the merging or redistribution of codes and categories.

Results

Six themes emerged from data analysis: Training conditioning, Practice conditioning, Creative and Expressive path, Therapeutic path, Intervention, and Self-Reflection.

Training conditioning

This theme refers to the circumstances that play or have played an influence on the professional path of the participants. As detailed in Table 1, nine categories of circumstances emerged from the analysis, including Geographic location, Family of origin, Financial aspects, Interests, Social Circle, Spirituality, Travel, Hobbies, and Health.

The most significant influence identified on the formative journey was related to the family of origin (22.8 %). Similar interests of family members were mentioned by half of the participants, for example:

"(…) it is something I inherited from my father. My father was never an artist, but always a very creative person, very involved in creative things, like photography and the things he created, drew and so on." [E6].

On the other hand, divergent interests of family members and multiculturalism within the family environment were also referred to as

Table 1
Categories and subcategories of the theme I. Training conditioning.

Category	Subcategory	# archives	# references	Percent
Geographic location		7	11	9.7
Family of origin	Similar interests	6	16	14.2
	Divergent interests	3	7	6.2
	Multiculturalism	3	3	2.7
Financial aspects		3	7	6.2
Intrinsic interests	Arts	3	8	7.1
	Helping	4	4	3.5
	Art-Human connection	3	3	2.7
Social circle		5	12	10.6
Spiritual		3	14	12.4
Travel		5	10	8.8
Hobbies		4	7	6.2
Health	Mental	4	7	6.2
	Physical	3	4	3.5

triggers for pursuing their desired training path:

"(…) I didn't want to study humanities, I wanted to study fine arts, but my mother, at the time, did not allow me to study fine arts because she wanted me to become a lawyer." [E12].

Participants' own intrinsic interests were mentioned as conditioning their training, namely the interest in 'Art':

"Firstly, mainly because I was going towards my passion, which was applied arts, even before it was therapeutic or not." [E12]

the interest in 'Helping':

"On the other hand, I have always loved helping others. The contact with others, the communication. It has always fascinated me." [E9]

and the intersection between art and the human being:

"Art therapy came to fill something I've always wanted (…) which is this marriage of art and therapy that, suddenly, makes perfect sense" [E6].

Spirituality was another personal aspect mentioned, as well as Social circle, Health, Geographic location, Travel, Hobbies, and Financial aspects.

Practice conditioning

This theme includes references of circumstances that play or have played an influence on the professional path of the participants. Within

this theme, as detailed in Table 2, six categories emerged: Portuguese context, Pandemic, Continued education, Established family, First experiences, and Remuneration.

The greatest influence on practice identified is related to the Portuguese context, with particular emphasis on the subcategory of the professional community. It was characterized as Inconsistent by the group of experienced professionals:

"…I feel that in Portugal things are still very much in the early stages in some matters (…), I don't feel there is a community in expressive therapies" [E5].

In contrast, the senior group of participants mainly classified the community as Consistent:

"[the association] was a gateway to meeting other people working in the field" [E8].

Eight participants indicated that they seek their professional community abroad, as in the following:

"I became a member of the French Federation of Art Therapists." [E9].

Conversely, the subcategory growth of the profession in Portugal was the second most mentioned subcategory, which is composed of the tertiary subcategories: Training; Associations; Pioneering; Professional recognition; and Professional meetings. Except for the latter, all the previous ones were mentioned more frequently by the senior group. The emergence of training opportunities was mentioned by half of the respondents in total:

"(…) after years of discussing what the training standards were, a set of criteria was finally established, and Portugal is on that way" [E4].

The pandemic was also another source of influence on professional practice, with a focus on the adaptations made to working methods:

"I worked all the time (…), but instead of having a group, which has about 11 people, we worked one or two people per session. And even today." [E4].

As seen, some changes persisted even after the suspension of safety measures. Online work circumstances, imposed restrictions, implications for training and work materials, the impact of the pandemic on respondents' creations, and peer exchanges were also mentioned. Continuing Education was a category mentioned by 11 of the 12 participants, with no differences between the junior and senior groups. Moreover, for art therapists, the dual professional identity and degrees from a variety of areas, make supplementary training a path to add perspectives from different disciplines that might otherwise be lacking, as observed by this participant who has initial training in humanities:

Table 2
Categories and subcategories of theme II. Practice conditioning.

Category	Subcategory		# archives	# references	Percent
	Professional community	Inconsistent	7	22	7.8
		Consistent	3	6	2.1
		Foreign	8	13	4.6
	Professional growth	Training	6	10	3.5
		Associations	4	7	2.5
Portuguese context		Professional recognition	4	7	2.5
		Professional meetings	5	8	2.8
		Pioneering	5	6	2.1
	Dictatorship		4	12	4.3
	Professional training		5	9	3.2
	Professional perceiving		6	8	2.8
	Work adaptations		7	28	9.9
	Online work circumstances		7	18	6.3
	Restrictions		6	12	4.2
Pandemic	Implications for training		4	10	3.5
	Work materials		4	10	3.5
	Impact on creations		4	8	2.8
	Peer exchanges		5	7	2.5
Continued education			11	36	12.8
First experiences			9	23	8.2
Established family	Parenthood		4	8	2.8
	Creative practice		3	4	1.4
Remuneration			4	10	3.5

"Throughout my supplementary training, I accessed Lacanian psychoanalysis training for many years. I studied it for many years. For me, it provided much more support and gave me much more framework for my practice." [E12].

Creative and expressive path

The third theme found explicit in the interviews refers to the participants' artistic practices and their current or previous creative processes. Two categories emerged, distinguishing between influences from personal practice and from professional practice.

As detailed in Table 3, personal practice is the most frequently mentioned, particularly regarding expressive and creative practices related to the participants' therapeutic modality/ specialization area:

"(…) I have always had these experiences of the body, dancing, doing yoga, and so on… That has always been a very important part for me and increasingly so." [E10].

This category also includes the initiation of an expressive activity during childhood/adolescence, a practice preceding formal training, a practice not related to the area of specialization, the significance of having witnessed someone else's expressive process, prior artistic experience as a requirement prior to training, and the pursuit of an artistic practice for personal skill development.

In the professional practice, expressive practices as an artist were the most frequently mentioned. An example:

"I was the artist combining, let's say, all the information and all that space and what it needed, making a presentation and then sending it to be executed." [E3].

This category also included expressive practices in other work contexts such as art therapy, therapeutic interventions, observing others' creative processes, expressive practices carried out in a training context, and in the context of artistic education.

Therapeutic path

The theme Therapeutic Path includes references to the direct and indirect influence of personal therapy processes on professional choices. The following five categories were found: Being in personal therapy at the time of the interview; Absence of personal therapy at the moment of the interview; Personal therapy as a motivation for choosing modality; Mandatory nature of personal therapy throughout training; and Previous exploration of modality in therapy before training (see Table 4).

Being in personal therapy at the time of the interview was the most frequently mentioned category:

"I have a therapist who has been supporting me for years." [E3]

It was equally followed by the mandatory nature of personal therapy throughout training and by previous exploration of each type of therapy

Table 3
Categories and subcategories of theme III. Creative and Expressive Path.

Category	Subcategory	# archives	# references	Percent
Personal Practice	Related to specialization area	8	28	17.7
	Not related to specialization area	4	10	6.3
	Childhood/ adolescence initiation	6	18	11.4
	Before training	10	13	8.2
	Requisite	3	6	3.8
	Testimonials	4	6	3.8
	Skills development	3	4	2.5
	Family influences	3	4	2.5
Professional Practice	Artist	8	17	10.8
	At work	6	15	9.5
	At intervention	8	14	8.9
	Creative process observation	5	11	7.0
	Training	8	8	5.1
	Education	3	4	2.5

Table 4
Categories of theme IV. Therapeutic Path.

Category	# archives	# references	Percent
Being in personal therapy	5	10	26.3
Not being in personal therapy	4	6	15.8
Therapy as mandatory	6	8	21.1
Previous exploration	5	8	21.1
Personal therapy as motivation for the modality	3	6	15.8

before training. Half of the participants referred personal therapy as mandatory during or before training. It was particularly emphasized by the senior professionals' group, who mentioned it at a rate of 28.6 %, compared to 19.4 % by the experienced professionals group. Personal therapy as a motivation for choosing such modality and absence of personal therapy at the moment of the interview were less frequently mentioned by participants, both 15.8 %.

Intervention

The fifth theme, Intervention, characterizes the intervention' contexts and population, as well as the therapists' theoretical and practical foundations. Within this theme, three categories were found referring to the contexts of intervention, theoretical foundations, and practical foundations (see Table 5). References to theoretical foundations in arts and expressive modalities rely on drama, movement, music, and visual arts. Those were highlighted as underpinning the professional practice of the participants:

"We play roles. And theatre and dramatic, theatrical artistic expressions allow me to train the roles that I have underdeveloped." [E11].

The theoretical foundations of psychology were also mentioned, specifically dynamic approaches, group approaches, the relevance of the setting, psychodrama, developmental psychology, other approaches, and critiques of psychology.

Other foundational bases included art education and philosophy. Five out of the twelve respondents discussed what art therapy is embracing expression, a practice that still needs defining, another use of the term, a practice requiring a constructive view of the subject, a practice centered on the relationship, a practice about creating meaning, and one that presents immediate benefit. They also addressed their conception of art as a return to playfulness, another dimension of beauty, and the expression of the invisible. One-third of the participants also conceptualized creativity.

Regarding practical foundations, guiding principles for professional practice were mentioned, including the audience they work with, promoting freedom and autonomy, the specific objectives of each intervention/case, trust in the art, and presence. One example of the audience they work with is:

"In reality, with each patient my work is very different, or with each group." [E5].

The most commonly used practices were bodily practices, integrative practices, storytelling, dramatic practices, drawing, musical practices, assessment tools, and verbal integration practices. The relationship between process and product in expressive therapy interventions was also mentioned:

"… we use theatre not so much interested in the final products, which are the performances, the plays, but rather in the processes that lead us to what we learn individually in the journey of creating a character." [E11].

Various intervention contexts were mentioned: teaching in training programs, research, private clinic, community, hospital, management roles in societies and associations, internships, and school context. Within this category, the most frequently mentioned context was Teaching in training, cited by seven of the 12 professionals:

"(…) I worked as a supervisor, as a teacher" [E12].

Group work was mainly cited by the senior group (3,4 %) compared

Table 5
Categories and subcategories of theme V. Intervention.

Category	Subcategory		# archives	# references	Percent
Intervention Contexts	Teaching in training programs		7	28	4.3
	Research		7	26	4.0
	Private clinics		7	15	2.3
	Community		7	13	2.0
	Hospital		8	12	1.8
	Management in associations and societies		8	11	1.7
	School context		4	10	1.6
	Internship		4	6	0.9
	Arts & Expressive modalities	Drama	4	43	6.6
		Music	5	36	5.5
		Movement	7	29	4.4
		Visual Arts	3	11	1.7
		Dynamic approaches	8	28	4.3
		Group approaches	6	19	2.9
		Setting relevance	5	15	2.3
	Psychology	Psychodrama	3	11	1.7
		Developmental Psychology	4	8	1.2
		Other approaches	7	9	1.4
		Critiques to psychology	3	8	1.2
Theoretical Foundations	Education through Art		3	10	1.5
	Creativity		4	8	1.2
	Philosophy		2	3	0.5
	What is Art therapy	Embracing expression	7	22	3.4
		A different use of words	6	20	3.1
		In need for definition	5	13	2.0
		Requires a constructive view	6	12	1.8
		Relationship-centered	8	12	1.8
		About creating meaning	4	7	1.1
		It has immediate effects	3	3	0.5
	Art as a return to playfulness		5	15	2.3
	Art as another beauty dimension		4	10	1.5
	Art as the expression of the invisible		3	5	0.8
	Guiding principles	The population	11	27	4.1
		Autonomy	7	13	2.0
		Intervention objectives	7	10	1.5
		Trust on art	3	10	1.5
		Presence	4	8	1.2
Practical Foundations	Practices	Bodily	5	16	2.5
		Integrative	5	10	1.5
		Histories	4	8	1.2
		Drama	4	8	1.2
		Drawing	3	8	1.2
		Music	6	7	1.1
		Assessments	2	5	0.8
		Verbal integration	3	4	0.6
	Process & Product		8	17	2.6

to the experienced professionals (2,4 %). The group of experienced professionals declared more frequently the work with vulnerability while the senior group declared more frequently the work with special needs population.

Self-reflection

The final theme encompasses the processes in which reflection and insight occur in either personal or professional contexts, influencing participants' professional identity. As detailed in Table 6, Self-reflection includes two major categories: the Motivators for self-reflection and the Outcomes regarding professional identity.

Relationships are the most prominent motivators, with those involving colleagues being the most frequently mentioned. Relationships with mentors and patients were also noted. Some examples:

"… clearly, the people I work with and have worked with. I think … The other day, I was thinking about how patients teach us about psychopathology, for example." [E5]; "And let's say that the process with [patient's name] was a process that really surprised me, but also validated me a lot, you see? In my self-development." [E3].

Other motivators included the expressive process, professional practice, training moments, personal therapy, supervision, the interview moment of this study itself, and self-care moments.

Among the outcomes of self-reflection regarding professional

identity, different attributes stand out. An example of satisfaction is:

"… it is very gratifying because, in fact, they [clients] respond very well." [E9].

The senior professionals mentioned modesty as a characteristic of being an art therapist:

"We don't do anything. We contribute to something." [E8].

Additionally, empathy and sensitivity, commitment, being an art therapist as a way of being in life, working with expression, relying on action, feeling fatigue and loneliness, having clear preferences regarding intervention contexts and populations, and recognizing their own experience were referred as being part of their professional identity.

Structural conflicts also stood out as outcomes of the self-reflection on professional identity. Namely, conflicts between the fields of art and therapy, between identifying as a therapist or an art therapist, between identifying as an art therapist or as a professional in their primary training, and the conflicting balance of personal and professional life. However, a sense of cohesion describing the integration of personal and professional dimensions, and of art and therapy was also mentioned.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that the professional development of creative arts therapists in Portugal emerges from an intricate

Table 6
Categories and subcategories of theme VI. Self-Reflection.

Category	Subcategory		# archives	# references	Percent
Motivators for self-reflection	Relationships	Colleagues	8	45	10.8
		Mentors	9	27	6.5
		Patients	7	23	5.5
	The expressive process		11	40	9.6
	Professional practice		9	30	7.2
	Training moments		10	30	7.2
	Personal therapy		8	21	5.0
	Supervision		6	16	3.9
	The interview itself		7	12	2.9
	Self-care		4	9	2.2
Outcomes regarding professional identity	Conflicts	Art vs Therapy	8	20	4.8
		Therapist vs Art-therapist	7	10	2.4
		Art-therapist vs primary training	4	10	2.4
		Personal vs professional life balance	2	2	0.5
	Cohesion	Personal & professional	5	19	4.6
		Art & Therapy	6	9	2.2
	Attributes	Satisfaction	8	17	4.1
		Modesty	5	12	2.9
		Empathy and sensitivity	6	12	2.9
		Commitment	5	10	2.4
		A way of being in life	5	10	2.4
		Working with expression	5	8	1.9
		Reliance on action	4	7	1.7
		Fatigue and loneliness	3	7	1.7
		Preferences	5	6	1.4
		Recognition of experience	4	4	1.0

interplay of personal history, training experiences, and contextual factors. These elements shape not only the trajectory of each therapist but also the ways in which they sustain and redefine their professional identity over time. By synthesizing results, four broader dimensions can be discussed: personal conditioning, creative and expressive path, therapeutic path and intervention and reflective integration.

Personal conditioning

Participants' accounts reveal that personal history and formative experiences play a foundational role in shaping their professional pathways, resonating with Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) model that highlights the influence of early life and family background on professional identity formation. Particularly among senior professionals, family environments often did not encourage the arts as a viable career path, reflecting a broader societal view that associated artistic practice with leisure rather than profession (Santos, 2006).

Reaffirming literature on professional identity being the alignment of interests and values with skills (Ducheny et al., 1997, cited by Orkibi, 2011), there was found a reference to personal interests having influenced participants' professional choices. This statement also reflects a common characteristic of the early stages of professional development, during pre-training, called the Lay Helper phase (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), especially when it comes to the interest of helping others. Moreover, results align with quantitative studies that found art practice, professional identity, and career commitment as being positively interrelated (Jue & Ha, 2020). For some, spiritual experiences also emerged as pivotal, shaping their values and fostering attitudes that informed both personal growth and therapeutic orientation. The emergence of a category referring to the specificities of being an art therapist in Portugal reinforces the influence of social factors on professional development (Orkibi, 2011). The country's historical lack of formal recognition for creative arts therapies meant that many of the senior professionals navigated their careers in relative isolation, often serving as pioneers. This context heightened the significance of professional communities and associations, which participants cited as vital spaces for exchange, validation, and identity consolidation. The Professional Community was the most frequently mentioned subcategory, underscoring the importance of interpersonal factors in the development of these professionals'

identity (Elkis-Abuhoff et al., 2010; Fish, 2008; Orkibi, 2011). As McNiff (2015) and Orkibi (2011) observed, participation in professional associations allows contact with colleagues and the exchange of experiences, which fosters a sense of community and professional identity.

It is believed that this movement occurred because these professionals started their practice as art therapists more than 25 years ago when fewer colleagues were working in the country and consequently fewer local associations to join. The oldest association related to art therapy was established exactly 25 years before this study and, being it the Portuguese Association of Music Therapy (APMT), it does not include professionals from other modalities. In fact, it is important to note that half of the senior group consists of music therapists, who seem to have a more consolidated community in our sample compared to other modalities.

Nevertheless, the overall perception of the professional community as consistent by the senior group can also be linked to having a more established professional identity after many years of experience and being more involved in professional growth actions in Portugal, as shown by the tertiary subcategories in Growth of the profession. This differential experience underscores how institutional infrastructures can either support or hinder professional development within emergent fields.

These contextual factors also framed responses to external disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants described significant adaptations to their practices, reflecting global trends in creative arts therapies where the shift to online modalities became a necessity (Feniger-Schaal et al., 2022; Keisari et al., 2023). The need for flexibility and innovation in professional practice further illustrates how environmental constraints and opportunities actively shape identity and skill development. Lifelong learning emerged as a cross-cutting practice, with nearly all participants emphasizing the importance and commitment to continuing education. (Junge et al., 2009). We observe that these references do not decrease in the senior group, which reports seeking updates on their knowledge through supplementary training throughout their careers. In parallel, it is believed that there is a specificity for art therapists in this regard: with a dual professional identity and degrees from a variety of areas, supplementary training adds perspectives from different disciplines that might otherwise be lacking. This continued pursuit of supplementary training contrasts with what Rønnestad and

Skovholt (2003) found in their studies, where experienced professionals start to lose interest in workshops and further education due to a sense of saturation of information.

Creative and Expressive Path

This dimension addresses the second specific objective of this study. Personal expressive experiences are mentioned by participants more frequently than expressive experiences in professional practice. These findings reaffirm literature on the importance of an art therapist's engagement with their artistic process outside the therapeutic sphere and the strengthening of their "artist side" (Philips, 2016). Engagement in personal artmaking was not merely recreational but constituted a form of professional sustenance, reinforcing identity and creative sensitivity essential for therapeutic work. (Eyal-Cohen et al., 2020).

Regarding professional practice, the number of references to artistic experiences as an Artist is noteworthy, with a considerable difference between the two groups of participants (12.3 % for experienced professionals vs. 7.7 % senior professionals). This difference can be attributed to the fact that the participants in the senior group have undergraduate degrees in areas that are oriented toward therapeutic and educational practice, not artistic. Additionally, relating the results in personal interests, we observe a greater interest in Helping from this group, which may have guided these individuals to integrate their interest in the arts into a more therapeutic role early in their professional path.

Therapeutic path

Personal therapy was one prominent reflective practice, with participants recognizing its role in fostering self-awareness and professional growth (Bouchard, 1998). An overview of the results suggests that it remains common to require psychotherapy and counseling training practices as mandatory in art therapy training. In fact, it is determined by major professional regulatory bodies for art therapy and healthcare professions in different countries (Orkibi, 2012c).

Five participants had previously experienced their own modality, that is, before entering training to become professionals, they had been in the role of patients for their type of therapy. The majority of participants who reported having followed this path belong to the first group.

Part of these results can be related to the fact that there were not many opportunities for such therapies in Portugal for senior professionals at the time before their training. As mentioned earlier, they were, for the most part, the pioneers of this field in the country, being responsible for the actions of growth/establishment of practice.

Intervention and reflective integration

Regarding the Theoretical Foundations of arts, Drama was cited most often by one-third of the interviewees, with a similar distribution between groups. The distribution of mentions by modality corresponds to the specializations of each group, that is, greater for movement in the experienced professionals' group, which contains all the dance-movement therapists of the sample, and greater for music in the group of senior professionals, formed 50 % by music therapists.

Regarding the theoretical foundations of psychology, dynamic psychology was mentioned by eight of the 12 participants, which reaffirms that most art therapists rely on psychoanalytic theories (Malchiodi, 2012). Group psychology was also mentioned by the participants.

Guiding Principles is the most frequently mentioned practical foundation by the participants in their professional practice. The one that received the most emphasis was attention to the Audience. With references from 11 out of 12 participants, we can observe what Granot et al. (2018) pointed out: art therapists recognize that the relationship with clients is the main guiding factor of the interventions they conduct.

This topic addresses the first specific objective. Here, we observe

how varied the work context of these professionals is, according to what is described in the literature by Philips (2016). The references from the second group are greater, which confirms that seniors are professionals from whom other professionals want to learn (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Moreover, they also want to teach, proposing autonomous training or incorporating expressive therapy subjects into other courses.

Reflection emerged as a vital mechanism through which participants synthesized their experiences and navigated the complexities of their dual identities. A particularly insightful finding relates to participants' early client relationships, which were frequently recalled as formative professional experiences. This echoes Rønnestad and Skovholt's (2003) proposition that interpersonal experiences during the early stages of practice serve as crucial learning sites, where contextual sensitivity and professional wisdom are cultivated. Work relationships continued to serve as a rich source of learning, particularly for experienced professionals who described learning through interpersonal encounters more than through formal education. Senior professionals articulated high levels of satisfaction with their careers, reinforcing prior studies that associate professional maturity with increased fulfillment (Orkibi, 2019; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). We also found references to Modesty, as indicated by the literature (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), with greater mentions from the senior group. Regarding professional identity, we identified the main dichotomies mentioned in the literature (Feen-Calligan, 2005, 2012; Orkibi, 2011), which were present in both a conflicting and cohesive manner in the interviewees' accounts. Notable themes include satisfaction, fatigue, and loneliness, as well as, as observed by Miller (2016), the educational role assumed by art therapists within multidisciplinary teams.

Overall, these results are crucial for shaping both academic training and professional practice, ensuring the continued growth and recognition of arts therapy as a vital profession in countries like Portugal.

Limitations

This study does not come without limitations. To be specific, it relied on a convenience sample, which may not capture the full diversity of art therapists' career paths in Portugal. Although interviews were conducted via Zoom, the sample was geographically limited because participants often referred colleagues who were working nearby, leading to concentration mainly in the Lisbon area. The lack of responses from some professionals also contributed to the restricted scope, excluding perspectives from other continental regions and the islands. Additionally, in the sampling process, the diversity of the therapeutic modalities took precedence over geographical distribution. Future studies are encouraged to employ randomized sampling and adopt mixed methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of art therapists' professional development.

Implications for research

Future studies can explore each theme in detail, combined with the impact of public policies and regulations on creative arts therapists' practice. Thereby, a solid foundation for the development of the profession in the country would be more easily and comprehensively addressed. Moreover, our results encourage future studies to explore the professional identity of creative arts therapists in countries in diverse stages of professional recognition, also addressing diverse stages of integration of the profession into national education, health and social systems.

Implications for practice

This study endorses important implications for practice. The results highlight the need to integrate peer support spaces and activities to foster professional reflection at various levels. For professional practice, it is crucial to consider how the regulation of the profession, which is

currently missing in Portugal, might influence the development of professional identity and career trajectories of arts therapists, and also promote spaces of professional reflection on this theme.

Conclusion

The main objective of the present study was to understand how art therapists develop professionally in Portugal. Given their dual professional identity, specific aspects of creative arts therapists' professional development have been addressed, although focusing mainly on the early stages of such career paths. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the factors that influence professionals' trajectories over time, particularly in countries like Portugal, where the profession is not yet regulated.

Our study showed that the professional identity of the creative arts therapists is influenced by multiple factors. The influences found in this study were of a social and personal nature, including family, creative-expressive aspects and personal therapy. They acted on both the creative-expressive path and the training and professional practice paths, influencing professional choices.

They practice mainly in training, research and clinical contexts. Arts and artistic modalities were the main theoretical foundations referenced by the participants, with emphasis on drama and movement, and within psychology, mainly dynamic and group approaches. Methodologically, body and integrative techniques are the most used. The main guides of professional practice are the patients they work with, highlighting the therapeutic relationship. Other relationships are also highly relevant as motivators for self-reflection, especially those with colleagues.

Regarding professional identity, the main dichotomies mentioned in the literature were present in both a conflicting and cohesive manner in the interviewees' accounts. A greater degree of conflict is evident in the Art vs. Therapy secondary subcategory (see Table 6), suggesting a fluctuation or difficulty in delimiting and integrating these domains within a clear frame of reference. In contrast, the Personal & Professional secondary subcategory emerges as predominant in cohesion, reflecting a dimension of alignment, compatibility, and harmony between personal and professional life, thereby forming a unified sense of self in professional identity. Professional identity was also characterized by satisfaction, as described in previous studies, with emphasis on art therapists. Commitment, expressed through continuous training, professional reflection, and ongoing artistic practice, has proven essential for satisfactory professional development in our participants.

From a practical perspective, this research highlights the importance of fostering professional communities and providing opportunities for continuous self-reflection, which can enhance job satisfaction and mitigate burnout. Such insights are crucial for shaping both academic training and professional practice, ensuring the continued growth and recognition of art therapy as a vital profession in Portugal and beyond.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Luana Prado: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Joana Machorrinho:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Graça Duarte Santos:** Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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