

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist, both shaped by histories of emotional withdrawal and self-sufficiency. Starting with a humanistic and integrative rationale, it considers how avoidant attachment patterns emerge in therapy, and what becomes possible when two people well-versed in distance begin to risk emotional contact.

The literature review traces the development of attachment theory from its psychoanalytic roots through to contemporary perspectives in neuroscience, embodied practice, and mentalisation theory. Key themes include the neurobiological underpinnings of avoidant strategies, adult manifestations of avoidance in therapeutic contexts, and the relational subtleties of working with clients who defend against vulnerability. Attention is also given to cultural and intersectional considerations, and the need for more inclusive, somatically informed, and socially attuned approaches.

A case study methodology is used to examine clinical work with a client presenting with high self-reliance and emotional detachment. The therapeutic process is analysed through a relational lens, highlighting mutual patterns of avoidance, moments of intersubjective movement, and the slow building of trust and emotional contact. Amongst other themes, it reflects on how meaningful relational depth can be co-created, not by bypassing avoidance, but by meeting it with presence, patience, and authenticity.

Ultimately, this is an exploration of what happens - and what heals - when two avoidant nervous systems meet in a space designed for connection.