

Assessment of the Immigration Phenomenon in Austria Through the Eyes of an Immigrant Psychoanalyst

Bewertung des Migrationsphänomens in Österreich aus der Sicht einer immigrierten Psychoanalytikerin

Ümit May

Kurzzusammenfassung

In einer Zeit, geprägt durch Globalisierung, einer starken Polarisierung von Wohlstand und Einkommen sowie nie dagewesener Mobilität ist die Zuwanderung zu einer der drängendsten Herausforderungen geworden, mit denen sich die Nationen weltweit konfrontiert sehen. Österreich, im Herzen Europas gelegen, hat eine beträchtliche Anzahl von Immigranten verzeichnet. Als Psychoanalytikerin mit Migrationshintergrund möchte die Autorin die Herausforderungen im Zusammenhang mit MigrantInnen im Kontext der psychoanalytischen Theorie und Praxis behandeln, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf die interkulturellen Ungleichheiten gelegt wird.

Schlüsselwörter

Einwanderung, interkulturelle Ungleichheiten, Migranten, Psychoanalyse, soziale Integration, sozialer Zusammenhalt

Abstract

In an era characterized by globalization, stark polarization of wealth and income as well as unprecedented mobility, immigration has become one of the most pressing challenges facing nations around the world. Located in the heart of Europe, Austria has experienced a significant number of immigrants. As an immigrant psychoanalyst, the author aims to address challenges related to immigration in the context of psychoanalytic theory and practice, with an emphasis on intercultural inequalities.

keywords

immigration, migrants, intercultural inequalities, psychoanalysis, social inclusion, social cohesion

What makes itself felt in a human community as a desire for freedom may be their revolt against some existing injustice, and so may prove favourable to a further development of civilization (Freud, 1930, p. 96).

1. Introduction

In an era characterized by globalization, stark polarization of wealth and income as well as unprecedented mobility, immigration has become one of the most pressing challenges facing nations around the world. Europe has experienced a significant influx of migrants and refugees in recent years, prompting heated debates and discussions. Located in the heart of Europe, Austria has seen significant numbers of immigrants.

In fact, Austria has historically been a land of diverse cultures and rich traditions. However, in recent decades, the country has undergone notable demographic changes due to various factors such as economic opportunities, political instability, and conflicts in neighbouring regions. These dynamics have led to an increasing number of individuals seeking refuge and a better life in Austria.

On the other hand, Austria is relatively free from many problems seen in countries of the Global North that cause severe sufferings on the lives of people, such as extreme wealth concentration, stark economic inequalities, discrimination, polarization, poverty and systemic racism. According to the reports and statistics from the United Nations, the OECD and the European Commission, Austria seems to be rather stable and less unequal or polarized by international comparison, with the exception for inequalities in areas of education and opportunity (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2019; United Nations, 2020).

As disparities and inequalities concerning the general population are beyond the scope of this text, challenges related to immigrants – one of the most neglected aspects – will be briefly addressed in the context of psychoanalytic theory and practice, with an emphasis on intercultural inequalities. By doing so, we will follow the course of action suggested by Freud in the following lines emphasizing the necessity and importance of questioning the flaws of civilization: “When we justly find fault with the present state of our civilization for so inadequately fulfilling our demands for a plan of life that shall make us happy; and for allowing the existence of so much suffering which could probably be avoided – when, with unsparing criticism, we try to uncover the roots of its imperfection, we are undoubtedly exercising a proper right and are not showing ourselves enemies of civilization” (Freud, 1930, p. 115).

2. Austria: A Good Laboratory to Evaluate the Immigration Phenomenon

Each country and its civilization may have vulnerabilities that potentially predispose the country and its citizens to uncertainties and future threats. For Austria, a significant factor seems to be the composition of its population, as it has one of the biggest migrant populations relative to its small population size. As of January 2022, foreign citizens comprise 17.1% of the total population and 25.4% of the entire population have a migration background (Living and Working in Austria, 2023). The share

of immigrants increases to nearly one third when natives with foreign-born parents are included (OECD, 2019). In 2022, the share of Viennese with a foreign origin was 42.6%, with some districts seeing figures about or above 50%. Among these migrants, those with Serbian origin make up the largest share followed by those with Turkish origins (Facts and Figures on Migration and Integration, 2022).

The challenges of immigration that Austria faces encompasses a myriad of complexities that go beyond mere statistical figures. At the heart of this issue are questions of integration, social cohesion, and national identity. The influx of migrants, particularly asylum seekers, ignited concerns among segments of the Austrian population, fuelling debates around cultural assimilation, economic strain, and security risks. Balancing the preservation of national identity and cultural heritage with the recognition of humanitarian obligations poses a significant challenge for policymakers and society at large.

Migrant integration represents a multifaceted issue with at least four important dimensions: (1) whether migrants can truly and fully integrate into the economic, social, cultural, and political areas of society (social inclusion), (2) how policies favour or limit migrants' inclusion, (3) how the host society and public perceive migrants and immigration, and lastly, (4) the discrimination migrants might be subject to (European Commission, 2020). The last three dimensions relate to social cohesion, including concepts such as anti-discrimination, combating xenophobia and related intolerances, and promoting mutual understanding. Unless problems within the context of each dimension are dealt with by common sense and socially friendly inclusion, destructive polarization and segmentation are inevitable. This could lead to frustrations, discomfort, discontents, for both migrants and native residents.

2.1 Two Main Obstacles to Solving the Immigration Problem: Polarization and Populism

The tremendous global polarization of wealth and income is accompanied by social polarization and populism, not only internationally, but also within individual countries. Thus, social unrest and conflicts may be ignited through discrimination across various social groups, such as between high and low-income groups and this may exacerbate tensions along the lines of social groups, classes and ethnic groups.

Populism is based on formulating and framing identities as one social group being threatened and harmed by specific other groups (Bos et al., 2020). In countries where populist parties have not yet assumed ruling positions, they tend to blame political elites for societal or economic problems. There is always at least one specific group to be disparaged and scorned. During times of economic recessions and political unsteadiness, the immigration issue is placed on the top of the populist agenda, with problems such as unemployment, anxiety about cultural integrity and crime being mostly manipulated. Populism not only targets immigrants and immigration-related human rights, but also paves the way for more restrictive migration policies.

Both social polarization and populism work together to create conflicts between people, and to provoke certain societal groups to degrade and humiliate others, disrupting all interpersonal relations between individuals, and inciting racism and ethnic discrimination. They also counteract and

undermine constructive efforts toward social inclusion and social cohesion, particularly when the main victims are immigrants.

Thus, any attempt to address intra-psychic and extra-psychic problems of immigrants should take social polarization and populism into account, as they need to be addressed and counteracted. In the presence of social polarization, populism-driven hostility and governmental restrictions on immigrants' rights, the psychoanalytic approach must consider the intra-psychic development and interactions of immigrants, as well as their sufferings and life experiences.

2.2 Benefits of Immigration and Immigrants to the Host Society as Opposed to the Claims of Populist Opposition

The United Nations' World Social Report 2020 devotes its fifth chapter, 'Migration: a force for equality, under the right conditions' to the benefits of immigration in addressing and creating equality. It outlines the potential of migration to be a force for equality. The report argues that the migration process can be managed effectively, benefitting both migrants and natives, without restricting or deterring human mobility.

The solution to the integration problem is to take steps toward social cohesion. Both migrants and natives should benefit from migration. Particular emphasis should be placed on demonstrating the benefit to the natives population, as this may mitigate the problems of discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance.

First, there are many developed countries where the immigration of highly skilled or educated migrants lead to substantial contribution to the sustainable development of the host country through investment, trade and the generation of knowledge. Of this, Freud is a most salient example. More recently, three Turkish immigrants have made profound contributions for their host countries and for humanity as a whole. One is a Turkish molecular biologist, Aziz Sancar, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2015 for his studies on DNA repair. Born in south-eastern Turkey, as the seventh of eight children, he was raised in poverty. The other is a distinguished Turkish couple, Dr. Uğur Şahin and Dr. Özlem Türeci, who are scientists and co-founders of BioNTech, a German biotechnology firm, whose vaccine against the Covid-19 infection has been one of the most efficacious ones. Thus, host societies are often indebted to countless immigrants who successfully keep up with, or even rising beyond the level of the host societies in various fields of civilization.

There are many other areas in destination countries where immigrants' contribution would be highly valued. In developed countries, ageing populations and decreasing birth rates, together with more women entering the work force, inevitably increase the demand for care jobs. This demand is often not met by the native workforce. Although it is often argued that immigration has adverse effects on the labour market through lowering average wages and employment, increases in the labour supply will offset this trend eventually. This happens through increased consumer demand for goods and services and thus, boosting job demand and easing the strain on social security system caused by an ageing population and a shrinkage of the workforce. Moreover, many sectors, like manual labour in agriculture and construction or jobs in the service sector such as child and elderly care and domestic

work, are no longer wanted by native workers at existing wages. Thus, life and development would not be sustainable without the contribution of immigrants to the smooth functioning of the society (United Nations, 2020, p. 139-140).

2.3 The Main Disadvantages Immigrants Have for Integration

Integration challenges naturally arise from the very beginning of the newcomers' arrival in the host country, bringing about challenges, disparities and inequalities.

A substantial portion of immigrants arriving in Austria have limited educational backgrounds, hindering their integration into labour market that requires education and skills. Even those who have average or higher educational backgrounds are often offered less favourable positions and, thus, forced to accept lower-skill occupations. Thus, they are underrepresented in higher-skilled positions, leading to overqualification. More than 40% of highly educated migrants with foreign degrees are over-qualified for their current positions, compared with 30% of their native counterparts. The unemployment rate of highly educated migrants is nearly three times as high as that of highly educated natives (6.4% vs. 2.4%; OECD, 2019, p. 34).

Integration of children in the education system is another challenge. The share of underperforming students and the proportion of early school dropouts remain too high for disadvantaged migrant groups. The rate of early school dropout is three times higher among foreign-born pupils than among native-born pupils (17% vs. 5.5%). Another obstacle is that Austria's school environment does not sufficiently promote social mixture and convergence in educational development, so that the proportion of immigrant children in certain schools is high and their interactions with other social groups are limited (OECD, 2019, p. 34).

Integration of immigrant women poses an even greater challenge, particularly for those unemployed or with limited formal education. As a female psychoanalyst of Turkish origin, the author has seen many such women. Almost all have faced adverse past or current experiences, are psychologically helpless and inactive, severely traumatized, confused, and anxiety-stricken, and see little prospect in the future. Given Austria's considerable struggle with the issue, the OECD report recommends examining and adopting successful initiatives from Norway, Australia, and Sweden. The goal is to promote and cultivate the existing skills of immigrant and refugee women to increase their labour market participation and integration into the society (OECD, 2019, p. 36).

3. Looking Through the Eyes of an Immigrant Psychoanalyst

Numerous psychoanalysts have left their own countries for immigration or as an exile due to intolerable hostilities faced in their home countries. Among them, Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, is the most prominent one. However, their immigration experience did not appear to influence their interest and work, probably because they were already qualified psychoanalysts engaged in the issues of their new countries. This trend has continued several decades. Only recently,

due to the efforts of immigrant psychoanalysts, has immigration began to appear in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts (Beltsiou, 2016).

Believing that life would be better elsewhere, the author chose to migrate. If home had been an indispensable place to be, nothing would have justified leaving it. A youth survey from Turkey in 71 cities inquired the emigration preferences of young adults aged 18-29 years (MAK Youth Survey, 2020). One question was: 'If a permanent citizenship of another country is granted, would you consider abandoning Turkey permanently and settling in that country?' The majority of the participants (64%) stated that they would certainly leave their country permanently, while only 14% expressed determination to stay. The reasons expressed by those who would abandon the country were a better future (59%), equity/justice (6%), a peaceful life (14.6%), and others (20.4%). An even higher percentage (76.2%) expressed their willingness to go abroad if granted a temporary living chance. The primary reason for their willingness to live abroad was the high unemployment with 46.7%, followed by high costs of living, terrorism, and education. It seems that the circumstances have not changed since the author's departure, but have substantially gotten worse. Thus, the same cry of the youth applies: 'Home is no longer a great place to be; life should be better somewhere else.'

Driven by her desire for a more stable and safe life and environment, the author left behind her connections to family, friends, native food and music, social customs, history, and even her native language. This leads to a psychic depletion which a new environment could never compensated for. This loss is characterized by challenges such as loneliness, a foreign language, strange food and dietary habits, different music, immigration-related concerns, and a visually different landscape. Initially, past representations of lost objects and nostalgia may shield the immigrant against the unfamiliarity and frustrations of the new setting. However, with time, immigrants begin to understand how much must be endured before one is ready to fully integrate into the new society. They are also facing the cumbersome bureaucracy of the residence visa and finally Austrian citizenship, and the waiting period. This process is quite complicated and discouraging for the immigrant that hopes to start a new life.

Being employed in formal economy and positions is extremely difficult for newcomers. While 80 to 90% of all employment relationships are covered by legislation in Austria, immigrants often resort to informal or even precarious jobs. That is not a free choice, but it is due to a tendency towards informalization and precarization of jobs, leaving them without social security and legal labour protection. Particularly young immigrants are consistently becoming informal workers in the construction industry, home-based services, and health care.

Both the challenges of getting a visa coupled with the necessity of working in the informal economy force many immigrants into unlawful activities or criminality. A supplementary case presentation to this text illustrates how and what kind of affairs immigrants may be involved in for the sake of being able to stay in the country.

In summary, approval for citizenship is largely dependent on the discretion of the authorities, as long as candidates can sustain themselves and manage to survive.

Under these stringent circumstances, the work of a psychotherapist, particularly with an immigration history, is exceptionally challenging. Beyond psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to mitigate their

sufferings and psychic disruptions, psychotherapeutic guidance is crucial to successfully navigate the paths of integration, acculturation, and social inclusion. As a result, immigrants can start or continue their education, build a career, learn German and avoid falling into criminality.

3.1 Psychoanalytic and Psychotherapeutic Considerations for Both Sides, i. e., Immigrants and Psychoanalysts

Immigration itself is a traumatic event leading to the loss of many cherished things in pursuit of a new life, sense of safety, improved living conditions and opportunities, and a promising future. Leaving behind familial, social, cultural relations and the hardships encountered in the new destination, both disrupt and reshape the psychic structure of the immigrants.

As a migrant psychoanalyst, the author aims to address some key issues that are of particular relevance to psychoanalytic practice. Successfully handling these key issues has notable healing effects on the mental and physical health of immigrants, resulting in significant steps toward a peaceful integration into the host society.

Exacerbated mourning is quite common in immigrants when confronted with unusual challenges in any form of lack of social recognition, resulting in discomfort, frustration and disorganization. The adverse effects of the new social and physical environment may intensify the mourning to such a degree that the immigrant may be paralysed in their daily chores.

The author visited immigration offices so many times for minor procedures and often returned home in vain for trivial reasons, that she missed even the notorious bureaucracy of her home country. Those employed in the informal economy frequently experience this reactivation of mourning as they work without legal protection, leading to vicious terms, threats and abuses. Therefore, the extent, severity and source of mourning should be envisaged for the psychodynamic analysis of each immigrant's unique experience.

Psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic considerations should also include issues stemming from the *dark side* of civilization. The majority of immigrants suffers from a long list of problems, including those related to the host country, such as poverty, inequalities, social and political hostility, violation of human rights, stigmatization, racism, and xenophobia. Additionally, they often include those related to the country of origin, e.g., past traumatic events, consequences of wars, and terrorism. Even in 'civilized Europe', severe inequalities and disparities have profound and destructive effects on the feelings and states of mind, thus, consistently fuelling discontents.

Until immigrants achieve complete integration, with full social inclusion and cohesion, they will often feel like they are not an integral part of society, nor will the natives look upon them in the same way. Stigmatization as 'the other' or 'stranger' will keep on eroding the foundation of individuality. As they are often disadvantaged and face social exclusion or limited access to resources and opportunities, life for immigrants tends to remain challenging.

Immigration, inherently a stressful experience, presents an endless list of threats to their psychological well-being: separation from the native country and family members; altered socioeconomic status;

social, financial, and employment restrictions; difficulty adapting to a new physical environment; language barriers that operate at every level of the host society; acculturation problems; hostility and segregation from the host population and country, among other examples.

A sharp mismatch between societal demands and an immigrant's intrinsic organization may disturb their psychic balance and ignites feelings of anxiety, confusion, sadness, depression, and anger. Thus, psychoanalysis should recognize and assess a broad range of manifestations, including psychological and somatic symptoms, identity conflicts, destabilized mood and self-esteem, separation between the idealized and devalued self, dissociation, and trauma.

3.2 Targets of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy Practice

Through living in these circumstances and encountering so many traumatized individuals, the author has gained a considerable amount of experience with inequality-related immigrant problems and conflictual issues. Thus, this attempt to further develop the psychoanalytic understanding of immigration and its implications becomes particularly valuable, especially when both the patient and the psychoanalyst are immigrants.

Immigrant problems, especially those inequality-related, serve as a source of anxiety, conflict, and inhibition, and should be more thoroughly incorporated into the practice of psychoanalysis to improve the integration of immigrants into their new countries. Considering that there are thousands of state-and-society-stricken immigrants, psychoanalysts should not hesitate to engage themselves in the discussion of the psychological effects of the immigration experience.

Psychoanalysis does not exist outside the political world. Why do so many psychoanalysts have blind spots to something that would ultimately also affect them?

Today, Psychoanalysis in Austria seems to shy away from the political. Psychoanalysts gain a special sensitivity to vulnerabilities and pain. Thus, with the tools of psychoanalysis, they have a greater potential for supporting those in society who need it the most. Especially those of us psychoanalysts who have experienced immigration first hand have a responsibility towards immigrants. We cannot afford to turn a blind eye and retreat into our convenient lifestyles. By increasing the resilience of immigrants and helping them through their neurotic states, we empower them to integrate faster and better, thereby benefiting society as a whole.

Supplement Materials

Case Presentation

I received a phone call during the initial Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in March 2020. A man asked for a first appointment, but he insisted on having a face-to face session. He said, "I will wait till the end of the lockdown." I asked him what the issue was. He replied, "I am having nightmares, which are rendering me sleepless."

Three weeks later, when the lockdown restrictions were eased, he arrived at my practice on time. A short man walked inside hesitantly, constantly checking every movement not to disturb me.

We were both wearing masks, so I could not clearly see his face. Inspected his movements I estimated his age to be over 60.

We sat on our chairs, I asked him, "What brought you here?" He said, "I have unbearable pain on my back and nightmares." The household was extremely disturbed by his waking up from the nightmares shouting and told him to seek psychotherapy.

Mr. A. reported that he was 55 years old and an immigrant from Turkey. I tried to conceal my surprise. I was sure that this man was at least over 60.

He was hesitating to talk, so I started to ask him questions. He still replied hesitantly. So, I told him, "You seem not comfortable to talk to strangers, but it is okay, we have time to get to know each other." This made him relax somewhat.

His life's story:

He was born as one of 9 children in an Alevi village of Sivas. But he did not know exactly the events of his birth as there had been some who died before he was born. His father died when he was 12, after which the whole family moved to İstanbul. His mother died when he was 17.

He grew up without receiving proper care. "Who would take care of me when my mother was working both in the field and at home, and when there were 9 children?" he commented.

One day, while they were still living in the village, a gendarmerie unit came and brutally attacked the villagers, even burning his father's beard. Upon witnessing this event, he had his first experience of fear of authority. He also remembered that the village children were frightened with the loud shouts of the gendarmerie is coming.

He got married at the age of 23 and moved to Germany to live with his older sister when his first child was born. After a short while, his sister kicked them out, saying, "There is no place to sleep here if you don't work.". They decided to move to Austria.

First, he left his family in İstanbul for a while and went to Austria on a tourist visa. He could not get a work visa for a year. He then met another immigrant man who said, "If you give me 5,000 euros (at

that time, shilling), I will get you a visa." Mr. A. gave the money, but the man disappeared. At that time, Mr. A. tried to stay in Austria as a refugee, but his application was rejected.

Mr. A. could only get a work visa (for a 6-month period) after he started a job on a construction site. He then brought his family to Austria on a tourist visa. But shortly after he started working, while working on the roof of a building on a snowy day, his leg slipped and he fell from the 6th floor, breaking all his vertebrae. After that he was disabled for 3 years. His visa expired while his treatment continued. Each time he applied, he could only get a 3-month visa and he repeatedly suffered this torment for 3 years. During this time, he was worried he would be sent back for not working. His anxiety developed into an anxiety disorder.

The money he paid for the visa was not the first deceit he was exposed to nor his illegal attempts. Since he was 30 percent disabled after the accident, one of his acquaintances implanted in his mind that he could get permission to open an off-licence tobacco shop. For this purpose, they visited various doctors and bribed to get disability reports. Then this friend took 15,000 Euros from him and disappeared.

When I asked him about the happiest moment in his life, eternal permission of stay granted by Austria was his answer.

Mr. A. has been working ever since he recovered. He has been at the current work place for 16 years and has been subjected to discrimination and threats every day: "If you don't work properly, you'll be fired." The fear of being dismissed is his biggest ordeal. Despite all the pain and being 30 percent disabled, he feels obliged to do all kinds of work, even when he does not have to. He says, "They fired all the other Turks, I am very afraid that it might be my turn. So, I cannot speak up even when there is pure injustice. Who would hire me again at this age?" His words reflect a self-destructive tendency that constantly grew because of the feeling of guilt since the beginning of his immigrant life.

His nightmares always go in the same direction. He is afraid that someone may harm him.

He lives with 3 children (2 daughters, 1 son) and his wife. All his children are educated. He has done his best to help them complete their education.

"I would love to be able to play Turkish saz, I would love to be interested in art." he says.

The only place he wants to return to and to be in is his village in Anatolia, where he lived until the age of 12.

An Overview of Mr. A's Psychic Turbulence

He has been having a painful and severe physical and psychical disruption. Despite my efforts to help him gain some trust in authorities, he has no confidence in any kind of positive interaction in society, which creates a terrible inferiority complex. He used to live in Eastern Anatolia, belonging to a sect (Alevi), and his isolation in the village made him feel like a foreigner in our society from the start. In Austria, this trauma of not belonging to the society continued repeatedly.

Although Austria took care of him for his physical health after the accident that left him disabled, the host country also subjected him to a different kind of distress; he was treated demeaningly in work settings, and authorities issued him only 3-month visas that repeatedly triggered his traumatic fears. He completely lost his trust in any kind of authorities.

By establishing positive transference-countertransference, I was able to build a bridge to the authorities that he could trust. At present, this seems to work and there is hope that he will gain trust in Austria again.

Childhood experiences greatly affect emotions and behaviours in adulthood. His anger at being a member of a minority and his internalization of this inequality in his home country were aroused in Austria too. All of his emotional and behavioural responses to the authority are the same motives as those he had in childhood. He spent his childhood emotionally neglected and no one really cared about his inner world, both of which deprived him of having a fully functioning ego.

The alienation he already felt growing up always accompanied him. In Austria, too, he has been stuck in the feeling that he is not wanted. How does a member of a minority feel when granted a visa for only 3 months after having a life-time disability. He was physically hurt and there was nothing around to soothe and restore his internalized feelings.

He has had terrible memories about authority since his early childhood, which he repeatedly encountered in Austria complicated by feelings of loneliness. When no ground is left to stand on, it is certain that a person will fall again. Numerous applications for a visa and repeated denials would certainly penetrate deeply into his psyche, as confirmed by the discomfort and resultant psychosomatic symptoms.

Why does Mr. A have those nightmares in the form of being chased by someone or being disturbed by a lot of snakes? He has a sleep disorder and a self-destructive tendency to overwork, which he developed to not get punished, but to be praised and prized by a stable visa. Those nightmares, in the form of being chased by someone or snakes, probably symbolize the internalization of authority figures that have often made his life more difficult.

Mr. A's story also falsifies the civilization myth of human rights. Like Mr. A., most of the therapist's patients state that they have come to Austria for its reputation for human rights. However, this is not always the case, and many realize that they are treated worse than in their home country. So, there is a certain illusion in the proportional representation of human rights. It may be that those individuals that suffered traumatic experiences are not included in the human rights context.

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About the Author

Mag. Dr. Ümit May
Adresse: Laimgrubengasse 17/6; 1060 Vienna
Tel.: +43 (0) 69919042894
E-Mail: umit@vienna-psychotherapy.at

Ümit May is a Turkish-born psychoanalyst under supervision, working as a psychotherapist in her private praxis. She also has the qualification for infant, child and adolescent psychotherapy.