

**Sensing Through the Keyhole:
Psychotherapists' Experience of Attunement in Online Video Therapy**
A Hermeneutic Literature Review

A dissertation submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of
the degree of Master of Psychotherapy

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Abstract

Attunement is central to psychotherapy; it facilitates emotional sensing and empathy, guides therapist interventions, and supports therapy outcomes for clients (Erskine et al., 2022). An interpretative hermeneutic literature review was chosen to examine the research question “How do psychotherapists experience and understand attunement in online video therapy (OVT)?”. The findings indicate therapists encounter spatial, technical, and relational challenges and limitations working in OVT which impact the experience of attunement. Many therapists notice difficulties with the perception and qualitative experience of empathic, affective, and embodied attunement in OVT. Notably, many therapists notice less silence in OVT, that attuning to silence is difficult, and communicating attunement in silent moments and times of intense client affect is challenging.

The capacity for attunement is not lost in OVT; it is transformed and requires therapists to adapt and evolve the thinking and practice of psychotherapy in this therapeutic space. When therapists accept the differences of OVT and gain technological confidence and competency, their attunement is enhanced. Attunement involves therapists intentionally preparing the ‘outer space’—the technology and physical setting from which they work, alongside their ‘inner space’ for attunement. This research highlights that the possibility for attunement exists regardless of therapeutic space and the psychotherapist’s capacity for attunement can be enhanced in OVT. Future primary research would be helpful to investigate therapist experiences of attunement, silence, and effective communication of attunement in OVT. A hermeneutic literature review is not primary research and has limited generalisability and transferability; nevertheless, the findings may offer a useful contribution to the wider body of psychotherapeutic knowledge.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Kryisia Lanigan

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Attunement renders feeling.

(Stern, 1985, p. 142)

This dissertation is a hermeneutic literature review exploring the research question “How do psychotherapists experience and understand attunement when working with clients in online video therapy?” The research aims to synthesise first-person perspectives of psychotherapists, from psychotherapeutic research and literature, focusing on their experience and understandings of attunement when working with clients in online video therapy (OVT). In this chapter, I provide a context for the research, including my motivation and position as the researcher, and definitions of the key terms of the research question. This section is followed by a brief discussion of the significance of attunement in psychotherapy, and a summary of the aim, scope, and rationale for the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the dissertation structure.

Motivation for the Research

Online video therapy has been in use and researched over the past 40 years (Smith et al., 2022); and notably the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of OVT (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2021; Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). For many psychotherapists, the use of technology to deliver therapy has been a necessity and not a choice. A recent meta-analysis of the efficacy of OVT and in-person therapy found comparable therapeutic outcomes between delivery modes (Lin et al., 2022). However, Aafjes-van Doorn (2022) highlight that although outcomes may be similar, the therapeutic experience is *qualitatively* different in OVT.

Current research has tended to focus on the general experiences of therapists working in OVT, including practical/technological concerns, thoughts on perceived effectiveness and challenges to the therapeutic setting/frame (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2021; Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020; McBeath et al., 2020; Smith & Gillon, 2021). The therapeutic frame can be defined as a responsive and flexible boundary that sets out the characteristics of the context of therapy, and includes the location, time, confidentiality and payment terms (van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). The research mentioned above also briefly notes therapists’ experience of challenge in communicating empathy, reading clients’ emotions, and managing distractions in OVT. McBeath et al. (2020) concluded that in OVT “the therapeutic field and space has changed, as

has the range of possible physical, embodied and psychological dynamics” (p. 11). It appears that OVT has implications for the nature of therapeutic relating and practice.

Currently, there is little qualitative research regarding psychotherapists’ experience and perceptions when working with clients in OVT (Smith & Gillon, 2021); and, an absence of research focused on the experience of attunement for the psychotherapist in OVT. Aafjes-van Doorn et al. (2021) examined therapist acceptance and attitudes towards the use of OVT and highlighted the need for focused training for less experienced therapists “to foster a better experience and to support effective use of online therapy” (p. 473). A recent qualitative study by Smith and Gillon (2021) examined therapists’ experiences of providing counselling online. These authors advocate for research to develop skills and enhance reflexivity for therapists working in an online mode. A review of the evidence base for OVT by Smith et al. (2022) highlighted that the experience of relationally orientated therapists has not been closely examined. They emphasised the need to develop experiential strategies to support empathic responding and present moment awareness of therapists working in OVT. This finding is echoed in recent research from Aotearoa New Zealand examining trainee psychotherapist experience of OVT during the COVID-19 pandemic (Day & Thomas-Anttila, 2021) where participants conveyed the need for “comprehensive, guided experiential training and practice to develop online therapeutic presence” (p. 111).

The current research question was developed through my experience of working as a psychotherapist in OVT and noticing the challenges attuning to myself, to the client, and to what was happening between us. Working in this new mode I noticed the need to enhance my capacity for attunement. I wondered how other psychotherapists were experiencing attunement in this new therapeutic space and, as my research progressed, I was curious about how psychotherapists support their capacity to attune in OVT.

The Researcher

Theoretically, psychodynamic psychotherapy shapes my understandings of attunement and my involvement with the research. A psychodynamic perspective appreciates psychotherapy is a therapeutic relationship and focuses on affective experience (Maroda, 2010). I consider attunement a unique form of ‘tuning in’ that requires noticing and sensing, akin to ‘felt sense’ awareness (Gendlin, 2003). Attunement requires therapist openness, receptivity, and “evenly suspended attention” (Freud, 1912, p. 111). In my experience, attunement may occur consciously or out of awareness, and may be felt, imaginal, or embodied. My understanding of attunement in the context of psychotherapy encompasses the therapist’s attunement to

themselves, the intrapersonal; the therapist's attunement to the client, interpersonal attunement; and the therapist's attunement to the intersubjective relationship. From a psychodynamic perspective, attunement to communications of intersubjective relating (thoughts, affect states, fantasies, imaginal, somatic, embodied responses) are fundamental to psychotherapy (Quatman, 2015). As a psychotherapist I contend attunement informs my responsiveness and empathy, underpins therapeutic relating, supports the therapeutic alliance, and improves therapeutic outcomes for clients (Erskine et al., 2022).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic I had no experience working in OVT. My lack of knowledge and technological anxiety undoubtedly fuelled my initial resistance to therapy in this mode. I felt ill-prepared and rushed to move to OVT in order to continue client work. My reservations centred on concerns about the absence of bodies together in the same physical space, and fears it would impact my capacity to attune and potentially reduce the therapeutic effectiveness of therapy. As the current research progressed, my experience working in OVT has grown. I have been called to question my prejudices about OVT and re-examine my thinking and practice about the conditions required for attunement in psychotherapy. Mindfulness practices are a part of my daily life and help sustain my capacity for intrapersonal attunement. However, throughout this research, I have intentionally increased the space in my day to focus on self-care and mindfulness practices and assert this bolsters my capacity to attune therapeutically.

Defining Key Terms

Attunement

Attunement is a central concept in psychotherapy and a challenge to define because it depends on the theoretical lens used to consider it (Finlay, 2021). There are many descriptions of attunement in psychotherapeutic literature. Confusingly, the terms are often used interchangeably; however, all can be considered forms of attunement. In psychotherapy, attunement occurs intrapersonally, interpersonally, and intersubjectively; and can be experienced consciously or out of awareness (Schore, 2018; Siegel, 2007).

From a psychodynamic perspective, Daniel Stern (1985) theorised a child's experience of attunement in early relating with a caregiver builds the ability to recognise and regulate affective experience which occurs out of awareness and consciously. Such a conceptualisation of attunement emphasises that the sensing and mirroring capacity of an attuned person supports the development of affect attunement, defined as "the expression of the quality of feeling in a shared affect state" (Stern, 1985, p. 142). Similarly, Greenberg (2021) explicated

that “empathic attunement to affect involves a kinaesthetic and emotional sensing of another’s inner world, knowing their rhythm, feeling, and experiencing by metaphorically being in their skin” (p. 115). In addition embodied attunement can be considered a specific mode of attending to the therapist’s embodied dimension of experience (Markman, 2020). Siegel (2010) conceived of ‘mindsight’ as the perceptual ability to focus, perceive, and tune in to the inner subjective experiences of the self and others. Mindsight could be considered attunement by another name. Fundamentally, therapeutic attunement is a dynamic relational process involving synchronisation between client and therapist process moment to moment (Finlay, 2022). As mentioned above there are varied ideas of attunement, therefore to capture a wide range of therapist experiences in the literature, a broad definition of attunement was used in this research. In this dissertation, attunement is defined as “making contact with (and staying close to) ... present moment experience” (Greenberg & Elliott, 1997, p. 174).

Online Video Therapy

Online therapy is a broad term and may refer to any therapy that is delivered via online technology. The broadness of the term may create challenges when reviewing research and supports assumptions that all therapy undertaken online is comparable. Addressing this concern, Smith et al. (2022) proposed the term online ‘video therapy’ be used universally and defined it as “synchronous, client-therapist interactions through video platforms which are structured in the same way as in-room counselling and psychotherapy” (p. 93). This will be the definition used in the current research.

Co-present Therapy

In this dissertation *co-present therapy* is understood as two or more people together in a shared physical space in the same geographical location (Isaacs Russell, 2020).

The Significance of Attunement in Psychotherapy

Attunement facilitates emotional sensing and empathy of the therapist, guides interventions, and supports emotional learning and therapy outcomes and benefits for clients (Erskine et al., 2022; Maroda, 2002). From a psychodynamic perspective it is theorised that attunement underpins a therapist’s ability to mentalize the client and is conceptualised as the “experience of having our subjectivity understood” (Fonagy & Allison, 2014, p. 372). Mentalization facilitates epistemic trust between client and therapist and is considered a pan-theoretical common factor of effective psychotherapy. Linked to mentalization, modern affect regulation theory proposes that “intersubjective state sharing” (Schoore, 2019, p. 38) occurs through psychobiological attunement, via bidirectional right-brain affective communications between

therapist and client (operating out of conscious awareness). It is posited that this process supports the coregulation of affect, helps to regulate attachment dynamics, and strengthens the therapeutic alliance (Geller & Porges, 2014; Schore, 2018).

The foundation for a therapist's ability to attune to the experience of the client rests on the capacity of the therapist to self-attune, and is referred to as intrapersonal attunement (Baker, 2015; Bruce et al., 2010; Siegel, 2007). It is significant in psychotherapy as the capacity to attune to the self and others can be learned and cultivated through practices that support mindful awareness and therapist presence (Baker, 2015; Bruce et al., 2010; Greenberg, 2021). In psychotherapy, presence is defined as a "state of being open" (Siegel, 2010, p. 35). Therapeutic presence is a conduit for therapist attunement and is considered by some to be a pantheoretical common factor that strengthens the therapeutic alliance and psychotherapy outcomes (Geller et al., 2012; Geller & Porges, 2014).

Many therapists assert attunement underpins the therapist's empathic responsiveness, guides therapeutic interventions, and is experienced beneficially by the client (Snyder & Silberschatz, 2017; Watson & Wiseman, 2021). Research by Bernhardt et al. (2020) corroborates this understanding, revealing embodied listening of the therapist (informed by therapist qualities of presence and emotional attunement) is perceived by the therapist and client as conducive to positive therapeutic change. In addition, the ability to attune to disconnections or ruptures in the relationship with clients is also therapeutically useful (Safran et al., 2011). Considering the fundamental role therapist attunement has in therapeutic relating, it could be considered "the heart of therapeutic change" (Siegel, 2007, p. 290).

Aim and Scope of the Research

My research is qualitative, grounded in an interpretative paradigm and epistemologically underpinned by Gadamerian hermeneutics. Interpretative phenomenological research "seeks to generate knowledge about the quality and texture of experience as well as about its meaning" (Willig, 2013, p. 17). This approach aligns well with the aim of a hermeneutic literature review which seeks a richer appreciation of how psychotherapists experience and understand attunement in OVT. Vivaly, a hermeneutic methodology appreciates the researcher's subjective experience and preunderstandings, and considers these as embedded and fundamental to the process of reading, exploring, and interpreting the literature (Crowther et al., 2017; Schuster, 2013). The method in this literature review is informed by the hermeneutic circle (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010), an approach that shapes the

researcher's process of knowledge generation recursively and dynamically to expand what is known about the chosen topic (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Ideally, to answer my research question a qualitative study would have been undertaken interviewing psychotherapists about their experiences of attunement working in OVT. However, due to the scope of a master's dissertation, the use of first-person accounts/narratives of psychotherapists synthesised from psychotherapeutic literature and research was employed. Given the absence of research published about psychotherapists' experiences of attunement in OVT, research and literature from a broad range of psychotherapy disciplines was considered for inclusion in the review. Literature was sourced from interviews, self-reports, commentaries, case studies, and qualitative research which include narratives of psychotherapists reflecting on their experience of attunement working in OVT.

Significance of the Research

In the context of a hermeneutically informed study, examining the experience of attunement of psychotherapists delivering OVT has the potential to contribute to the knowledge base of psychotherapy theory and practice. Potentially, this research will support a fuller understanding of my own and other psychotherapists' experiences of attunement in OVT, and may contribute to psychotherapist knowledge of how to enhance the capacity for attunement in OVT and improve therapeutic outcomes for clients. As previously mentioned, the capacity for attunement can be learned; therefore, this research has the potential to contribute to the education and experiential training of psychotherapists who practice in this mode.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have introduced the context for the dissertation, including the motivations for my research interest in attunement in OVT and the pre-understandings that I bring to the research. I have defined the key terms used throughout the dissertation, and discussed the significance of attunement in psychotherapy and the aim, scope, and significance of the research. Chapter 2 discusses the methodology and method chosen to answer the research question "How do psychotherapists experience and understand attunement when working with clients in OVT?" Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the findings of my hermeneutic literature review. The last chapter is a discussion and reflection on the findings, with a mention of the potential implications of the research, evaluation and quality considerations, and future research directions.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method

To read in a hermeneutic way is to be attuned and engaged. One brings a willingness to be surprised, openness to difference and courage to make the leap into the space of thinking.

(Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 17)

The research question under investigation was developed through my experience of working as a psychotherapist in OVT and noticing my ability to attune was often challenged. To explore this experience, I chose to undertake a hermeneutic literature review seeking to gain a more in-depth understanding of how psychotherapists experience and understand attunement in OVT. In this chapter I outline the rationale for the use of hermeneutics as the research methodology and my position as a researcher; followed by a discussion of the hermeneutically informed method and process used to guide this literature review.

Methodology: Hermeneutics

My research is qualitative, grounded in an interpretative paradigm, and epistemologically underpinned by hermeneutics. Qualitative research is considered exploratory and inductive and aims to examine subjective meanings in the social world (Finlay & Evans, 2009). An interpretive paradigm seeks to explore and understand human experience, accepting multiple realities as possible, and viewing the dialectical engagement between researcher and researched as central to knowledge generation (Davies & Fisher, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Therefore, an interpretive paradigm aligns well with the research question which seeks to examine how psychotherapists experience and understand attunement in OVT.

My approach to the research is informed through the lens of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics developed from the work of philosophers, including Heidegger and Gadamer, who contended our understanding reflects “our embeddedness in the world of language and social relationships, and the inescapable historicity of all understanding” (Finlay, 2009, p. 11). Originally, philosophical hermeneutics was used to inform the description and interpretation of biblical texts; latterly, it evolved as a methodology in qualitative research (Moules et al., 2015). The philosophical base informing hermeneutics is phenomenology which is the study of lived experience (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutics is interested in lived experience or “life as we live it” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 38) and involves interpretive engagement to generate understandings—a process is contextually and continuously shaped by our lifeworld which is

defined as our “lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 101). A key benefit of hermeneutic research is it allows for the possibility to incorporate the researcher’s reflexivity, subjectivity, and embodied experience when reading and interpreting the literature (Crowther et al., 2017; Schuster, 2013). Attunement is a subjective aspect of the psychotherapist experience and an integral aspect of psychotherapeutic practice. In light of this understanding, a qualitative interpretative approach underpinned by hermeneutic methodology is well suited to answer the research question.

Alternative Methodologies

Initially I considered undertaking primary research interviewing psychotherapists working in OVT; however, due to practical limitations this approach was not feasible. Given the high volume of recent research on OVT, I instead chose to research first-hand written accounts of psychotherapists. With a focus on psychotherapists’ experience and understanding, I sought more than a descriptive analysis of their experience of attunement in OVT; for this reason a descriptive phenomenological approach was not suitable to answer my research question (Finlay, 2009). I briefly considered a thematic analysis however, a hermeneutic literature review allows for the researcher’s subjective engagement and interpretive synthesis (Willig & Stainton, 2017).

Hermeneutic Concepts Guiding the Research

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic ideas are useful for informing hermeneutic research (Koch, 1996). Several key concepts guiding my research are discussed below.

Hermeneutics an Attuned Conversation

Gadamer viewed language and dialogue as central to the understanding of experience (Schwandt, 2007). In hermeneutic research, the text is the intermediary between the researcher and the researched and acts as a “dialogical partner to provoke thinking” (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 23). A hermeneutic enquiry could also be viewed as a conversation between the researcher and researched (Kinsella, 2006); a conversation that requires the researcher to be attuned to the text and attuned to their responses when engaging with the text. In hermeneutic research, engagement with the texts requires openness and attunement (Crowther et al., 2017; Smythe & Spence, 2012). For Gadamer (2013), openness to ‘otherness’ entails the willingness to put our own experience or horizons of understanding at risk of being changed. This stimulates possibilities in thinking, provokes further questioning, and supports researchers to make interpretive leaps (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

Horizons of Understanding

Gadamer (2013) defined a horizon of understanding as “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 313). These horizons or viewpoints are shaped by our pre-understandings, those we are aware of, and those which are out of awareness. In addition, Gadamer highlighted the importance of a situated location of understanding and interpretation (Moules et al., 2015). These locations are dynamic and unique to the individual and reflect the historical, social, and cultural perspectives that form our horizons of understanding (Kinsella, 2006; Schmidt, 2006). A hermeneutic research approach requires a researcher’s reflexivity and dynamic awareness of pre-understandings about the topic. This approach aligns with a view in the psychotherapy profession that reflexivity and thoughtful self-awareness are expected and essential qualities of a psychotherapist (Finlay & Evans, 2009).

My horizons of understanding in relation to the research topic are impacted by my pre-understandings as a psychotherapist, client, supervisee, and student. I am a beginner psychotherapist, have limited experience as a researcher, and my theoretical base is informed by psychodynamic theory. Additionally, I am a person whose lifeworld has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic I had no experience working therapeutically online. My sense was of having to shift to OVT to continue working as a psychotherapist as opposed to having a choice about working in this mode. I acknowledge that my lack of skills and anxiety about working online (alongside that of anxiety related to the pandemic), fuelled my initial resistance to OVT and impacted my capacity for attunement. All these horizons inevitably shape the entire research process, including the choice of research topic, search strategy, text selection, hermeneutic engagement with the texts, and written literature review.

The Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle was first described by Schleiermacher in 1838 and was expanded upon by Heidegger and Gadamer (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Schleiermacher envisioned the hermeneutic circle as a methodological process whereby interpretation of the parts could support an understanding of the whole text (Schwandt, 2007). Heidegger and Gadamer built upon this understanding, deeming that every interpretation relies on previous interpretations, and the circularity of interpretation is a universal feature of all human understanding (Schwandt, 2007). Schuster (2013) conceived this as a “movement between sameness and otherness, where understanding is mediated by interpretive activity” (p. 197). This movement may be thought of as a form of open-ended hermeneutic circling—a back-and-forth shift

between the researcher’s horizons of understanding and the participants’ horizons of understanding. Gadamer explained that “understanding is reached within a fusion of horizons” (Kinsella, 2006, p. 3). Although Gadamer did not endorse any method, the hermeneutic circle model is useful when undertaking a hermeneutic literature review.

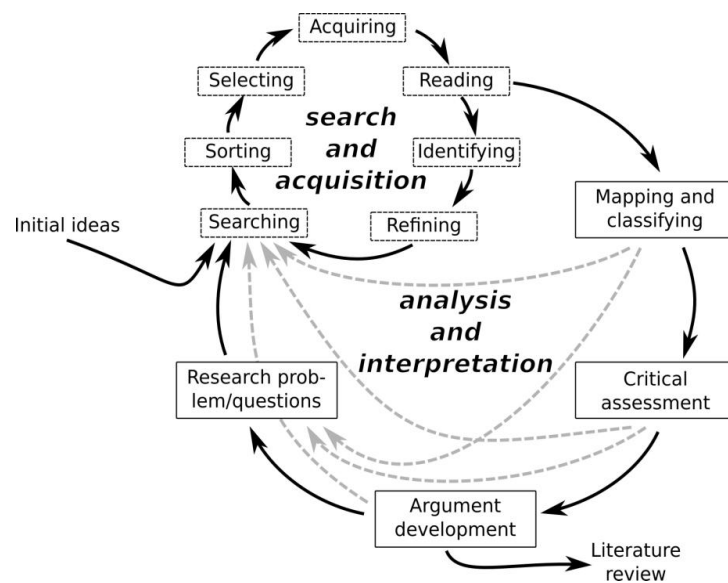
Method: Hermeneutic Literature review

Applying the Hermeneutic Circle

A hermeneutic literature review, as explicated by Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2010, 2014), was used as a framework to guide the research process (Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Hermeneutic Framework for the Literature Review Process Consisting of Two Major Hermeneutic Circles as Conceptualised by Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014, p. 264)



Smythe and Spence (2012) conceptualised a hermeneutic literature review as “a way to be attuned” (p. 23). This perspective shapes the researcher’s cycle of searching, sorting, selecting, acquiring, reading, identifying, and refining the choice of literature to review, as they seek to expand their understanding of the chosen phenomenon (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). This method aligns with the research topic and its methodological underpinnings that asserts the interdependent recursive movement between the whole of and parts of experience/text is integral to the interpretive hermeneutic process (Koch, 1996; Schmidt, 2006). Entry into the hermeneutic circle began as soon as the topic was chosen and I was formulating my research

question. Alongside, there was an immersion into hermeneutic literature which provided the scaffolding for the research process.

Searching, Sorting, Selecting, and Acquiring. The searching process began by identifying relevant databases to search within. The databases chosen were Ebsco, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP), PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Ovid Emcare, and Google Scholar. Initial searches involved key search words and phrases using Boolean operators and truncations (Table 1, p. 12), including: psychotherap* and therap* (to capture variations and plurals), and online, remote, tele* (to capture teletherapy, telepsychotherapy), and video* (to capture video therapy, video conferencing). The key search term 'attunement' was searched where possible as attun* to capture literature with the variations of attune, attuned, attuning, attunement.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. Due to the absence of literature explicitly focused on psychotherapists' experience of attunement, I expanded my search circle to include general first-hand experiences of therapists working in OVT from 2012 to 2022. Accounts from therapists from all theoretical modalities providing individual psychotherapy were included for consideration. Accounts were sourced from peer-reviewed journals and books and included interviews, commentaries, case studies, and narrative excerpts from empirical qualitative research.

Exclusion criteria were non-English texts and texts about psychotherapists working with groups (family therapy, couples therapy, group therapy). In addition, texts referring to synchronous communication via text or phone/voice and non-synchronous communication of any form online (online texting, emailing, voice chat) were not included for consideration. Initially I looked at titles, abstracts, introductions, and chapter titles to assess their relevance. The initial search revealed duplicates in several of the databases which assisted in gathering core articles of relevance to the research topic. Once potential text sources were identified the in-text search function enabled scanning of relevant texts looking for alternative search words and synonyms about psychotherapists' experience of attunement (Table 2, p. 13). This method captured several new text sources which were included for review. All relevant text sources were acquired via Auckland University of Technology library services, supported databases, or interloan. In addition, a Google Scholar email alert for newly published articles and books relating to the research topic helpfully captured additional text sources.

Table 1*Initial Database Searches*

Database search engines	Search strings	Search results	Relevant results
Ebsco	Attun* AND therapist* or psychotherapist* AND Online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele* (Titles)	0	0
Ebsco	Attun* AND therapist* or psychotherapist* AND online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele* (Subject terms)	0	0
Ebsco	Attun* AND therapist* or psychotherapist* AND online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele* (Abstract)	33	4
Ebsco	Attun* AND "online psychotherapy" OR "online therapy" AND experience or perception (All text)	92	12
PEP	Attun* AND online psychotherapy	149	14
PEP	Attun* AND online therapy	36	14
PEP	Attun* AND teletherapy	29	12
PEP	Attun* AND videoconferencing	11	3
PEP	Attun* AND computer-mediated	70	17
Google Scholar	Attun* AND "online therapy" AND therapist*OR psychotherapist*	470	57
Google Scholar	Attun* AND "online therapy" AND "therapist* experience" OR "psychotherapist*experience"	36	6
OVID Emtree	Attun* AND therapist* or psychotherapist* AND online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele*(Keyword)	17	4
PsycARTI CLES	Attun* AND therapist* or psychotherapist* AND online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele* (Keyword)	471	32
PsycARTI CLES	Attun* AND "online therapy" AND "therapist* experience" OR "psychotherapist*experience" AND online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele*(Keyword)	46	2
PsycINFO	Attun* AND therapist* or psychotherapist* AND online OR video* OR computer* OR remote OR tele*(Keyword)	49	6

Table 2

Attunement: Alternative search words and synonyms

Affective attunement
Attention
Connection
Embodied attunement
Embodied awareness
Empathic attunement
Felt sense
Moments of meeting
Presence
Resonance

Reading, Identifying, and Refining. A hermeneutic approach allows for the encirclement of relevant literature sources which may not be found or included in a systematic literature review (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). Encirclement is important in this dissertation where there is minimal literature on the topic; therefore, a more flexible method to capture relevant text sources was advantageous. The use of snowballing and citation/reference tracking (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010) helpfully informed further searching within the texts as I read them. Additionally, the texts included for review were stored in an online reference library storage application, Read Cube Papers (2022); and references were stored through Endnote which enabled ease of review and the ability to add notes and sort into thematic groups. A tabulated summary enabled systematised record tracking of my engagement with each text at the initial reading and subsequent re-viewing of each text, as well as thoughts and responses I had during the process (see Appendix A: Core Text Summary Table). The number of text sources included in this hermeneutic literature review was 44.

Attuning, Analysing, Re-viewing, and Writing. A key aspect of my process of interpretation was the return to previously read texts to encounter them in a “fresh way” (Finlay, 2011, p. 13). In doing so, I often noticed more subtlety in the language and description of therapist experiences that I had previously not seen. This process of seeing afresh often occurred at the text level, dwelling on words or small text portions and then moving to consider these parts in relation to the whole of the text (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Organising the reviewed literature from the core texts was a reiterative process and the use of a Key Ideas Table (see Appendix B) helped immensely. At times it was as if small chunks of text

presented themselves more brightly off the page. Often these became useful ideas that helped to organise and shape the findings; for example, more doing than being, the unblinking eye, and through the keyhole. Parallel to this process was a recursive movement between one therapist's experience of attunement (one text), then movement to consider aspects of that experience in relation to previously read texts, and back again. At times, the hermeneutic circling via the reading and immersion felt overwhelming and breaks for self-care and physical activity outdoors were vital to support the process.

Re-reading, Re-writing, and Exiting the Hermeneutic Circle. Gadamer regarded questioning as a key aspect of hermeneutics to facilitate new understandings (Lavery, 2003). From the literature it appears that psychotherapists who are familiar with body/somatically based practice, adapt and prioritise intentional attunement to their own body which supports their capacity for attunement in OVT (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019). Upon encountering this idea, I began to incline toward therapists' experience of this process in OVT. Attuning or inclining towards the texts that resonate with the researcher is a feature of a hermeneutic approach to research (Smythe & Spence, 2012). Additionally, this curiosity led me to re-view my sources of literature with a focus on embodied attunement and how therapists support embodied attunement in OVT. The writing and re-writing process allowed the freedom to craft the literature review at any time over the process of analysis. As mentioned above, the Key Ideas Table facilitated the generation of thematic/key ideas which originated from salient text portions and enabled me to reiteratively make and develop interpretations anchored in the text and emerging from the therapists' experience.

The decision to exit the hermeneutic circle occurred when salient ideas were developing and no further new ideas were presenting themselves; the searching had reached a "point of saturation" (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p. 272). Despite the open-ended nature of hermeneutic enquiry, it is possible this process could continue indefinitely; however, time restrictions to the dissertation also supported the decision to exit the circle.

Quality Considerations

A critique of hermeneutic research asserts that if the researcher does not encounter the text openly and lacks reflexivity, the research lacks depth (Schuster, 2013). To support my reflexivity, I used journaling to record any responses, thoughts, and questions throughout the research. This process helpfully facilitated tracking my awareness of the challenge and change to my horizons of understanding. A hermeneutic approach "implies that understandings are made rather than found" (Koch, 1996, p. 178). As a researcher, my

interpretations are foregrounded in the process of analysis, and I acknowledge the power of such a position (Grant & Giddings, 2002). I am mindful that in hermeneutic research my subjective view on the topic to make and demonstrate my findings have power and are also open to the interpretation of the reader. As such, I acknowledge my responsibility in the research and maintained fidelity to the data through the robust process of reflexivity and accountability in supervision; adherence to correct processes of citation and referencing (according to the style guide published by the American Psychological Association, 2020); and to considerations of cultural safety in my written work (as noted by the Psychotherapists Board of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2020).

Chapter Summary

A hermeneutic methodology is a suitable guide to underpin the current research and it aligns with my perspectives as a psychotherapist; most notably, maintaining a stance of openness, mindful that understanding is contextual and continually evolving, and that change is possible through understanding (Crowther et al., 2017). The findings of this hermeneutic literature review are shaped through recursive attuned conversations with the literature—the proxy voice for psychotherapists who shared their experiences of attunement in OVT. The process of hermeneutic circling involved revisiting my understandings of attunement, continual shifts to my horizons of understanding, and adaptations to my psychotherapy practice in OVT. The next chapter presents findings about the impact of technology and spatial aspects on psychotherapists' experience of attunement in OVT.

Chapter 3: A New Therapeutic Space

It's much more exhausting because I get the feelings and perceptions through a keyhole.

(Jesser et al., 2021, p. 4)

The reviewed literature highlights that working online in cyberspace is a new frontier for therapists from varied theoretical approaches. Suler (2016) defined a cyberspace as the “the psychological space mediated by computers and their networks” (p. 23). The most impactful challenges to therapists’ experience of attunement in OVT are working via digital technology and the absence of therapist and client “physical co-presence” (Isaacs Russell, 2020, p. 365). The current chapter examines the findings that focus on spatial and technological aspects that shape psychotherapists’ experience and capacity to attune in an online therapeutic space.

Attuning to a New Therapeutic Space

As mentioned in the introduction, the frame or setting is considered a cornerstone of psychodynamic psychotherapy and usually assumes a shared physical space (Lemma, 2015). In the literature, some therapists spoke of their initial concerns about being able to attune in the absence of a physical co-shared therapy room. Some therapists contend that functional equivalence in OVT cannot be assumed; in other words, we cannot necessarily generalise and shift our psychotherapeutic practice seamlessly between delivery modes (Ahlström et al., 2022; Roesler, 2017). It appears the shift to working with clients in OVT has stimulated new thinking about the therapeutic frame and nature of attunement, especially to intersubjective co-created communications (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Ferro, 2021; Mathew, 2021).

The findings reveal many therapists express self-doubt about their ability to attune in OVT as they would in co-present therapy due to the presence of technology as a mediator (Ronen-Setter & Cohen, 2020; Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021; Zuppari, 2020). One psychoanalytic psychotherapist contended the therapy room has now become a co-created place in the mind, and reported increased freedom to attune to the intersubjective relationship in OVT (Ferro, 2021). Similarly, Mathew (2021), a Jungian psychotherapist, found OVT challenged their assumption that co-present therapy is the only therapeutic space in which to support transformation for clients. As their experience and competence with OVT increased, this notion shifted and they now contend their internal therapeutic space is more fundamental to attunement. They conceive the internal space as “the availability of a still

space in mind, enabling the freedom to think, associate, imagine, fantasize, be lost, or surrender to reverie” (Mathew, 2021, p. 469). Openness to having horizons of understanding challenged is a sentiment echoed in the literature by other therapists who acknowledge the conditions for OVT practice are different and require curiosity, critical reflection, and adaptation of theory and practice (Banack, 2021; Lemma, 2017). It appears that psychotherapists who choose to work in OVT and are competent with digital technology report their capacity for attunement remains, while those who are less confident express they work harder to attune to themselves and the client in OVT (Mitchell, 2020; Tantillo, 2022).

Notably, therapists who accept the differences and are open to adapting report being more able to be present and attuned in OVT (Rodgers et al., 2021; Ronen-Setter & Cohen, 2020). As I engaged with other therapists’ experience of attunement via the texts, I was challenged to reflect on my notions of the primacy of the co-present therapy space as an essential condition for attunement. Throughout the dissertation process and working as a psychotherapist in OVT, my perspectives on attunement have changed; alongside a growing awareness that professionally we may be limited and freed by our theories. As Gadamer (2013) asserted we are challenged to risk our horizons of understanding when we hold an openness to encounter new knowledge and experience.

Attuning to the Technology

Safety

The literature reveals that therapists notice their capacity to attune in OVT is tempered by concerns about online safety, confidentiality, and the threat of environmental and technical disruption (Jesser et al., 2021; Leutrum, 2022; Padfield, 2021). Reading the literature and reflecting on my own experience in OVT leads me to question how well we attune implicitly and explicitly if we feel unsafe. Some therapists notice that anxiety about technology inhibits their capacity for attunement, often noting they are more likely to attune to the technology than to themselves and the client (Rodgers et al., 2021). Ahlström et al. (2022) examined the experience of psychodynamic therapists who transitioned to OVT and found that initially therapist anxiety was technology-focused; however, a year later this had reduced. These findings align with other research which reveals when psychotherapists intentionally set up their online therapy space and gain technical skills and experience, it engenders a sense of safety and enhances therapist attunement in OVT (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Jesser et al., 2021). Therapist competencies for working in OVT include adaptability, acceptance of the potential for technical and digital interferences, and having alternative plans to maintain a digital connection (Rodgers et al., 2021; Tantillo, 2022; Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021).

It appears that a sense of safety in the technological space facilitates therapist attunement to their inner space, facilitating intrapersonal attunement in OVT.

Attention Dispersed

Attunement in OVT appears to require an extra capacity of the therapist which is not usually required in co-present therapy (Rodgers et al., 2021). In OVT therapeutic relating requires a mediator and we relate “both through and with technology” (Essig & Russell, 2021, p. 162). As psychotherapists working in OVT we are required to expand our attention more widely. In addition to attuning to therapist and client process and intersubjective communications, OVT requires attunement to the technological and physical environments of both client and therapist spaces, and the OVT therapy room (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021). Susman (2021) highlighted how working in OVT requires inherent receptivity to multiple channels of simultaneous communications which contributes to fatigue. Many therapists report fatigue plays a role in reducing their capacity to attune (Isaacs Russell, 2020; Levey, 2021). Fatigue is understood to arise from the therapist’s efforts to compensate for missing avenues of sensory perception, hyperfocus on visual and audible sensory channels, and increased cognitive activity (Frank, 2020).

Technology Impacts Flow

The findings reveal that digital disconnection and distortion of sound and visual images impact the flow of communication, turn-taking behaviour, and therapist attunement in OVT (Brahnam, 2017; Dettbarn, 2019; Sayers, 2021; Zoumpouli, 2020). One therapist described interferences as reducing an openness to present moment experience and a “loss of the interactive flow” (García et al., 2022, p. 198). Rodgers et al. (2021) considered therapist acceptance of the interruptions in OVT as “a vital part of being able to reframe ‘interferences’ ... as therapeutic opportunities” (p. 300). Several therapists reported that openly addressing and exploring the timing of these moments of mismatch with clients supports interpersonal attunement (Mathew, 2021; Zoumpouli, 2020).

Technology Like Skin

Screen Barrier

A prominent theme in the reviewed literature is that some therapists experience the digital screen as a barrier that impacts their capacity for attunement in OVT (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Jesser et al., 2021; Tantillo, 2022). Although technology is not the reason the bodies of the client and therapist are separate; it appears that for some therapists the screen represents a barrier to the possibility of co-presence. In actuality, technology is an enabler of connection in

a virtual space. Susman (2021) conceptualised technology functions as a “metaphorical skin” (p. 332), which connects, separates, and protects. Akin to the skin, the digital screen also functions to connect, separate, and protect. What we see and hear is modified by skin technology and this filters our experience of the other—implicitly and explicitly (Banack, 2021; Brahnam, 2017). Some psychotherapists wonder about the possibility for elements of digital transmission, namely digital noise and silence suppression, to act as a barrier to the intersubjective process between therapist and client (Brahnam, 2017; Ferber & Weller, 2022). Additionally, therapists describe difficulties perceiving subtle gestures and non-verbal communication such as tears, body and breathing sounds in OVT (Brahnam, 2017; Rodgers et al., 2021). One described noticing the loss of the “sounds of physical presence... the sounds of the real presence of our shared humanity” (Agosta, 2019, p. 44). Others expressed concern about the loss of smell and pheromones upon attunement to implicit communications in OVT (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Sayers, 2021). Several therapists reported that OVT impacts their holistic sense of a client via reduced perception of the kinaesthetic, of bodily movement and a sense of the client in relation to their physical environment (Padfield, 2021; Weinstein, 2021). It appears that therapists working in OVT experience a loss of familiar wayfinders (previously unrecognised by them as informing attunement) until they are absent or more challenging to perceive.

Screen Portal

Despite the reduction of some sensory information in OVT, many therapists experience an amplification of some visual and audible sensory information (García et al., 2022; Isaacs Russell, 2021; Zoumpouli, 2020). My experience aligns with therapists who notice closer spatial proximity of the therapist’s face to the client’s face in OVT as compared to co-present therapy (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021). In one OVT session, I measured an arm’s length from my body to the screen image of the client and reflected that this distance would not feel comfortable for me if we were together in my office. I wondered why this is more tolerable in OVT and surmised protection of the digital screen may afford such closeness. Despite this experience, many therapists find proximity provides the opportunity to view a client’s non-verbal and facial communications at close range and enhances their empathic attunement in OVT (Agar, 2019; García et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2020). In addition, therapists report larger screen sizes, a greater digital resolution quality of a client’s image, and the best sound quality also enhance the opportunity for attunement (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Ogden & Goldstein, 2019). However, despite the affordance of close-range visuals, some therapists experience challenges perceiving and differentiating subtle facial micro-expressions of clients; including tears, breathing sounds, and skin tone changes, and acknowledge these difficulties impact

attunement (Rodgers et al., 2021). It appears OVT is a portal for access to some sensory communications from clients whilst others are reduced.

Although therapists are geographically distant from the client in OVT, they are also afforded nearness to the client's lived environment. Many therapists experience that observing clients in their lived environments enhances interpersonal attunement. This opportunity illuminates previously unseen dimensions of the client and can hold potential meaning about how they want to be seen and understood (Agar, 2019; Trub & Magaldi, 2017). Conversely, other therapists contend it is distracting and impedes access to countertransference (Isaacs Russell, 2015). Generally, it appears that therapists experience the opportunity to view a client's lived space as useful to support attunement in OVT.

The Screen Keyhole

A notable finding in the literature is therapists' experience that the digital screen gives a restricted field of view of the client in OVT. This intensifies and encourages hyperfocused attention on the client's face and/or upper body and challenges interpersonal attunement (Brahnam, 2017; Rodgers et al., 2021). Research by Jesser et al. (2021), looking at the subjective experiences of psychodynamic therapists in OVT, found the reduced field of view of the client impacts therapists' sensory perception; one therapist remarked "I get the feelings and perceptions through a keyhole" (p. 4). This sentiment aligns with other therapists who experience viewing parts of their clients, and in a miniaturised form, reduces their capacity for interpersonal attunement (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Mitchell, 2020). This sense of limitation is echoed in the words of another therapist who described working in OVT through a "shrinking visual frame" (Carroll, 2021, p. 2). These findings suggest therapists experience that technology channels their attention and limits some sensory information, all of which impacts attunement in OVT.

As a psychotherapist working in OVT, at times I have the sense of entering and relating in the virtual world through the screen keyhole. The ideas of a keyhole, shrinking, and miniaturisation, led my mind to think of the story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 2015). Alice seeks to enter the world she glimpses through a keyhole and is challenged by an alternate reality involving spatial and physical limitations. Psychotherapy in cyberspace involves paradox and, at times, illusory qualities. As mentioned previously, we are privy to remarkably close visuals of parts of the client's face and body; yet, they are proportionately smaller—we are geographically distant and spatially closer. As our hands come close to the camera they are magnified, appearing unrealistically large and otherworldly. In this virtual

world, I experience some elements of sensory information are magnified and others reduced; and, like Alice, it challenges my familiar ways of being and requires creative adaptation to enter.

Therapist as Observer and Listener

Some therapists experience that psychotherapy mediated by a digital screen contributes to a sense of looking at the client more than in co-present therapy. They experience an increase in client-focused visual attention leaves less space for intrapersonal attunement and self-reflection in OVT (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Trub & Magaldi, 2017). Sayers (2021) proposed the digital screen in OVT “echoes the rectangular shape framing the cinema screen or theatre stage” (p. 226) and potentially reinforces the idea screens are for observing or performing. This idea links to the kind of metaphors used by therapists to make meaning of OVT; often likening the difference between co-present therapy and OVT to reading a comic book versus a novel (Isaacs Russell, 2015), and watching a film versus live theatre (Tantillo, 2022). These narratives support the idea of emphasis on the visual nature of OVT and allude to a less enlivened quality of the experience of attunement. In the literature, several therapists experience the screen image flattens the holistic perception of the client and impacts attunement in OVT (Malawista et al., 2022; Rodgers et al., 2021). Frank (2020), a gestalt therapist, theorised that “When we steer our visual attention to the screen and flatten the fullness of bodily experience... we lose the volume of ourselves as we strain to feel something ‘over there,’ rather than wonder our bodily experience ‘here’” (p. 371).

The screen is experienced by some therapists as a barrier to accessing intrapersonal attunement in an embodied way. It is possible the visual hyperfocus (reinforced by the technology as mediator) prioritises looking out and observing the client, which competes with therapist attunement, the looking in. However, in psychodynamic psychotherapy observing is considered a cornerstone of therapeutic practice regardless of the mode of delivery (Quatman, 2015). Perhaps in OVT the nature of observation and attunement is simply changed but still present. Utilisation of these affordances to enhance attunement will be discussed in the next chapter.

Stuck in the Frame

The reviewed literature suggests that therapists experience some restriction to remain in the field of view as defined by the digital screen in OVT. Research by García et al. (2022) indicated therapists can feel entrapped by the digital screen in OVT; one therapist described, “the camera demands stillness” (p. 203). Some therapists experience a sense of limitation or

stillness to their body movement and gestures in OVT (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Padfield, 2021). Others experience pressure to appear present and attentive with/to clients in OVT and notice this manifests as less physical movement outside the field of view, and reduced freedom to recursively shift between wide-peripheral and focused frontal vision (Banack, 2021; Carroll, 2021).

The Unblinking Eye

This sense of restriction aligns with the finding that therapists experience longer moments of mutual gaze-holding with clients in OVT (García et al., 2022). One therapist described it as being unable to glance away from the “unblinking camera eye” (Leutrum, 2022, pp. 173). Many therapists reported that looking away from clients is difficult in OVT and understand this experience as not wanting to appear disengaged, and as compensation for lack of physical co-presence (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; García et al., 2022; Sayers, 2021; Weinstein, 2021). Interestingly, the findings suggest that therapists new to OVT are more vigilant in maintaining eye contact with clients (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Padfield, 2021). A therapist new to practicing OVT describes their experience:

Often, I am not looking at the patient as I try to access something internal, an image, memory, or sensation that allows me to contact the patient’s affective experience... on the screen glancing away seems rude, a break in our... connection. It is harder to hear my own thoughts. (Weinstein, 2021, p. 112)

The sense of visual hyperfocus and challenge to glance away freely from the client was mentioned by therapists as impeding inner space for reflection and attunement (Isaacs Russell, 2015).

These findings emphasise the pull to focus and maintain eye contact with the client potentially hinders therapist attunement in OVT. After musing on this finding, I often noticed feeling pressure to maintain eye contact with clients in OVT. I realised looking away from the screen into my own physical space is a tangible reminder that the client and I are not together in a co-present therapy space. Perhaps a loss of visual connection in OVT disrupts the sense of relational connection with the client. Potentially, my anxiety about eye contact may drive the visual pull to maintain a connection through the keyhole, and as such the inner space for intrapersonal attunement is reduced.

Seeing Ourselves

In OVT platforms, there is often a self-view function that allows for both client and therapist to be viewed on-screen at the same time. The literature highlights that the presence of the self-view image of the therapist during sessions is considered a distraction; impacting embodied awareness and behaviours, with some therapists actively modifying facial and bodily expressions (Eve, 2022; García et al., 2022). One psychotherapist noted, “you stop sensing yourself to look at yourself” (García et al., 2022, p. 200). Eve (2022), a body psychotherapist, reported seeing their self-view encourages self-scrutiny and distracts from intrapersonal attunement. They discovered hiding the self-view enhances their capacity to attune. Following my encounter with this literature I realised that hiding my self-image was a possibility in OVT. Once I implemented this change, I became aware of how routine visual toggling between images of the client and myself had been an extra source of competition for my attention.

Preparing the Space to Attune

Preparing the space for attunement in OVT involves preparing the technological OVT space, the therapist’s physical space, and the therapist’s inner space. As previously discussed, the findings reveal that as psychotherapists gain technological knowledge and skills competency, and intentionally set up their OVT space, their capacity for attunement is enhanced (Bizzari, 2022; Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Jesser et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2020). This process is assisted practically by reducing potential distraction from the physical and technological environment, ensuring a reliable internet connection, minimising browsers, turning off notifications, and hiding the self-view window (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019; Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021). Furthermore, maximising the technological quality of what can be seen and heard in OVT is also important and will support therapist attunement. Some therapists find a pre-session check of sound volume and screen image helpful (e.g., to check lighting and ensure a clear view of their face/body) and find that it helps communication of therapist attunement (Eve, 2022; García et al., 2022). Intentionally setting up a consistent physical space in which they conduct OVT can support therapist attunement (Mitchell, 2020). Some therapists advocate having more space around them and a wheelable chair enables freedom of movement and promotes embodied attunement in OVT (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019). Consideration of how close or distant to the camera we are positioned can be discussed with clients and can be used to enhance interpersonal attunement (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021).

Therapists find implementing pre- and post-session reflection pauses via mindfulness practices, breathing, and grounding exercises can prepare the therapist’s inner space for attunement and facilitate transitions into/out of the OVT space (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019;

Padfield, 2021; Sayers, 2021; Zoumpouli, 2020). Some therapists reported transition rituals between sessions can mitigate the effects of the immediacy of connection and disconnection in OVT (García et al., 2022); taking longer breaks between clients, increasing physical movement, short walks, and yoga between sessions also support this transition (McBride et al., 2020; Schellinski, 2021). Therapists mentioned these self-care practices become more important to utilise when working in OVT and help to reduce fatigue. Therapists also reported clinical supervision and support from colleagues who work in OVT being of great value to examine and share experiences of working in this mode (Essig & Russell, 2021; Merchant, 2021; Padfield, 2021).

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how therapists' experience of attunement is impacted by technical and spatial factors in OVT. It included a discussion of how therapists experience the digital screen as a barrier to the experience of attunement and a portal for connection. The findings highlight OVT affords therapists amplification of visual and auditory sensory information; and that therapists can support the capacity for intrapersonal attunement by adapting their practice in OVT. Adapting practice includes intentional preparation and setup of the OVT space and gaining technological confidence and skills competency (Mitchell, 2020). As technological confidence increases, therapist anxiety is reduced which supports a sense of safety and enhances intrapersonal attunement in OVT. In addition, findings indicate a therapist's inner space for attunement can be enhanced via the use of mindfulness practices, intentional physical movement, scheduling considerations, space creation for transition rituals between client sessions, and efforts to reduce fatigue in OVT. The next chapter will explore psychotherapists' experience and perceptions of the relational dimensions of attunement in OVT.

Chapter 4: Sensing Through the Keyhole

The embodiment of the mind, in its fullest sense, has a profound impact on the experience of screen relations.

(Isaacs Russell, 2015, p. xviii)

Psychotherapist experiences of attunement are impacted by spatial considerations and technology in OVT. The idea of sensing through the keyhole was touched upon in the previous chapter and provides a metaphor that encapsulates the notion that the field of view via the digital screen is like a keyhole. It is possible that the keyhole perspective does something to therapist experience of attunement in OVT. This chapter examines how therapists experience relational aspects of attunement in OVT which includes the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intersubjective domains. Next, findings that elucidate how therapists enhance their capacity for attunement in OVT to facilitate sensing through the screen keyhole are explored.

Through the Keyhole

The literature reveals that therapist experience of attunement is changed in OVT (Roesler, 2017). Many therapists notice challenges in the perception and qualitative experience of empathic, affective, and embodied attunement in OVT (Essig & Russell, 2021; Isaacs Russell, 2021; Malawista et al., 2022). In addition, therapists report difficulty perceiving countertransferential responses in OVT (Ahlström et al., 2022; Isaacs Russell, 2021; Jesser et al., 2021; Padfield, 2021). This is an important finding because in psychodynamic psychotherapy, a therapist's capacity to attune underpins the perception of countertransference (Maroda, 2010). Countertransference can be defined as "all of the therapist's emotional reactions to a client" (Maroda, 2010, p. 246). Some therapists report a diminished quality or richness of countertransferential communications in OVT (Bizzari, 2022; Susman, 2021). One therapist noted, OVT "can mute things... in person, it's in full and living color" (Tantillo, 2022, p. 100). Notably, some therapists noticed somatic and embodied experiences with some clients when co-present become inaccessible in OVT (Isaacs Russell, 2015; Padfield, 2021). Another therapist described how their capacity for attunement involving unconscious synchronisation and mirroring via subtle body movements in co-present therapy is now unreachable in OVT (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021). The findings indicate that for many therapists the enlivened quality of embodied relating is diminished in OVT. Totton (2015) defined embodied relating, occurring implicitly and explicitly, as "the felt sense of the other" (p. 32). Conversely, many therapists reported experiencing moments of intense somatic,

embodied, and visual countertransference in OVT (Giustino, 2021; Kallner, 2020; Mathew, 2021). This aligns with other findings that reveal although there are some limitations of sensory information in OVT, therapists experience depth of emotions and intense moments of affective attunement in OVT (Schellinski, 2021; Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021; Zoumpouli, 2020).

Transformation

The findings show that many therapists with little previous experience of OVT are surprisingly reassured that attunement is still experienced in cyberspace (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2020; Schellinski, 2021). Mathew (2021), a psychoanalytic therapist, revealed the shift to OVT was challenging. However, they noticed as their technological experience and confidence grew, so did their ability to attune. Notably, they experienced this process as strengthening the ability to “re-attune to countertransference phenomena” (Mathew, 2021, p. 221). Mathew’s experience supports findings that therapists who gain technological skills and competency are potentially in a better position to attune in OVT. Linking to this idea of reattunement, Padrón (2021) questioned whether countertransference communications are *transformed* in OVT, writing “virtuality... obfuscates the emergence of strong, intense affects and the uses of our own countertransference... (however) does it get transformed, like the body under the regime of virtuality, into something else I am still not aware of?” (p. 126).

This notion of reattuning to communications of therapeutic relating in OVT intimates something has changed that requires adaptation and transformation. Based on findings that the possibility for attunement exists regardless of the therapeutic space, perhaps it is not the communications of attunement that are transformed in OVT; rather, the therapist’s perception and sensing of attunement requires transformation to adapt to therapy in this mode.

More Doing Less Being

Aligning with this idea of transformation is the finding that therapists notice attuning more to the cognitive and less to felt sense experience in OVT (Levey, 2021; Susman, 2021; Zoumpouli, 2020). One therapist described finding it “more difficult to dwell” (Isaacs Russell, 2020, p. 368). Another therapist revealed attunement to countertransference communications required a more conscious perception in OVT (Jesser et al., 2021). Some therapists assert it is the lack of physical co-presence in OVT that limits the process of psychotherapy to “‘states of mind’ rather than ‘states of being’” (Essig & Russell, 2021, p. 376).

This understanding is highlighted in research examining embodied awareness of Gestalt psychotherapists in OVT:

Doing to the other became more prominent than *being with...* working online invites a split where more attention is given to content, and to what we can observe and evaluate, rather than to what is felt and sensed in relation to the other. (Kallner, 2020, pp. 13-14).

Despite the pull to observation and evaluation, Kallner's (2020) research found that when therapists intentionally focus on embodied experience, their capacity for embodied attunement increases in OVT. Similarly, a psychodynamic therapist reported intentionally focusing on their intrapersonal felt sense experience outside of sessions enhances their capacity for attunement in session with clients (Padfield, 2021). Although this practice is relevant for any mode of therapy, many therapists notice an increased need for practices that promote intrapersonal attunement when working in OVT.

The reviewed literature also shows that therapists notice more doing, via an increase in their verbal and nonverbal facial and gestural communication in OVT (García et al., 2022; Leutrum, 2022; Mitchell, 2020), increased use of minimal encouragers and more explicit enquiry into the client's experience (Jesser et al., 2021; Schen et al., 2022). Interestingly, for some therapists, the increase in verbal communication in this therapy mode appears to impact silent spaces in OVT. Notably, psychotherapists notice fewer silences in OVT and that attuning to these silences is more difficult (Ahlström et al., 2022; García et al., 2022; Rodgers et al., 2021). One therapist posited in silent moments in co-present therapy we are reassured of the presence of each other via confirmations of life, such as subtle bodily movement and noise. In OVT these are often absent, and therapists move to fill the space with words (García et al., 2022). These findings provoked reflection on my experience, often noticing the wish to remain in silence and finding it challenging in OVT. Perhaps I use my voice to confirm my presence, to reassure myself and the client we still are connected, fuelled by the memories of past occurrences where technical glitches and disconnections cause silences and barriers to communication. In addition, my anxiety in these moments is increased by my assumption that silent space is required to facilitate attunement. This assumption is informed by the psychodynamic perspective that contends that silence is a valuable resource of unconscious intersubjective communication in psychotherapy (Lemma, 2015).

Focused and Free

In OVT many therapists find shifting between focused and free-floating attention difficult (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Isaacs Russell, 2015; Mitchell, 2020; Padfield, 2021). Some therapists experience that a reduction in silent moments in OVT means less space for evenly suspended attention, intrapersonal attunement, and reverie (Dettbarn, 2019; García et al., 2022; Kallner, 2020). Ogden (1997) conceptualised reverie as a metaphorical expression of our unconscious intersubjective experience. As mentioned in Chapter 3, OVT technology focuses therapist attention on visual and auditory senses which may impede a dynamic tuning in and out to their felt sense experience. However, others experience increased freedom to attune to the intersubjective communications of therapeutic relating in OVT (Ferro, 2021; Giustino, 2021; Mathew, 2021). Ferro (2021) described how OVT enhances the availability of more oneiric dreamlike reverie states. I wondered about the varied experience of attunement in OVT and came across the reflection from Agosta (2019). They contended that the virtual ‘as if’ quality in psychodynamic therapy always exists and argue that the potential for attunement to intersubjective communications is unbounded by the therapeutic space. Their idea, alongside the findings, highlights that the possibility for attunement exists in all therapeutic relating and requires therapist adaptation to tune in. Some therapists understand this as being required “to make significant adjustments to our ways of listening, of taking in the client, and making sense of the experience of being with the client” (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021, p. 13). These findings lend support for the idea that the nature of how therapists attune is transformed in OVT.

Moments of Flow

As touched on previously, many therapists experience moments of deep affective attunement in OVT (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Mathew, 2021). Schellinski (2021) described in these moments “the feeling of connection: despite the space that distanced us... a kind of oneness” (p. 538). Rodgers et al. (2021) noticed intensified empathy between therapist and client in these “moments of ‘flow’” (p. 296). This phenomenon can also be understood as *telepresence*, the illusion whereby in a moment of heightened attunement we forget we are using technology (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Telepresence is considered by some psychotherapists to underpin therapeutic action in OVT (Essig & Russell, 2021). I resonate with these accounts and experience how in moments of flow my perception of the screen keyhole fades, accompanied by a sense of moving towards the client and a quality of togetherness. These moments occur in co-present therapy too; however, they feel more noticeable in OVT. Perhaps the illusory quality of telepresence is lost when we glance away from the screen into our own physical space, a tangible reminder that we are not together in a co-present space.

The Body

As previously discussed, OVT poses questions for therapists about the nature of attunement, embodied relating, and embodiment (Leutrum, 2022). Embodiment is understood to be “the ongoing moment-by-moment experience of our existence as living bodies” (Totton, 2015, p. 9). As mentioned, many psychotherapists grapple with the loss of co-present bodies together and consider that this changes their experience of attunement (Agosta, 2019; Isaacs Russell, 2020; Susman, 2021). Conversely, although other therapists view having physical bodies together in the same location as desirable, they do not consider it an essential requirement for attunement to occur in OVT (Agosta, 2019; Mathew, 2021; Orrell, 2022). This varied experience generated questions for me about how therapists experience the body and embodied attunement in OVT.

Forgetting the Body

A noteworthy finding is that some therapists experience forgetting their own body and the body of the client in OVT which reduces their perception of embodied attunement (Frank, 2020; Levey, 2021; Susman, 2021). From a Gestalt psychotherapy perspective, Frank (2020) argued that in efforts to attune to clients, to feel something through the digital screen, we shut down the ability to attune to our “moving-feeling body” (p. 371). As reviewed in Chapter 3, technology limits access to some familiar wayfinders of attunement in OVT, particularly to what is visible of the client. Perhaps because we are relating therapeutically through the keyhole of the screen (field of view) we are funnelled to attune to the visible parts and may forget the whole. Susman (2021) contended the digital screen absorbs the lived experience of how it feels to be with a client in a whole person sense, and potentially contributes to unlearning “previous experiences of wholeness, of embodiment” (p. 339). Another aspect of forgetting may be the possibility that in OVT therapists forget they have bodies with volume and have the freedom to move physically through space (Kallner, 2020). This salient point links to other research that finds therapists who move and change body positions feel more embodied in OVT (Kallner, 2020; Weinstein, 2021). Astutely, Svenson (2020) suggested that “when we find ourselves searching for bodily experience in the therapy, we might conclude that it is missing from the therapy when in fact we are having trouble locating it inside ourselves” (p. 453). All these findings imply that as therapists if we lose connection with our own felt sense experience we may be challenged to attune to the client.

Remembering the Body

Recurrent findings are that some therapists experience forgetting their body in OVT which impacts their capacity for embodied attunement. However, many others appear to have

adapted their thinking and practice in OVT to support their embodiment. As Lemma (2017) asserted, “in cyberspace we are still embodied... what changes is our experience of embodiment” (p. 92). This idea emphasises it is our experience of the existence of our living bodies that changes in OVT. Engagement with the literature challenged me to reflect on the living body and illuminated how sometimes I experience a sense of forgetting my body in OVT. I was curious about how this potentially changes my capacity for embodied attunement and wondered how other therapists support their embodiment in OVT.

Kallner (2020) stated that “although we only see a part of the other's body, it is possible to feel into the whole” (p. 14). They described how bringing a mindful awareness and attuning to embodied experience in session helps their ability to attune to the client. Similarly, Schellinski (2021) revealed their capacity for self-attunement, an “*innerconnectedness*” (p. 542), is enhanced through a purposeful focus on somatic embodied experience in OVT and is supported by regular meditation practices. This process is not specific to OVT; however, the literature highlights how many therapists find that implementing more regular practices to support mindful awareness and self-reflexivity enhances the capacity for attunement in OVT (Carroll, 2021; Eve, 2022). From the reviewed literature it appears that therapists who use body and somatically informed approaches are more able to adapt their practice and experience embodied attunement in OVT (Agosta, 2019; Frank, 2020; Kallner, 2020).

Lacunae

Some therapists struggle with attunement due to limitations to what can be observed of the client in OVT. One therapist suggested that OVT involves filling gaps or *lacunae* in our experience of each other (Agar, 2019). However, I would argue there are always lacunae in therapeutic relating regardless of the therapeutic space in which it takes place. Filling these spaces with ideas and imagining parts of the other person underpins the intersubjective relationship in psychotherapy. Some lacunae can be filled via previous co-present therapy experience of the client, and many therapists attest this helps attunement when they transition to OVT (García et al., 2022; Isaacs Russell, 2021; Lemma, 2017; Mitchell, 2020). A phenomenological study interviewing psychotherapists from a range of theoretical schools reveals that the therapist’s prior co-present experience of the client “allows a sort of implicit reconstruction of the presence of the other” (Bizzari, 2022, p. 5). This finding aligns with research that contends that somatic memory provides a base or anchoring sense of the client to attune from and is therapeutically useful (Embleton Tudor et al., 2021; Lemma, 2017; Mitchell, 2020).

Connection Through the Keyhole

As this dissertation progressed, I became increasingly curious about how other therapists enhance their capacity for attunement. This question was driven by my experience of transitioning to OVT practice and noticing challenges to the perception of my embodied attunement. Hermeneutic engagement with the literature provided an opportunity to view how psychotherapists experience attunement in OVT at close range and reveals several key ideas. These ideas, examined below, discuss how psychotherapists enhance their capacity for attunement in OVT.

Slow Down to Tune In

In OVT many psychotherapists notice the *pace* of attunement is different and requires intentional pausing and *slowing down* (Kallner, 2020; McBride et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2020; Tantillo, 2022). Some therapists emphasise in OVT the onus is on them to “slow down the process and create a space where we can stop and feel” (Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021, p. 373). Intentional slowing down is helpful to facilitate intrapersonal attunement in OVT (McBride et al., 2020). In addition, intentional awareness and close observation of the somatic felt sense experience of the therapist facilitates interpersonal attunement and affective co-regulation with the client (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019). As mentioned in the previous chapter, OVT requires therapists to consider how they appear to the client through the digital screen. For Susman (2021) intentional slowing down takes the form of unhurried and more deliberate facial and gestural expression in OVT. For others, it includes awareness and dynamic modulation of voice volume and tone (Kallner, 2020; Ogden & Goldstein, 2019; Susman, 2021). Some therapists advocate in moments of intense client affect that therapists intentionally slow down their body movements, ensure a clear view of their facial expression, and use a calm voice to support communication of empathic attunement. (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019).

An important finding that was briefly mentioned in the literature is that therapists find communicating an attuned receptive presence to clients more difficult in silent moments in OVT (Jesser et al., 2021; Schen et al., 2022). This finding led me to wonder how therapists can communicate an attuned presence to clients in nonverbal ways in OVT. There is little about this process in the reviewed literature; however, some therapists notice leaning in toward the client in moments of intense affect, especially sadness, supports interpersonal attunement (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019; Tantillo, 2022). Others notice that empathic mirroring of a client’s gestures is useful in OVT to communicate an attuned presence (Agosta, 2019; Sayers, 2021). These findings reflect how nonverbal body movements can support communication of empathic attunement in OVT.

Staying Close

As technology mediates therapy in OVT, this means the therapist and client are—in a 2-dimensional sense—closer spatially to parts of the other and to what is visible and audible. In psychotherapy, observing and listening are fundamental for attunement; yet, many therapists experience that attunement in OVT, requires a more intentional approach (Ahlström et al., 2022; Dettbarn, 2019; Embleton Tudor et al., 2021). For many therapists working in OVT the auditory portal for sensing is amplified, providing an opportunity for close listening to the nuances of speech, tone, and voice volume (Kallner, 2020; Tantillo, 2022). Technology offers the opportunity to be close. Some therapists consider that these affordances enhance interpersonal attunement through the opportunity for purposeful near observation and moment-to-moment tracking of the client (Banack, 2021; Tantillo, 2022). Actively paying close attention to body-related communications as expressed via movement, posture, gesture, eye gaze, and facial expressions supports attunement and perception of the implicit processes of psychotherapy (Ogden & Goldstein, 2019). The findings highlight that when therapists stay close to client experience through purposeful close listening and near observation, interpersonal attunement can be enhanced in OVT.

Intentional Checking In

Therapists notice they are more actively checking in with the client in OVT which facilitates attunement (Banack, 2021; Ogden & Goldstein, 2019; Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021). In OVT, inviting the client to check in encompasses explicit verbal curiosity about embodied experience. Naming what is seen, heard, and sensed supports attunement to felt sense experiences (Kallner, 2020; Lemma, 2017; Tantillo, 2022). Some therapists advocate that explicit verbal disclosure of relational observations with clients in OVT supports co-regulation of affect and a sense of accompanying the client (McBride et al., 2020). In addition, checking in with clients about their experience of silence is also found to facilitate empathic attunement and is useful therapeutically (Rodgers et al., 2021).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined therapists' experiences and understandings of the relational aspects of attunement in OVT. The findings highlight how psychotherapists experience challenges in the perception and quality of empathic, affective, and embodied attunement in OVT (Essig & Russell, 2021; Isaacs Russell, 2021). Despite these, therapists are adapting their ways of working in OVT to facilitate attunement (Schellinski, 2021; Schen et al., 2022). Significantly, it appears that when therapists accept the differences and affordances of OVT

their attunement is enhanced (Agosta, 2019; Banack, 2021; Mitchell, 2020). Therapeutic attunement in OVT can be supported through an intentional focus on therapist embodiment, purposefully slowing down, staying close via listening and observation, and intentionally checking in with the client. The findings lend support for the idea that OVT transforms the possibilities of clinical attunement and therapists are required to adapt. The following chapter discusses the findings of the current research and their relevance to the wider field of psychotherapy.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The *virtual* shrinks space and time and brings people closer... It also connects realities that were disjointed before, oblivious to one another. This interconnected closeness challenges all sorts of distinctions: inside/outside, mind/body, far/close, important/banal, new/old, fiction/reality, private/public, alive/dead, memory/oblivion.

(Padrón, 2021, p. 126)

This hermeneutic literature review seeks to answer the research question “How do psychotherapists experience and understand attunement in OVT?” This query emerged from my challenges with attunement in OVT and was fuelled by scant research on the topic. I was curious to know how other psychotherapists were experiencing attunement in cyberspace. From a psychodynamic perspective, therapist attunement is considered “the heart of therapeutic change” (Siegel, 2007, p. 290). Therefore, I was motivated to expand my knowledge with the hope of enhancing my capacity to attune in OVT. This chapter begins with a summary of the findings and is followed by a discussion about the implications of the findings for psychotherapy theory and practice. To conclude, I reflect on the strengths and limitations of this hermeneutic literature review and suggest further avenues for research.

Summary of the Findings

Current research suggests psychotherapists experience the therapeutic process as qualitatively different in OVT (Aafjes-van Doorn, 2022). The findings of this dissertation agree and expand further to reveal how therapists understand these challenges. Working through the digital screen keyhole appears to transform the nature of attunement in psychotherapy. Therapists understand this is due to the mediation of therapy through technology, including spatial changes, and the absence of physical co-presence. There is variability in how therapists understand these factors to be impacting attunement in OVT. Some assert attunement is not dependent on a co-present therapeutic space; rather, it is a space in the mind. Technology enables connection and is a tangible reminder of the impossibility of physical co-presence. Many therapists experience technology as both a barrier and portal for attunement, and that working in OVT requires them to attend to more stimuli/information. Some therapists notice that hyperfocus through the screen diverts attention away from their felt sense experience and makes intrapersonal attunement more challenging in OVT. A notable finding is that therapists experience relating through and with technology as fatiguing which impacts the capacity for attunement. The findings align with communications research that suggests ‘zoom

fatigue' is caused by increased nonverbal overload in technology-mediated communication (Bailenson, 2021). It is believed that fatigue is fuelled by increased cognitive demands on the person, hyperfocus on the screen, eye gaze at a close spatial distance, and a sense of physical immobility (Bailenson, 2021).

Some therapists notice that countertransferential communications of therapeutic relating are dampened, impacting the felt sense of connectedness with clients in OVT (Békés et al., 2021). The findings reveal variable experiences of intersubjective attunement in OVT. Some therapists experience increased freedom to attune to intersubjective communications; conversely, others experience the opposite. Many experience there is less space for reflection and reverie in OVT, and surmise this reduces the space for intersubjective attunement. Notably, therapists notice challenges with embodied attunement and many experience forgetting their bodies in OVT. However, for others embodied attunement remains an accessible resource. A salient finding lends support for the idea that if therapists lose the capacity for intrapersonal attunement they will struggle to attune to the client in OVT. This finding aligns with the body of research that asserts a crucial precursor to creating an attuned therapeutic relationship with the client is the therapist's capacity for intrapersonal attunement (Bruce et al., 2010).

Therapist acceptance and adaptation to OVT enhances the capacity for attunement in all dimensions (Mitchell, 2020). Gaining technological confidence and skills competency helps therapists utilise the affordances of working in OVT. Therapists can support intrapersonal attunement by intentionally slowing down and creating space to pause and check in with their felt sense experience. The findings of this dissertation lend support for the idea that the possibilities of attunement are transformed in OVT, and these will be discussed below.

Implications for Psychotherapy

Theory of Attunement Transformed

Suler (2016) theorised we are being shaped by the architecture of cyberspace; an idea echoed in the findings of the current hermeneutic review. Therapists' experience of attunement is transformed in OVT and with intentional practice capacity to attune can be enhanced.

Historically, psychotherapy has privileged co-present relating and the shift to OVT has initiated a sea change and opportunity for the evolution of this field. It has provided the impetus to zoom out and re-evaluate the culture of psychotherapy; to consider how we think about, practice, and enhance attunement when working therapeutically in differing spaces. In the words of a psychotherapist reflecting on the transition to OVT after a lengthy career, "we have

had to give up any notion of theory as being immutable, we have had to recognize the value of flexibility” (Ferro, 2021, p. 140).

Gadamer (2013) asserted that openness to otherness challenges us to risk our horizons of understanding which kindles the evolution of further understanding. Initially, I was resistant to OVT and deemed that because of the absence of co-present bodies together it would be less therapeutically beneficial to clients. Through hermeneutic engagement with other therapists’ experiences of attunement via the literature and working concurrently as a psychotherapist in OVT I have been challenged to expand my horizons of understanding. The hermeneutic process has stimulated continual questioning of my assumptions, my ideas about attunement have expanded, and the fusion of horizons in the form of findings has shaped the evolution of my therapeutic practice in OVT. Before undertaking this research I had not seriously considered a therapeutic space as an inner space, and the possibilities of an embodied space in the mind of the therapist. I understand embodied space to be informed by the therapist’s *innerconnectedness* and embodied felt sense experience and, where possible, previous co-present psychotherapy experience of clients also enriches this embodied space. These revelations liberated me from the assumption that co-present therapeutic relating is essential for attunement. This shift dissipated a sense of feeling immobile and stuck in the screen’s field of view and enabled freedom for my enhanced attunement in OVT.

Practice of Attunement Transformed

Intentional preparation and setup of the OVT space, and gaining technical skills competency builds confidence, a sense of safety, and supports therapist attunement (Mitchell, 2020). Preparation of the therapist’s outer space and environment helps to support the inner space and enhances the opportunity for intrapersonal attunement in OVT. These findings have implications for the education of all therapists and potentially other mental healthcare professionals who work in OVT.

In psychotherapy process research, pantheoretical common factors have been identified as having significant contributions to beneficial therapeutic outcomes for clients (Wampold, 2015). It could be argued that attunement underpins all the common factors including the therapeutic alliance, therapist qualities, and empathy. As such, when therapists enhance their capacity for attunement it also supports beneficial therapeutic outcomes for clients. As previously mentioned, therapeutic presence and attunement can be learned and strengthened in OVT (Geller, 2020). In OVT therapists notice that as their capacity for *innerconnectedness* and intrapersonal attunement expands, so does their ability for attuning to the client and the

therapeutic relationship (Schellinski, 2021). The capacity for intrapersonal attunement is fundamental to all modes of therapeutic relating; however, the findings suggest it requires a more intentional focus in OVT.

My understanding of attunement has grown through the current research. Initially, I considered attunement as the capacity to stay close and make contact with moment-to-moment experience, the clients, and the intersubjective relationship. However, engagement in the hermeneutic process has expanded my view. The findings suggest therapist attunement requires a more focused and responsive practice in OVT. The continuum of attunement from being to doing exists in all therapeutic relating; however, it appears in OVT therapists notice more active focused doing. This experience is further reflected in the findings that therapists are experiencing more focused than free or evenly suspended attention in OVT. The idea that the mode of attunement is transformed in OVT is supported by findings that show therapists increase their responsiveness verbally and gesturally. As one therapist reflected, the “pace of attunement is different online” (Mitchell, 2020, p. 130). Some therapists assume that the doing activity inhibits the capacity for therapeutic attunement but this does not appear to be the case. Therapist responsiveness is underpinned by attunement and is fundamental for facilitating new emotional learning and promoting of change for clients (Watson & Wiseman, 2021). Research by Snyder and Silberschatz (2017) indicates that a client’s experience of the therapist’s attunement and responsiveness in session may be an important predictor of future session outcomes. They conceptualised attunement as a process that includes both a capacity to attune to the client’s felt experience *and* the communication of attunement to the client; an “attuned responsiveness” (Snyder & Silberschatz, 2017, p. 609). This finding has implications for all therapists seeking to enhance their capacity for interpersonal attunement and communication of empathy in OVT.

The findings agree with current research that highlights the need for experiential strategies to support therapist attunement and responsiveness in OVT (Smith & Gillon, 2021). The capacity for reflective listening and attunement can be learned and is considered a core competency of being a psychotherapist (Pizer, 2017). A large body of research indicates practices that support growth of therapeutic presence and mindful awareness also enhance the capacity for intrapersonal attunement (Baker, 2015; Bruce et al., 2010). The findings in this dissertation support the idea that when therapists intentionally implement practices to support selfcare and mindful awareness, it both reduces fatigue and supports their capacity for attunement (McBride et al., 2020; Schellinski, 2021) .

Linking with the idea of experiential strategies to support attunement in OVT are the findings that purposeful attention to bodily experience and felt sense states helps to prepare the therapist's inner space for attunement (Frank, 2020; Kallner, 2020). Many therapists describe a sense of forgetting the body in OVT. Although technology funnels our attention to visible parts of the client and away from the whole, the therapist's body and embodied felt sense awareness remains a resource in OVT (García et al., 2022; Ogden & Goldstein, 2019). Interestingly, therapists from somatic/body-informed psychotherapeutic modalities appear to be more able to modify clinical practice, to bring the body back in and experience embodied attunement in OVT (Frank, 2020; Kallner, 2020). In OVT adaptations that support embodied attunement include intentionally slow down and practical ideas that encourage physical movement, the use of moveable chairs, intentional mirroring of client gestures, and encouraging attention and expression of embodied experience.

Technology utilises visual and auditory modes of sensory communications and making use of these affordances in OVT provides therapists the opportunity to enhance interpersonal attunement. The findings support what is already known about the use of close observation; listening; and micro-tracking of clients' facial, bodily, and vocal expression to support therapist attunement (Fosha, 2021; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). The findings also concur with research that shows adaptation of ostensive cues is required in OVT (Fisher et al., 2020). Ostensive cues include gestures, vocal sounds, facial expressions, and verbal translation and expression of what therapists sense to the client. These cues are important for psychotherapists because the intentional use of ostensive cues can communicate attunement to the client and foster epistemic trust in the therapeutic relationship. Through such adaptations psychotherapy practice is being transformed by therapists to support and enhance attunement in OVT.

Evaluation and Quality Considerations

A key strength of this dissertation is that it fills a gap in the current knowledge about an important and relevant topic in psychotherapy with potential benefits for the education of psychotherapists and therapeutic outcomes for clients. In addition, the hermeneutic approach is a strength that allows for the researcher's subjective experience about the topic and is integral to the findings. The rigour of this research is demonstrated via my commitment to openness and reflexivity, and is supported through reflexive journaling and regular peer/academic supervision (Yardley, 2017). Rigour is displayed further via the disclosure of my subjective experience and evolving perspectives in response to the literature throughout the dissertation (Crowther et al., 2017). In this dissertation, transparency has been demonstrated

through a detailed discussion of the methodological process and method, and by grounding my interpretations in the data (Barker & Pistrang, 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus for the rapid uptake and use of OVT by many psychotherapists with little experience working in this therapeutic space. Potentially the environmental context of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted therapist anxiety, amplifying the anxiety related to the sudden shift to working in OVT. Increased anxiety likely impacted therapists' capacity for attunement in OVT and may have been reflected in their narratives. Another potential limitation is that my research question was fuelled by my anxiety about the transition to working in OVT, and unconsciously influenced the literature I gravitated towards. Although I was mindful of the possible influence during the process, I consider that inclining towards certain literature is expected and acceptable in hermeneutic research (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

In hermeneutic research, such as the current study, psychotherapist experiences and understandings of attunement are mediated through language via the text. A limitation of using a secondary data source like text is the loss of information about *how* psychotherapists express their experience of attunement working in OVT. Potentially such data reduces the capture of embodied and nonverbal bodily communication, vocal qualities, and silences as the therapist reports their experiences of attunement. Although interpretative hermeneutic research is considered to have limited generalisability and transferability (Davies & Fisher, 2018) it does not diminish the useful contribution of the current research to the body of knowledge relating to OVT. As such, the findings of this dissertation are not considered conclusive; rather, they are generative of further curiosity about psychotherapists' experience of attunement in OVT.

Future Research Directions

There is a notable absence of research examining psychotherapist experiences of attunement in OVT, and none in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Considering this limitation, primary research exploring psychotherapists' experiences of attunement in OVT would be advantageous. Such research could include an exploration of attunement to countertransference communications (embodied, imaginal, somatic, visual) and how therapists enhance their capacity for intrapersonal attunement in OVT. Importantly, primary research would enable the capture of the nuances of *how* therapists express their experience of attunement and may elucidate information not accessible from texts.

An interesting finding in this dissertation is that therapists experience less silence and difficulties attuning to silence in OVT. It appears that therapist concerns centre on the possibility that less silence means less space for reflection and reverie which may impact intersubjective attunement. Further primary research would be helpful to investigate the relationship between silence and attunement in OVT. Additionally, therapists experience communicating an attuned presence in silence and times of intense client affect as more difficult in OVT. In psychotherapy, the communication of empathic attunement, which seeks to communicate acceptance and a sense of being alongside the client, often occurs in silent moments (Rodgers et al., 2021). The findings of this dissertation lend support for research that indicates psychotherapists struggle to communicate attunement to clients in OVT (Smith et al., 2022). Future research about how therapists can effectively communicate attunement in OVT would be beneficial for psychotherapists and clients.

Conclusion

This research explored how psychotherapists experience and understand attunement in OVT. The findings illuminated how therapists perceive, make sense of, and enhance their capacity for attunement in OVT. The capacity for attunement is not lost in OVT; it is transformed and requires therapists to adapt and evolve the thinking and practice of psychotherapy in this therapeutic space. It involves therapists intentionally preparing the outer space—technology and physical setting from which they work, alongside their inner space for attunement, in order to prepare the ground for enhancing attunement.

The topic of the dissertation was generated by my experience of psychotherapy in cyberspace and the awareness that my capacity for attunement was challenged. Initially, I noticed that familiar ways of finding in the co-present therapy mode did not seem as accessible in OVT. Fortuitously, the process of hermeneutic engagement with the literature has stimulated the evolution of my thinking and practice about attunement, and my horizons of understanding have shifted. Additionally, working as a psychotherapist in OVT alongside this research process has provided the opportunity to challenge my presumptions and expand my capacity for attunement experientially. Therapeutic attunement is a vital aspect of psychotherapy and the capacity for psychotherapist attunement can be supported and enhanced in OVT.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Core Text Summary Table (excerpt)

Source	Summary	Ideas and Themes	Reviewing and responses
<p>39 Kallner, H. (2020). Phronesis and knowing through movement: working with Gestalt psychotherapy online. <i>British Gestalt Journal</i>. Very good article printed</p>	<p>When sensory information is not available in familiar ways, there can be a tendency to lean towards aspects of experience that are more practised – the rational, cognitive and objective body 15. Our lived body It seems that working online invites a split where more attention is given to content, and to what we ...p. 14 can observe and evaluate, rather than to what is felt and sensed in relation to the other.p. 15.</p>	<p>Bringing the body back in Content – observation and evaluation as opposed to what is felt and sensed in relation to the other. inter- personal attunement can only see part of the body but it's still possible to feel into the whole. we forget we can move. silence filling "empty" space – aim to connect</p>	<p>Bringing the body back in – embodiment Movement parts and whole Movement to embody in OVT? Silence anxiety words filling space?</p>
<p>40 Leutrum, M. (2022). The analyst as user illusion: therapy in the time of COVID-19. <i>The Journal of Analytical Psychology</i>, 67(1), 170–182. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12778</p>	<p>The possibility of being hacked, of surreptitious listening in by family members or the government triggered feelings of paranoia, control issues and persecutory anxieties. P. 171 participants can feel surveilled, worrying how the 'unblinking camera eye' may show them to others. P. 172-173 What about dropped connections? Russell quotes Winnicott's comments about 'continuity of being' stating, 'When there is a breakdown in presence, the</p>	<p>Anxiety about privacy and safety Loss of embodied co-presence Absence of embodied reciprocity</p>	<p>Under observation – Camera eye? Impacts to intrapersonal attunement – stuckness?</p>

Appendix B: Key Ideas Table (excerpt)

Relational	Potential Ideas	Text Source Number	Thoughts, Ideas, Responses & Questions
	Defences against attunement	17, 41	"Disconnection for protection" see 17 More speech, less silence more active, more surface less depth
More doing less being	Increased cognitive. States of mind more than states of being	2, 5, 6, 28, 29, 39, 47, 56	"more doing than being" 6. See Kallner 39 Online makes it more challenging to attune to self, impacting a central psychotherapeutic process.... Loss of physical co-presence confines psychotherapeutic process "to 'states of mind' rather than 'states of being'. p. 376 47# Issacs. If we can't access this as previously where does that leave us and what does it mean?
	Fatigue	6, 13, 41 6, 7, 20, 26, 32, 45	"Handling technical disruptions and compensating for missing sensory perception was described as tiring" p. 8 Jessor 41 Zoomed out (Anxiety related?) Hyperfocus related. Stimuli related Digital third needs attention too?
Silence	Silence – filling the space	5, 6, 21, 25, 28, 30, 33, 37, 39, 41	"Filling gaps" with speech 36 See 41 - see extra article by Knol of significance of silence in psychotherapy
	Gestures and speech	10,18, 20, 21, 25, 26, 28, 29, 32, 52	Gestures like open palms empathy difficult online to express see 52
	Closer to voice with headphones	2, 47	See Marzi – voice becomes more important p. 230.
	Listening	28, 45	Tone of voice
	Lacunae	30, 38	Filling in the imaginary gaps of experiential knowledge of the other person (do we do this anyway)
	Closer to face	46	Paradox- access to more visual info and to less? What is unseen or missed?
	Pace is different online	5	"Pace of attunement different online" Mitchell 2020 p. 130
Challenge to intrapersonal attunement	Hyperfocus on client – less attention to self of therapist	6, 13, 15, 17, 24, 35, 36, 45, 56	"Under observation" as opposed to alongside see 25. Links to fixed gaze/glued to the screen