Please complete front sheet

Welsh Psychotherapy Institute

Course- Advanced Diploma in Psychotherapy

Name of Trainee: John Dray

Essay Title: “Attunement is more than Empathy. It is a process of communion with and unity of interpersonal contact” (Erskine 1999) Discuss your understanding of the term’s empathy and attunement referring to your own experience as a client and/or practitioner as well as appropriate theoretical material regarding historical and contemporary usage of these terms.

Word Count: 2980

Date of Submission: 1 May 2025

Overall Score 71% Grade Merit

Date Received

ESSAY MARKING SCHEME Year 2-4 onwards

Trainees Name: John Dray Year: 3

1st Marker: Rosy Wood-Bevan Date Marked: 9.05.25.

Essay Title: Empathy and Attunement

Assessment criteria & 1st Marker Comments	**Marks**
You give a well-considered account of theory, linked to various facets of your personal and professional experience which demonstrates originality and creativity. I think the examples you give could be tied more explicitly to aspects of theory and the theoretical passages, conversely, broken up by references to practice – real or hypothetical to show a more digested integration of theory and practice. Similarly, your examples relating to Ethics and AOP could be more integral to the whole and particularly with the first, set within a discussion of the importance of cultural attunement and acknowledging difference. Nevertheless, a good personal take on the question.	
1.Organisation and Planning There needs to be a structured plan for the work with an introduction, development and conclusion. The work should address the essay title. Well-structured and focussed. I think the essay would have benefitted from greater integration of theory and practice, by way of illustrating and breaking up some of the long theoretical passages. Equally, Intersectionality could have been woven more into the whole rather than being addressed separately.	7/10
2. Argument and Application to Practice Own ideas will be developed and others included and referenced to show application of theory to practice and self-awareness. Where relevant, indicate further ways in which the themes could be developed. You relate the question well to your own therapy and the emergence of new understandings for you as a result of your therapist's empathy and attunement. You offer some valuable and well grounded reflections from the training and although you do give an example from client work, could I think have expanded on the latter area in generalto say more about the small nuances of atttunement – pacing, timing, prosody etc within the theoretical sections. You do make some valuable points about the boundaries of empathy and attunement, based in your own experience.	19/30
3. Theory and Analysis Theory must be used to support the essay title. It must be critically evaluated and clearly linked to specific areas of application including self-awareness and own process. You offer a good literature review and an accurate account of theory from Erskine, which could however, do with some reference to examples to ground and show your digestion of a rather abstract passage. You do go on to give some powerful examples particularly from your personal, but also professional experience. I feel these could do with tying in more specifically to the preceding theoretical sections. You demonstrate a valuable and creative	21/30

critical edge in exploring the need for limitations to attunement and empathy in order to boundary tendencies towards merger which could be harmful to either party.	
4. Ethical and Anti-oppressive Practice Discussion of Ethical and Anti-oppressive practice and an understanding of the impact of intersectionality must be integral to the written work, reflecting the significance of such practice within psychotherapy. Reference can be made to ethical dilemmas, boundary negotiations, legal matters, personal transferential phenomena and any other issues related to power dynamics. You address this well in a separate and discreet paragraph. The cross-cultural example is pertinent but a bit short. Your ethical point about the challenges and limitations of empathy and attunement with certain clients is well made and demonstrates independent thinking based in your experience. In future it will be good to weave this section more fully inot the whole essay.	10/15
5. Research and Referencing All work will be referenced and include a full bibliography. Harvard referencing system to be used throughout. Reference can be made to books, articles, journals and web links. Correctly referenced and a good bibliography.	9/10
6. Style and Presentation Assignments are to be typed and double spaced with pages numbered and named. Front sheets must be included. Marking will take into account spelling, grammar and adherence to word limit (+/- 10%) unless special dispensation has been agreed. Very well written and correctly presented.	5/ 5
Total **Grade**	**71%**

0 – 39% = fail, 40% - 49% = REFER; 50% - 59% = PASS; 60% - 79% = MERIT; 80 % + = DISTINCTION

2nd Marker Comments: General Comments required if grade agreed.

Grade agreed Between Both Markers? **YES / NO** **If NO, the 2 markers will discuss and may alter the mark to agree.** **If the markers do not agree then the second marker will grade the essay and average grade will be given.** **Average Grade if required** **See Handbook section 3, Policy 15 if you wish to appeal this.**

1st Marker Signature : **Date: 9.05.25.**

2nd Marker Signature: **Date:**

Please use this document to write your essay. Start on the next page.

John Dray

Assignment 3 (Year 2 trainees only) Essay

1. “Attunement is more than Empathy. It is a process of communion with and unity of interpersonal contact” (Erskine 1999) Discuss your understanding of the term’s empathy and attunement referring to your own experience as a client and/or practitioner as well as appropriate theoretical material regarding historical and contemporary usage of these terms.

Word Limit 3000 +/- 10% Deadline: Noon, Tues 9th July 2024

Introduction

> Recently, a woman broke into my important conversation with another to explain that she was in the top ten percent of people with empathy. At that point I was burning anger… she continued, oblivious to my annoyance.

Empathy is a term widely used in both everyday language and psychotherapy, yet its definition and therapeutic value can differ significantly across contexts. Similarly, attunement is a concept often referred to in integrative and relational psychotherapies, yet not always well understood or universally applied. In my own life—as both a client and a trainee therapist—coming to terms with these concepts has proven personally transformative.

In this essay, I argue that while empathy, in its therapeutic meaning, is foundational to the therapeutic relationship. Attunement extends further, involving not only understanding but also a moment-by-moment responsiveness to the whole person. I explore how empathy and attunement are defined in the literature, how they are employed across different therapeutic modalities, and how I have encountered them within my own psychotherapeutic journey. I also consider ethical challenges, cultural variations, and interpersonal dynamics that complicate or deepen the work of empathy and attunement in practice. Excellent introduction

Literature Review

Empathy has long been a cornerstone of therapeutic practice, most notably within humanistic and psychodynamic traditions. Rogers (1946) defined empathy as the ability to perceive the client's internal frame of reference with accuracy and sensitivity. Kohut (1972), in developing self psychology, saw empathy as essential for psychological development and

therapeutic healing. Rowe & MacIsaac (1991) expanded on empathic attunement in self psychology, emphasising its relational and affective dimensions.

Erskine, Moursund, & Trautmann (1999) developed the concept of attunement as going beyond empathy—where the therapist not only understands but also resonates with and adjusts to the client's emotional and relational needs. Neuroscientific contributions, particularly from Schore (2012), support this view by situating empathy and attunement in right-brain, non-verbal domains of relational communication. In recent years, D. E. M. Milton (2012); D. Milton, Gurbuz, & Lopez (2022) has raised important critiques through the "double empathy problem," which highlights how mutual understanding is shaped by neurodiversity, culture, and lived experience. Good summary

Definitions and Conceptual Distinctions

The *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010) defines empathy as "the ability to understand and share the feelings of another," and attunement as "making receptive or aware; acclimatising; or making harmonious." These distinctions suggest that empathy involves a cognitive and affective understanding, while attunement implies an ongoing, interactive process of mutual regulation and alignment.

Erskine et al. (1999) conceptualise empathy as the therapist's capacity to understand the client's internal experience from the client's own perspective. However, attunement requires that the therapist be *with* the client—not just understanding them but engaging in a process of "communion," an embodied presence that fosters psychological contact and emotional repair.

Kohut (1972) similarly emphasises the importance of understanding the self-object needs of the client. Yet while Kohut champions empathy as a method of inquiry, Erskine builds upon it

by emphasising attunement as a healing process—a responsiveness that includes emotional, somatic, and relational dimensions. Clear account

Attunement According to Erskine

Erskine's concept of "attunement" is an important aspect of his philosophical and psychological work, particularly in the realm of psychotherapy and relational dynamics. Attunement, as understood by Erskine et al. (1999), refers to a deep, empathic connection where the therapist is not only empathetic but also finely tuned to the client's internal experiences, emotional states, and needs. This goes beyond traditional empathy in several ways:

2. **Depth of Connection**: While empathy involves understanding and sharing the feelings of another person, attunement requires a more profound connection. Attunement involves being fully present with the client, perceiving subtle emotional cues, and responding in a way that resonates with the client's inner experiences. It's about being emotionally in sync with the client, allowing the therapist to respond in a way that is genuinely aligned with the client's needs.
3. **Mutual Influence**: Attunement is not just a one-way process where the therapist understands the client; it also involves a dynamic interaction where both the therapist and client influence each other. This mutual influence allows for a more adaptive and responsive therapeutic process, where the therapist's understanding of the client is continually refined and deepened.
4. **Beyond Cognitive Understanding**: Empathy can often be seen as a cognitive process, where the therapist intellectually understands the client's feelings. Attunement, however, goes beyond this to include an affective and often non-verbal connection. It involves the therapist's ability to resonate with the client on a non-

verbal level, picking up on body language, tone of voice, and other subtle cues that might not be consciously recognised.

5. **Holistic Engagement**: Attunement encompasses a holistic approach where the therapist is engaged with the whole person of the client—not just their emotions but their bodily experiences, thoughts, and relational dynamics. This holistic engagement allows the therapist to address deeper layers of the client's experience, leading to more profound therapeutic outcomes.
6. **Therapeutic Presence**: Erskine emphasises the importance of the therapist's presence in attunement. This presence is characterised by a mindful, non-judgmental, and accepting stance that allows the therapist to be fully open to the client's experience. It's through this presence that true attunement can occur, as the therapist is not just reacting to the client's words but is deeply engaged in the relational process.

Erskine's view of attunement thus represents a more nuanced and interactive approach to understanding and connecting with others, particularly in therapeutic contexts. It is a dynamic, ongoing process that requires the therapist to be deeply engaged with the client's entire being, allowing for more effective and transformative therapeutic interventions.

An accurate understanding. This would be enhanced if you could give some small, perhaps hypothetical examples to illustrate and ground these points which at the moment are rather abstract and seem a little unprocessed.

Personal Experience: Empathy, Attunement, and the Scars of Childhood

My own experience in therapy has shown me the difference between being empathised with and being attuned to. One episode from my childhood stands out:

I was around thirteen years of age. Our house required a new driveway for the car we were getting. Over the course of weeks, I helped out with a sledge hammer, smashing up hard

core. I enjoyed this work as it seemed that with every swing I got stronger and became more the boy that my father wanted: more manly, fitter, more ‘normal’. Once the hardcore was done came the job of hand-mixing the concrete. We could not afford a cement mixer, so did this work day after day to make the concrete. Once we had put the concrete over the hardcore came the job of levelling the concrete. The two of us would bounce a large beam to smooth out the concrete. Eventually the drive was complete. We went to get my mother, we were admiring it. We turned to admire the garden. I stepped backwards. I looked down. I had stepped in the wet concrete leaving a footprint. I stepped forward. My dad saw what had happened. He picked up his shovel and his face filled with anger and rage.

I ran as hard as I could and just in time jumped. The shovel struck me, while I was in mid-air, on the ankle. My mother and I retreated to my bedroom to hide and clean the wound, while my father raged outside. I sobbed, terrified.

In therapy, revisiting this event—especially standing up to demonstrate the step—became a deeply moving moment. My therapist did not simply sympathise or intellectually understand. She sat with me in the feelings, noticing my body, tone, and pacing. Together we explored whether the punishment was “just,” as I had long believed. With her attunement, I moved from believing I deserved it to knowing I did not. Her presence allowed for a reprocessing of trauma, enabling a shift from shame to dignity.

As part of the examination a curiously non-empathic word, my therapist asked whether my father had shown empathy. I sat there frozen for several moments as I mentally checked back over my life and realised that I had never seen him show empathy to me or anyone else. As we examined this further, I was able to come to the conclusion that his harshness had not been my fault, it was his. My head screamed with joy, “It was not my fault.” My father’s extreme reaction to my mistake was not my fault, it was not something that I had deserved.

Living inside the situation on my own, I had not been able to see this.

John Dray

I mentioned to a fellow student that I had just realised, in the last few weeks, that my father had no empathy. Her face dropped and she said that she had realised that fact two years ago from our group process. For me, this signalled how an attuned, empathetic therapist or friend can see things that the client cannot. On the other hand, if my colleague had told me, “your father clearly has no empathy”, when she realised then I would have probably taken exception to her rather than accepting her analysis. Honest and moving examples from your experience.

This brings me to the twin concepts of chronos and kairos. They are both Greek terms for time, but chronos refers to the passing of time (e.g. chronograph) whereas kairos refers to the right time (e.g. the predator waited for the right time to pounce on its prey). I am imagining that my therapist had spotted my father’s lack of empathy from early in our therapeutic journey, or even from the way I walked into the room. Part of the attunement of my therapist was waiting eight years for the kairos - the auspicious moment when I was ready to examine my father’s lack of empathy. Good point, which could be linked with Erskine’s discussion of pacing as one element of attunement.

Another example, from my own practice: I was working with a client and towards the end of a session they became very enthusiastic about a technique that I had suggested we try together at the next session. When the next session arrived they had no enthusiasm for it at all. Would it be empathetic to still proceed with the treatment? Would it be attuned to their needs to proceed with the treatment? To my mind, the answer to both questions was a resounding ‘no’. If I had proceeded with the technique I would be fulfilling my agenda, rather than listening to the needs of the client. Particularly with clients who have been coerced or forced into an act to which they did not consent, it would have not only expressed a lack of attunement, but could potentially put the course of therapy into reverse gear, and even be thought unethical. Good discussion, well linked to the subject. I wonder whether you were able to explore this shift in their enthusiasm?

John Dray

Empathy, Attunement, and Misattunement in Practice

Attunement and empathy are not only about therapeutic repair —it they are also about connecting to the other. In a recent fishbowl exercise, I served as therapist to someone who showed few discernible facial cues. As the therapy proceeded I found that I did not have clues as to what was going on for the client. I felt deeply destabilised. Instead of slowing down, leant into self-disclosure as a misguided attempt to build connection. This received sharp feedback, highlighted how my over-reliance on facial affect for empathy had left me unattuned to the client. With time and supervision, I learned to notice other somatic signals, such as breath or repetitive movement, and to trust these cues in addition to facial movement. Also, in group process, I attempt to discern what is going on 'in the room' without looking at the client: What is the tone of voice? Is there noticeable breathing? What sounds and smells are there? What is going on in my body? How am I feeling? Asking myself these questions is helping me build my ability to attune. As my experience increases, I am sure that I will add to these discernments. Valuable reflections and learning

Another example of attunement and empathy comes from when I was at primary school. The class was standing around in a circle. The teacher asked a question. She was used to me answering questions. I was excitedly putting my hand up. I needed to go to the loo. We were not allowed to go to the loo without putting our hand up first. The teacher refused to notice me because she wanted an answer from **any** other child. This went on for what seemed to be an eternity. Unable to hold on, and in a great deal of discomfort I wet myself there and then. Prior to that, assumptions were made, by the teacher, about what was going on for me and, through the rules of the class, I was muted to the extent that I became incontinent. I then received a lot of unwanted attention from the teacher as she helped clean up the mess. Her sympathy just brought attention to my embarrassment and I felt deep shame. Brave example, though I am not sure it is the clearest in terms of demonstrating an absence of empathy and attunement. It sounds like a miss at a quite literal level of meaning.

John Dray

Cross-Cultural and Ethical Reflections

Empathy and attunement are not culturally neutral. In group process with a colleague from a different cultural background, I found that while I viewed support as stoic perseverance, they experienced support as communal connection. Our efforts to 'understand' each other through verbal dialogue created more rupture. Yet in conversations focused on emotional expression rather than analysis, we "got" each other. This shift underscored D. E. M. Milton (2012) "double empathy problem": empathy requires a shared language of experience, and attunement demands a shared mode of communication. Can you give some brief examples to ground this? These could be invented whilst remaining in the mode of what you describe above, in order to preserve confidentiality.

Attunement can also feel unsafe. With one colleague, I perceived a coercive dynamic reminiscent of controlling relationships from my past. Though they are a capable counsellor with close friendships, I experience them as emotionally dangerous. In working with them I feel as if I am being led into a trap. I can empathise with their struggles—but I choose not to attune, for my own protection. In such cases, attunement is not merely a skill but a boundary decision. This is important for me to remember in my choice of clients. While there are some clients that I would not be therapeutically beneficial for, there are also some clients that would not be good for my own mental health. The process of attunement is a generous gift that opens one up. It is vitally important for me to understand that the safe environment of the therapy space must be safe for both me and the client. The giving, empathetic nature of psychotherapists can open them up to possibilities of early burnout. Very good point about boundaries and you own limits in relation to empathy and attunement. Clients with Narcissistic tendencies can invite confluence and, as you say, it is vital to maintain a sense of your own separateness whilst offering empathy and attunement eg through owning your subjectivity 'I feel x when you say y' for instance, or indeed, deciding not to work with some people. Or, as you suggest, perhaps this person also triggered your own relational trauma.

There are also ethical challenges when empathy is misused. As Hammel-Zabin (2003) documents, some individuals use empathic understanding manipulatively, including in the grooming behaviours of abusers. In her work, Hammel-Zabin (2003) details how a pedophile builds empathetic connections with their victims and chooses child-victims who do not receive much empathy in their lives from family and friends. The result is chilling. In my work with adults who were sexually abused as children, there seems to be a universal feature that as children they did not have safe adults to turn to. The abuser filled this void as an empathetic adult. Empathy without ethics can be a tool for immense harm. Absolutel. And linked to the point above.

Attunement Across Therapeutic Approaches

Attunement appears across many modalities, not just those influenced by Erskine. In *person-centred therapy*, attunement is central to unconditional positive regard and congruence Rogers (1957). In *emotionally focused therapy*, it supports restructuring attachment bonds Johnson (2020). In *somatic therapies*, attunement includes bodily cues like breath and movement Levine & Maté (2010). In *mindfulness-based therapies*, attunement is about non-judgmental presence Kabat-Zinn (2003).

In *relational therapy*, attunement is a co-constructed process. Mitchell (1988) and Schore (2009) emphasise that attunement is mutual, non-verbal, and physiological. Winnicott (1965/1990) describes the “holding environment” as dependent on attuned care. Erskine (2015); Erskine et al. (1999) builds on these ideas to argue that attunement can form a reparative dyad between therapist and client—reworking the uncompleted tasks of early relational development. This is a good summary but feels a bit like a list, and could do with unpacking a little to show your involvement in thinking about the differences and similarities in terms of how attunement is understood and used within these modalities.

John Dray

For me, the concept of “communion” resonates strongly. As a former parish priest with Holy Communion at the heart of the practice, I recall Maundy Thursday services (Church of England, 2006) where the language shifts from “on the night he was betrayed” to “on *this* night, the night when he was betrayed.” The ritual re-enacted the past to transform it and in some sense bring it into the present. This allows the congregation to take part in the emotion and drama of that night, and bring that understanding to their spiritual journey. Therapy, at its best, does something similar: not a literal return to the past, but a re-enactment in the present that allows healing, re-interpretation, re-processing. In relational therapy, this is facilitated by empathy and attunement. Interesting reference

Empathy, Attunement, and the Politics of Practice

Despite its transformative potential, attunement is resource-heavy and difficult to measure. Changed facilitated in an attuned relationship takes time and money. Public health systems often favour short-term, protocol-driven models like CBT (*Psychological Therapies, Annual Report on the Use of IAPT Services, 2021-22*, 2023). Some digital programmes, like Deprexis, show statistical improvement (Lopes et al., 2023), yet offer no human resonance at all. This raises difficult questions: is a measurable but superficial intervention better than an attuned relationship available to only a few?

(Berne, 1964/1996) posed the question: “Would you rather be a happy frog or the prince you could be?” It is a metaphor that applies equally to therapy. Do we offer tools for symptom relief or journeys toward transformation? I would suggest ideally both—but the reality of finite resources forces compromises. Useful, socially contextual points.

Conclusion

Erskine’s assertion that attunement is more than empathy challenges us to consider the depth and presence required in therapeutic work. Empathy involves understanding;

attunement involves being-with. Empathy can be delivered from a distance; attunement requires risk, responsiveness, and resonance.

As a trainee, I have found this distinction transformative—both in my own healing and in my growing capacity to be present for others. Attunement requires that I be grounded in my own safety, sensitive to others' communication, and willing to stay with ambiguity and pain. It is not always comfortable, but it is often where the healing happens. It is only in the context of loving the work and loving the other that this is even possible.

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