

THE PRACTICE OF ATTENTION IN THE WORKPLACE

Phenomenological Accounts of Lived Experience

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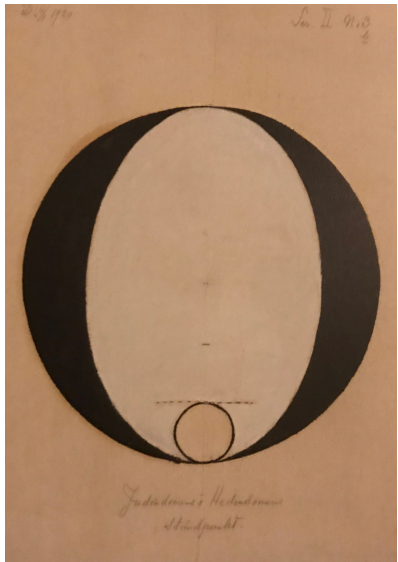
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*To Fellow travellers,
who had their Courage, Trust and Love beaten out of them
but kept on walking the Path regardless,
Sometimes, the impossible is possible*

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Abstract

In this very moment, our attention is being captured, tracked and traded as a commodity in the commercial market. As a global community, we are facing one of the most serious cultural crises of our time yet we are too distracted to be aware of it and for that simple reason we are ill-prepared to deal with its consequences. This is the challenging landscape of the *Attention Economy* where managers are expected to make responsible, ethical decisions every day and where organisations are fighting a battle to maintain focus on what matters. This reality is the backdrop of this study and the environment in which I explore what a deliberate practice of attention means for the development of self and others in the workplace.

I present a case for why a conscious engagement with attention is essential for management learning and how the development of a deliberate practice plays an important role for human self-transformation and connection to purpose. It starts with a review of historic and contemporary academic literature on different aspects of attention and proceeds to present the findings of an eighteen-month longitudinal study comprising the stories of ten managers as they explore their emerging practice of attention in the context of everyday life. A five-year record of autoethnographic accounts weaves through the research and reveals that not only is a regular, rigorous self-examination a necessary condition for maintaining a deliberate practice of attention – the deliberate practice of attention is a necessary condition for being on a path to self-knowledge. In exploring the epistemic significance of attention, this study reconstructs the bridge between *attention* and *ethics* – a connection that, in light of our current situation, is far too rarely made explicit.

This study is, itself, an exercise in attention practice. Through the reflexive engagement with the literature, the lived experience of the participants and the autoethnographic accounts, the reader is invited to experience the phenomenology of being on a path to self-knowledge by attending to attention in a deliberate manner. This research is a contribution to management learning and a call for a new ethics of attention in which managers develop ways of choosing and discerning to what and to whom they attend as they go about their daily lives in the workplace.

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1. Introduction

Narratives about the world have changed since this study began in 2014, but it would seem that we struggle to change with them. We are still far from understanding what it means to be in the midst of a climate emergency and we seem largely unwilling to accept the very real possibility of societal collapse. We no longer recognise the political, financial and social infrastructures we were brought up to rely on and contribute to in this part of the world because they no longer tell us stories of certainty and safety.

Only the other day, a young woman was asking herself, in my presence, why she should bother making plans for the future. About to start University, she wondered whether this would be the best use of her time seeing as global Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2019) are now unlikely to be realised. As some world leaders continue to turn the blind eye, it seems to be glaringly obvious to the younger population that unless we shift our attention from *individual wealth creation* to *collective health¹ creation*, the radical changes that are so desperately needed are out of our reach.

The issue is that most of the time it seems we are not in charge of what we give attention to. Rather than being a free consent based exchange between humans and their environments, our attention has become a commodity – a product that is considered to be in scarce supply and thus, the most valuable asset on the market today (Williams, 2017; Harris, 2019).

1.1. The Problem of Attention

Welcome to the *attention economy* where attention *fracking* is a thing, where our attentional behaviours are captured, tracked and traded (Zuboff, 2019) and where it is unapologetically promoted that the *extraction* of attention represents the largest investment opportunity in the next decade (Attention Capital, 2019). This is the landscape within which senior managers find themselves and from which we expect them to make ethical decisions with integrity and authenticity – this is the laboratory of my inquiry and the rationale for its current legitimacy.

If we decide to ignore the impact of attentional capture and leave the issue unaddressed, our everyday reality will continue to pose a risk to our faculties of discernment and, inevitably, to our conscience (Skewes, 2016). The new normal in workplace experience is a depressing

¹ I will not be defining 'health' but simply point to its origin in Old English *hælh* from the original Germanic meaning Whole (The New Oxford American Dictionary, 2019)

absence of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2009) and lack of mastery – there is a dearth of the kind of competence that only comes with patient practice and the *stretching* of our concentration span (Crawford, 2015). After a day in the office, dominated by digital overstimulation, mental fragmentation and physical inertia, we are struggling to restore our shattered attention and we may feel so exhausted that we cannot but surrender to the welcome distraction of another pixelated world of virtual friendships – *friends* that are too distant to provide us with any real support and challenge yet close enough to satisfy our inborn need for recognition (Miller, 1997) and our natural predisposition to build communities that we can tell stories about (Harari, 2015).

So if we want those who come after us to have a future in which they have the *option* and the *faculties* to make moral choices, scholars and practitioners engaged in management learning have an urgent decision to make about whether to continue perpetuating a culture of *captured attention* or whether to develop and promote a *deliberate practice of attention*.

1.2. The Practice of Attention

This study is about how we attend, what we attend to, and the stories we tell about it. It is a tribute to the senior managers and their colleagues who gave time to be co-researchers in this study and explore what a deliberate practice of attention means for the development of self and others in the workplace.

In what follows, I present a case for why a conscious engagement with attention is essential for management learning and how the development of a practice of attention plays an important role in human self-transformation and connection to purpose. I start by reviewing historic and contemporary academic literature on different aspects of attention and proceed to present the findings of an eighteen-month longitudinal study comprising the stories of ten senior managers as they explore their practice of attention in the context of everyday life.

A five-year record of autoethnographic accounts weaves through the research and reveals that not only is a regular, rigorous self-examination (Hadot, 2004) a necessary condition for maintaining a deliberate practice of attention – the deliberate practice of attention is a necessary condition for being on a path to self-knowledge. I explore the notion of being on such a path and investigate through case studies what may be the impact on senior managers and organisations of deciding either way. I am inquiring into the epistemic significance of attention (Wu, 2010) and in so doing, I am reconstructing a bridge between attention and

ethics – a connection that seems to have been lost, forgotten or perhaps ignored, for too long (ibid.).

First and foremost, however, this study is a contribution from practitioners to their peers. As we sat together to share practice – senior managers all deeply engaged in cooperative inquiry – we agreed that each individual must be prepared to be a role model for the change they want to bring about in the workplace. We need the courage to take steps and risks equally, for we can no longer justify supporting or promoting cultures in which stress and mental health issues dominate the lives of our colleagues and where endless distraction from vision, purpose and mastery undermines our connection to self, others and the world. As a global community, we are facing issues that demand the highest quality of attention but the environments in which most senior managers spend the majority of their waking hours are not – in most cases explored here – conducive to the giving and receiving of high quality attention. Without effort and commitment to change, things will simply remain as they are. So what can we do?

This study found that the attention of senior managers is all too often captured by fear-based inner states, such as unrealistic expectations, the imposter syndrome or lack of self-confidence. Such states dictate our responses and reactions in the workplace and without attention, they begin to influence decisions and actions. As we will explore, the deliberate practice of attention has the potential to bring to awareness the stories that inform these states and the careful deconstruction of negative narratives liberates attention from capture. Free of self-limiting beliefs, senior managers may develop the courage to take decisions and action that challenge the status quo and become the role models we so desperately need.

Equally, this research revealed that in the lives of middle managers, attention is commonly captured by external demands, such as the relentless management of risks, compliance and responding to the, sometimes, challenging behaviours of superiors. Middle managers driven by competing external demands are at risk of losing connection to their teams and their sense of purpose in the organisation. This study has discovered that a deliberate practice of attention can offer new ways of consciously navigating those competing demands, reconnect middle managers with a sense of purpose and, over time, cultivate inroads to wise practice.

1.2.1. Being, Being *Without* and *Being With*

When I started my own journey as a senior manager, I quickly realised that it was my *way of being* that was of the essence, rather than anything I knew or did. From that moment on, I concluded that management practice is not about knowing what happens next – it is about

being ready to take responsibility for self and others in the face of uncertainty. My growing interest in *management practice in uncertainty* and *being without* inspired me to conduct this study under the supervision of the particular team to whom I give my thanks above. This research journey has taught me a further lesson, however: it is not enough to work on ways of *being* or *being without*, we need to develop multiple ways of *being with*.

In the context of this inquiry, attention is the phenomenon of *being with*. The deliberate practice of *being with* requires of us that we learn to discern and realise conscientious ways of giving and receiving attention in each moment. As we will discover, this demands of us that we do indeed develop the capability of *being without* (French and Simpson, 2015) and that we do not immediately seek certitude over truth – even if it means that we need to let go of our favourite narratives about what we think we know. We will be investigating how *attention* and *intention* interweave and why reflective and reflexive practices are the keystones that support the attitudinal infrastructure required to make moral choices.

Attention, I propose, is a *privilege* that is given or received by consent, not imposed or captured, tracked, traded and exploited. We will be exploring how a deliberate practice of attention must seek its moral justification in the development of *an ethical attitude of consent* (Weil, 1952) and how we must hold ourselves to account in our practice at all times.

1.2.2. A Study of *What*, not *Whether*

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study set out below, I remain clear about my position on the immense urgency with which we need to introduce the deliberate practice of attention in the workplace and in management learning. With this statement, I have named a bias. I call it a bias despite the fact that I set out to explore *what* a deliberate practice of attention means for the development of self and others in the workplace, not *whether* a practice of attention has any value. It is a bias only because my journey with senior management practice prior to this study showed me what a deliberate practice of attention did for *me in my context*. But it has remained an open question for me throughout as to whether mine was a unique case and whether other senior managers would tell different stories or, indeed, share experiences that aligned with mine.

Thus, this has been a true research journey without prejudice or assumptions about exactly what a conscious attention practice might entail for other people undertaking it and how it impacts on the people, places and purposes they serve. The findings were often unexpected and the research has expanded and enriched my own understanding of attention and its

potential. It has multiplied the ways in which we can speak about its practice among peers but also in the managing, educating and consulting in which we are all engaged beyond the inquiry itself.

In my dedication, I claim that *sometimes, the impossible is possible* and I name this study as evidence for my claim. Those who have witnessed this process will validate that I have completed it against the odds from the outset. This inquiry has survived several deaths in the family and at work, an economic downturn and the risk of bankruptcy, a restructure and a powerful turnaround followed by a process of steady recovery; it has survived illness and depression, financial and political impacts of Brexit, the opening of a new international office, the launch of several new courses, the departure of long-serving senior colleagues in the team and the transformation to a *distributed leadership* model in the organisation I work for. I made several attempts to go on study leave during the last five years, but the only time it happened was a three-week period in January 2017. This turned out to be a seminal time, however, where I found the methods for engaging with the data and analysed most of it. I wrote a series of autoethnographic accounts during this time that turned out to be essential to getting to the heart of the matter of attention and its significance. Otherwise, I simply continued in a full time executive role with all that this entails. This brings me to two insights that I want to share before we begin:

- I have completed this study *because* of these unfavourable circumstances, not *despite* them. I serve in a team of dedicated and courageous people, committed to making a positive contribution to the great story of this world. It is the sense of shared purpose and meaning that I find when we work together that has powered this process beyond what felt humanly possible at times and it is the gift of attention from every student, client and collaborator that has inspired it.

- I would be nowhere without a deliberate practice of attention. This study will explain why.

1.2.3. Contributions

This study makes a number of contributions to knowledge. The first is to highlight the emergence of the attention economy and its growing impact on our attentional freedom (Williams, 2017, 2017a). This calls for the development of new faculties that can safeguard our capacities for discernment, flow and mastery in the workplace (Crawford, 2015; Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2009). The alarming absence of attentional consent (Weil, 1952, 2000; Zuboff, 2019) has meant that the quality of our moral, social, strategic and

operational engagement with decisions and actions suffers the consequences of our mental fragmentation. Difficult to avoid, hard to control and, once adopted, so very challenging to overcome, this fractured inner state is at risk of becoming the *new normal* in the workplace.

This lack of awareness is not confined to society at large and a second major contribution of this study is to the field of management learning. There is currently precious little recognition of the vital importance of attention in the context of the *cultural crisis of values* (Crawford, 2015) that we have co-created and it staggers me that a field as critical to society as management learning is not representing one of the loudest voices in the emerging debate. Whilst Ramsey (2014) suggested that *practice-centred learning* involves “a considered and developing process of choice as to where and how to attend” (p. 10), five years have now passed and subsequent scholarly literature in the field, and the corresponding developments in the education of managers, leaves us *no* wiser as to what a deliberate practice of attention might entail in management learning and in the day-to-day reality of the workplace.

This study therefore situates the deliberate practice of attention, its significance and the consequences of its absence, at the core of management learning. It responds to the absence of empirical evidence of how senior managers might develop a deliberate practice of attention and how they experience its impact on self and others in the workplace. It addresses the surprising and rather disturbing lack of theoretical contributions to the field and reacts to the deafening silence on what *a practice of attention* might bring to management learning today. It is therefore not merely a contribution to knowledge that I am making here, but a call to action.

A methodological contribution of this study is the importance of a consistent reflexive practice of attention, which is made visible through the autoethnographic accounts. In these intimate stories of my own transformative journey as a practitioner, the study is itself an exercise in the practice of attention as a step on the path to self-knowledge.

A further contribution relates to the epistemic significance of reflexivity. The form of the thesis is not merely a contribution to knowledge but an invitation to a deliberate practice of attention. The reader is invited to go on a personal journey with attention to discover the power, validity and ethical dimensions of its deliberate practice.

1.3. Overview

As a true *Bricoleur* (Levi-Strauss, 1966), and in honour of my *heritage craft*, this thesis is structured rather like a piece of music. It comprises four main movements that each present a number of principal themes. At the end of these themes is a *coda* – not to be confused with a conclusion in that a coda is not necessarily a summary but a set of concluding observations or remarks. Eight illustrations accompany the research and I explain below the rationale for my choice of this particular artist and how her work connects with the theme.

Section 2 is a review of historic and contemporary literature on attention, with a particular focus on the themes of embodiment, reflexivity and practical wisdom in the context of management learning. I end the review with an exploration of the role of attention in this field and ask a set of questions that will weave through the study.

Section 3 explains the rationale for the choice of methods and how first- and second-person perspectives were gathered and used as empirical data. This chapter also sets out ethical considerations, limitations and preconceptions in the study and explains how the findings from the fieldwork can be identified throughout.

Section 4 is the presentation of findings, analysis and discussion. This is the heart of the thesis and it is divided into three subchapters in which I focus on the phenomenology of attention, the practice of attention and the virtue of attention. Each subchapter offers a set of inquiries that are brought together in the concluding chapter.

Section 5 is the conclusion where I explore the wider implications of this work and discuss the findings in light of current world events and the situation in which we find ourselves now. I present some further questions that arose from the findings and look at what future research might entail.

Section 6 ends this study with an epilogue – an autoethnographic account – that offers in poetic prose a phenomenological account of lived experience of the practice of attention in a moment.

1.4. Illustrations

During this process, I realised that there were subtle wordless dimensions of the research that I needed to capture. My encounter with *Bricolage* as a method invited me to think holistically

about the findings in ways that I will be describing in detail below. Whilst the autoethnographic accounts are often poetic in nature, the inner imagery that has accompanied my engagement with attention demanded a visual expression in this study. I have therefore illustrated this work throughout with selected drawings and details of larger pieces by Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), a Swedish artist and mystic whose work spoke to me during the last phases of the research.

For me, Klint is the artistic response to the work of Simone Weil (1909-1943), whose study of the ethics of attention has inspired this inquiry. My experience is that Klint echoes visually the enigma and mystery of attention that Weil expresses textually and poetically (Weil, 1952). Klint had a life-long interest in the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of what art could express. Convinced that her contemporaries would not comprehend it, she kept her abstract and esoteric work hidden during her own lifetime.

Her works of art, she believed, belonged to the future and would only be understood by the public when the time was right. Klint's vision was that her art would then be able to contribute to the consciousness of people and influence society. By the time she died, Klint had produced well over a thousand non-figurative paintings that had never been shown to outsiders and more than one hundred and twenty-five notebooks and sketchbooks were found. In her will, she expressed that the works should not be made public for twenty years and that the collection should never be split (Hilma af Klint Foundation, 2019).

I deliberately offer no captions or explanations with the images but leave them to dialogue with the attention of the audience.

All images are exclusively from the work of Müller-Westermann and Widoff (2013).



Photo of Hilma af Klint (Müller-Westermann and Widoff, 2013)

2. Attention in Literature

Positioned within the field of management learning and its application, this study aims to explore an understanding of the individual experience of attention that is anchored in practice. I do not, therefore, set out to explain attention but rather explore the phenomenology of its practice within the particular context of the workplace.

Whilst there are very few examples of literature in management learning that address this theme directly, in this review, I will demonstrate how work on *embodiment*, *reflexivity* and *practical wisdom* all point to a practice of attention *by implication*. Looking at scholarly works that go a step towards assigning a particular role to attention, I find no shortage of reasons why a practice of attention is necessary but little indication as to what such a practice might look like. I go on to explore a more fine-grained understanding of attention and conclude that when we go beyond the familiar territory of focused attention, it becomes necessary to challenge common conceptual frameworks. It is in some ancient literature on self-knowledge and in Simone Weil's ethics of attention that we find more detailed accounts of practice. However, the ontological foundations for those metatheories may stand in the way of ready adoption by a contemporary audience. Ocasio (2011) reminds us that "a key difficulty in comparing research on attention is that the research relies on both different metatheories and different definitions [...] of the construct of attention itself." (p. 1286). Before exploring the literature on attention within management learning, it is important, therefore, to acknowledge the landscape of the wider attention debate and the growing interest in attention as a distinct focus of study within the literatures of philosophy of mind, psychology and neuroscience. At the same time, we have the opportunity to expand the vocabulary of attention by taking inspiration from the science and philosophy of attention.

I am mindful of the importance of context when borrowing concepts from other fields of research. In management learning – as with other fields – our terminology of attention is, for the most part, situated squarely within the territory of folk psychology. Folk psychology can be said to provide an account of what we all think attention is, "that thing that people talk of 'paying' or 'shifting', that is 'caught' by things or is 'attracted' to things" (Doughney, 2013, p. 29) and which provides a quick intuitive answer to the question *what is attention?*

Recognising the issues that may arise when we are dealing with the indefinable, our focus in this study is on *the practice of attention in the workplace* and attention is therefore explored in the context of a selection of accounts of lived experience from the perspective of managers in the day-to-day.

2.1. The Attention Debate in Context

Whilst recognising the major contribution and influence of Buddhism, it is in neuroscience, psychology and philosophy of mind that a more nuanced and specific language of attention has developed in recent years. The science of attention has moved forward considerably since James famously said:

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence [...] (James, 1890/1981, p. 403-404)

We face deeper issues when referring to attention in different contexts. Scholars in the Buddhist traditions, for example, point out the dangers of aggregating into one class the multitudinous phenomena of consciousness that we, in this part of the world, simply call attention (Ganeri, 2017). We also need to consider the statement that “any field of study where you cannot define the subject of study is not yet a mature field of study (Sarvapriyananda, 2018).

When we look at the contemporary scholarly debates on attention (Arvidson, 2003; French and Simpson, 2014; Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008; Ganeri, 2017; Wallace, 2006; Watzl, 2011; Wu, 2014) we find an overwhelming plethora of conflicting views. Indeed, as Watzl states, “[...] the opinion that there might not be a unified subject matter in the study of attention is now widespread among scientists” (2010, p. 13). Allport (1993) states that “there is no one uniform computational function, or mental operation [...] to which all so-called attentional phenomena can be attributed (p. 203) but Watzl (2010) asks whether the implication then is that attention is a phenomenon that is shared experientially – at least to a large extent – yet neurophysiologically incommensurable? (p.13) Already in 1898, Groos stated that there are no generally recognised answers but various attempts to find solutions “even diverge in the most disturbing manner” (Wu, 2014, p. 4/loc. 280).

All this begs the question of whether it makes sense at all to talk of attention as a single phenomenon. Watzl (2011) offers a helpful taxonomy of attention, which demonstrates the point effectively. He proposes that, overall, we can position contemporary theories of attention between a reductionist and a non-reductionist pole. Reductionist theories of attention include, but are not limited to, the following:

The Perceptual Filter Model – attention is the function that controls what “[...] perceptual information reaches higher cognitive processes or higher brain areas like the pre-frontal cortex” (Watzl, 2011, p.845)

The Feature Binding Model – attention binds together the various features that are otherwise processed separately as features of the same object

The Biased Competition Model – attention can be identified with the neural competition mechanism that is biased by high-level cognitive input: “[...] brain processes compete for resource, as well as for control” (ibid). According to the biased competition model, the strength of the competing (sensory) representations is influenced by feedback from higher brain areas that represent the subject’s goals, interests, emotional states, etc.” (p. 846).

On the non-reductionist end of the spectrum, Watzl sets out the following important distinctions –

Focal vs. global or distributed attention – where the former is narrowly directed at a particular object or event, while the second spreads over a scene as a whole

On-off attention vs. *degrees* of attention – where in the first case you either focus attention on something or not, while in the second case you focus attention on various objects to various degrees.

Voluntary vs. involuntary attention – where the first is controlled by the subject’s intentions and goals (and in this sense an intentional action) whereas the latter occurs without such intentional or voluntary control (e.g. when attention is grabbed by a salient stimulus)

Exogenous vs. endogenous attention: where the first is controlled by a stimulus, while the second is internally controlled.

Perceptual vs. executive (or central) attention – where the former consists in prioritizing certain perceptual inputs, whereas the latter is a central processing capacity

A few examples of non-reductionist theories include:

The Selection for Action View (initially presented by Allport and Neumann and in Wu, 2014) – claims that attention is a personal-level activity. Attention is here regarded as the solution to

the famous Many-Many Problem (see Wu 2011b, 2011c). In order to act at all, you must select a specific path through the behaviour space. According to Wu (2014), it is the “selection of some (input) item so as to act on it” (Watzl, 2011, p. 849). Attention, he says, “should be identified with the processes involved in selecting a specific input to inform a specific response” (ibid.). Wu furthermore states about the Selection for Action View that it is “[...] the best hope of imposing unity and organization on the theory of attention” (Wu, 2014, loc. 329).

Structuralism or the *Structuring View* forms the basis for Watzl’s most prominently positioned theory of attention. He states that attending to something “consists in the mental activity of structuring one’s stream of consciousness (so that some parts of it are more central than others)” (2011, p.849) And he continues:

[A]ttention is the mental activity of structuring the stream of consciousness
According to the structuring view, the nature of attention implies, on the one hand, a certain form of holism about the mental: relations between the parts of our conscious mental life are as important as the intrinsic features of various mental states. On the other hand, the account also implies that agency and conscious experience are more closely connected than has often been assumed. (ibid)

On this note, I want to leave Watzl’s overview and look briefly at the work of O’Shaughnessy (2002) who argues a very similar point. For O’Shaughnessy, the phenomenon of attention is a system of experiences that are *present in the mind at any given moment, or across time* – “‘Experiential Consciousness’ as one might call it, ‘Consciousness’ in one sense of the word, none other than the ‘Stream of Consciousness’ of literary fame” (p. 291).

He argues that attention provides a psychic space of awareness – a system of present experiences, which he calls Experiential Consciousness. Another function of attention, according to O’Shaughnessy, is that of bringing “[...] certain phenomenal existents to consciousness” (p. 293). He explains that each experience occupies attention, that is, it occupies a piece of the same *something* and this *something* is not a distinct space that is created for each experience to take place. This *something* is a *system*; a system of experiences. The experiences of the moment form a system and he argues that this system *is* attention. O’Shaughnessy further describes how experiences come to this system and exist within the system alongside each other. He also explains attention as a *circle of awareness* and experiences as the *objects* of this circle. Important to this picture is that it is liberated from the law of limitation (that we have a finite amount of attention available to us) but not the principle of distribution (meaning that we constantly administer a distribution process of the capacity for attention that is available to us at any given time) (ibid.).

O'Shaughnessy makes an interesting link between attention and perception. He states: "Perception is an attentive event [...] it is the attention finding the object" (p. 292). Further on he goes on to say that attention – representing the two functions mentioned above – is not diverse functions of diverse phenomena but rather diverse functions of a unitary phenomenon.

Ganeri (2017) explores the immense contribution that Buddhist scholars have made to this field. Where so many theories of attention here described are full of 'bottlenecks', competition, capacity-limitation, and bias, Ganeri argues that the Buddhist theory of attention represented in the *Abhidhamma* section of the Pali Canon of attention is rich, complex and almost free of the above. As an active contribution to consciousness, attention divides into two functions: 1) bringing-to-mind, or single-minded placing, or conscious rehearsal and 2) effortful control. Cognitive modules, he states, process "sensory content throughout a cognitive hierarchy from initial stimulus through to manipulation in working memory" (p. 64).

Ganeri describes the different functions of attention in perceptual experience as *attentional placing* (for example, centring on a leaf and eliminating distractions) and *attentional focusing* (focusing on the properties of that leaf). Attentional placing is about placing an object in the centre of the mind and Ganeri explains how this may be achieved by narrowing the attention window whereas one may achieve the retaining by expanding the object to fill one's field of attention. The former can be understood as absorption, the latter, mindful attention. Ganeri states:

A recognition of exactly this distinction is what motivates the Buddhist claim that attention has two roles in conscious experience, a role having to do with placing and non-wavering and a role to do with bringing an object to mind (p. 109).

He also argues that a third aspect of attention is to have "a coordinating role [...] in marshalling all the cognitive resources onto the object" (p. 66).

Ganeri offers an interesting perspective in his 'Attention as a Rod' example. This example explains the notions of endogenous and exogenous attention, seeing these as forming a continuum rather than as unconnected separate opposite states. The world at one end can tug or capture it (the exogenous attention end) and the self at the other end (the endogenous attention end) can manipulate the attention by paying, or 'directing', it. Ganeri argues that one should not consider attention "a 'spotlight' that the self shines onto the world via the senses but as a 'hard link' between the world and the senses" (p. 165). Thinking about attention in this way, we are therefore not talking of two kinds of attention, but two kinds of control that attention is subject to.

We will return later to Ganeri when exploring attention in the context of knowledge and belief. For now, we will move on to look at a theory of attention that promotes this as a dynamic, differentiating activity. In so doing, we are entering deeper into the field of phenomenology with Arvidson (2003a) who, in his *Lexicon of Attention*, presents a creative interpretation of the work of Aron Gurwitsch (a student of Husserl) who said that the field of attention is “a dynamic tension of transformations of content involving dimensional organization principles [...] and transformation principles” (p. 99). The position he advocates is most evocatively described as follows,

On the whole, attention is not like a waltz. It is more like a variable dance with an eclectic-minded DJ – a dance at which the musical content and activities transform frequently – styles (waltz, jazz, polka, hip-hop), tempo (allegro, andante), partners (alone, group, triad), gyrations (twist, hop, lean, step), and so on. (2003a, p. 201)

Arvidson (1996, 2003a), Ganeri (2017), O’Shaughnessy (2002), Watzl (2010, 2011, 2011a) and Wu (2014) collectively offer extensive guidance on where the current debate on attention has come to. Before we leave this to look at the wider attention debate, I want to introduce a concept that I will freely borrow from Philosophy of Mind and which will feature prominently in this study.

Wu (2014) introduced me to the idea of *captured attention* in his in-depth study of this phenomenon. I refer to Wu above in connection with his defence of the Selection for Action view and it is this view that informs his argument with respect to attentional capture.

Attentional capture, according to Wu, is driven by “cases where there are sudden changes in one’s mental state in respect to an object (or feature)” (loc. 1957-1968); this may be a loud sound, for example, or “a swooping bird, a fragrant smell [...] or a disturbing thought” (ibid.) Attention moves from *not* having to *having* mental states directed at the object. This suggests that “an action that is automatically driven by the suddenly appearing stimulus is an input-output coupling that can be contrary to the subject’s current intention” (ibid.). Wu explores this in some depth and his positioning of attentional capture in relation to intention is important for this study, providing a helpful bridge to the following review of literature within the field of management learning and how this contributes to the practice of attention in the workplace.

The importance of Wu’s contribution to captured attention is the opportunity that I have to take hold of my attention by bringing it to awareness. In doing so, I can make it subject to an intention – that is to say, it becomes voluntary attention (Watzl, 2011). Then, I can make

choices about what I want to attend to. Attentional capture exists only as an experience as far as I am aware of it happening. And it is from that starting point that I am able then to apply my will to control and make conscious choices with, my attention.

The history of the attention debate takes us from Antiquity to neuroscience but might we consider whether we are in fact entering a time of neo-pragmatism where we, as Skewes (2016) states “dare to talk about attention in terms of agency again and where executive function is not just computational processes but attention as something that fires our agency” (40:00). He makes a strong case for the significance of attending to attention and proposes that an individual’s perception informs how an understanding of the world is constructed and continues:

If you can control my attention, you can control what sort of world I construct – my beliefs, desires and actions. If I control my attention I can enhance my freedom relative to other people’s control (40:10)

Skewes argues that attention is a gateway to accessing the world of others – even their actions. If we understand attention in this way, it suggests that this is an area in which there is a call for a level of moral awareness and accountability and that in turn suggests that the development of a practice of attention is not only an option for managers but also a moral responsibility.

2.2. Attention in Management Learning

In light of the wider attention debate outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that most of the literature we currently find in management learning raises more questions about the practice of attention than it answers. With a few exceptions where the importance of an actual practice of attention is addressed explicitly, we find mostly pointers to the significance of a practice of attention *by implication*. The practice of attention, however, goes beyond a consideration of attention as a phenomenon based on an assumed capacity for focusing the mind and this assumption limits attention to a type and overlooks the tokens (Wetzel, 2018). A practice of attention entails reflexivity and a conscious engagement with the different ways in which we can administer attention in a deliberate and contextual manner.

In this section, I am looking at literature in the field of management learning that speaks of a practice of attention *by implication* and by that I mean that the ideas explored *imply* – necessitates, in some cases – a practice of attention but do not make this explicit. In this context, I explore contributions on the role of embodiment and reflexivity in management

learning as a steppingstone to engaging directly with the phenomenology of attention when we start looking at findings, where I will draw on this as a theoretical framework.

We then proceed to review the limited literature that makes the practice of attention *explicit* in the context of management learning and explore this against the backdrop of practical wisdom and implications for self-knowledge (Hadot, 1995).

This leads on to an investigation of the ethics of attention, where we will look beyond the literature of Management Learning. The crucial question of the ethics of attention gains prominence as we proceed and anchors the contributions of this study in one of the most challenging societal and cultural issues of our times.

2.2.1. Attention and Embodiment

Whilst the notions of embodiment in organisations (Witz, Halford, and Savage, 1996), body politics (Dale, 2001) and embodied leadership (Palmer and Crawford, 2013) are now finding their way into the management learning debate, we still largely investigate what Mackay, Zundel, and Alkir (2014) would call co-constructed human abstractions. This is the ‘meta-language of business’ (ibid.) that, hand in hand with the ‘body-as-organism’ view inherited from natural science, has given rise to implicit assumptions about the nature of the body. To a large extent, these assumptions are still shaping the discourse in the field today (Dale 2001). Embodiment, according to Dale,

[...] rejects the dualistic separation of subject and object along with the basis for this dichotomy – the Cartesian split between mind and body [...] The body has become *both* subject and object – knower and known, nature and culture (p. 11)

Without entering deeply into the world of Husserl’s phenomenology of embodiment, I do want to recognise in this context his epistemological perspective on *lived embodiment*, which makes it “not only a means of practical action but an essential part of the deep structure of knowing” (Behnke, 2018, no page).

Lived embodiment, in this sense, represents an epistemic contribution to our knowledge of the world (ibid.) and, taking up this invitation to challenge the subject/object split, we may wish to look with fresh eyes at the way so many organisations perpetuate the idea that the body is but a vehicle for the mind (Robinson, 2007). The layout of most office environments still promotes human beings in hunched over positions, attention captured by flickering screens, positioned in an environment that is dominated by artificial lighting and bad air quality. This reality of the modern day office, says Dale (2001), is predicated on the human as

‘resource’ – an institutionalisation of the division of body and mind for optimal production output. The implicit hierarchy represented here points to an organisational control culture where the body becomes a utilitarian object “animated by the indwelling mind” (p. 21). Whilst we have moved away from understanding the body merely in biological terms, Dale is clear that the Cartesian split still lies at the heart of the discourse within management learning and she proposes that this influences the theorising of management practice.

Hansen et al. (2007) bring the body and the emotions back into focus in their study of Aesthetic Leadership. They state:

Leadership is an embodied practice, but the presence of bodies has been taken for granted in organizational studies [...] few organizational theorists have taken up discussion on how bodies are conceptualized and attended to in organizations (p. 554).

They explain how “bodily leadership knowledge” acquired through experience over time can be considered a form of tacit knowing. They argue that aesthetic knowledge is experienced through the senses – touch, smell, hearing, seeing, touching, etc. – and that it is thus “lived through the body” (ibid.).

In essence, aesthetics, according to Hansen et al., is about what they call ‘sensory knowledge and felt meaning’ (ibid. p. 555) and when we consider the role of attention as the main conduit between *knower* and *world* (Ganeri, 2017; O’Shaughnessy, 2002; Watzl, 2011) we see how a practice of attention becomes a necessary condition for a conscious engagement with these phenomena. Hansen et al., (2007) offer but a momentary recognition of this when they state that, “inquiry into felt meanings requires an aesthetic sensitivity in making observations” (p. 555). They propose that it requires openness and attentiveness to taking an aesthetic attitude in observation and experience an object or process aesthetically. Aesthetic leadership, they say, breaks with the tradition of looking for certain objective characteristics in the manager and introduces instead the search for “subjective qualities constructed in interaction between leader and follower, which allow social influence” (ibid.)

With the notion of aesthetic leadership as described by Hansen et al. we move towards a paradigm where management is both embodied and transpersonal in that it focuses on sensory knowledge, felt meaning, emotions, intuitions and interaction, i.e. that which happens in people as well as in the space *between* people. Recognising the evident role of attention as a conduit in this context is obvious but we are left with a question about what it entails to become conscious of a practice of attention and it also raises the question about how this may evolve into a way of being. The most resonant description of what I consider a possible

answer to this question is from Fabre Lewin (2019), who says, “My artful bodymind is my divining instrument for being-with and knowing the world” (p. 39). Bringing together aesthetics, ethics, ritual and embodiment, Fabre Lewin proposes how engaging with our holistic self as a divining instrument for *attending to* and *coming to know* the world also holds us to account in our multidimensional existence.

In their investigation of what may constitute authentic embodied leadership, Ladkin and Taylor (2010) invite us to “attend to a way of being in the world which holds the power to inspire, encourage and motivate others through its true, yet elusive quality” (p. 72). This invitation to attend to a particular way of being is central to this study. It is pertinent that Ladkin and Taylor propose that embodied authentic leadership is *a way of being*, rather *than a way of doing*. They suggest that there are three key aspects of authentic leadership: *self exposure*, *relating* and *leaderly choices*. Looking at these in turn I explain below how, by implication, the practice of attention becomes a necessary condition for the development of embodied authentic leadership. About *self exposure*, they suggest that “leaders must be attentive to the somatic clues of their body as they experience situations, and then choose how to express them” (p. 70).

In highlighting the significance of ‘choicefulness’, they point to the dominant tangible asset of a conscious practice of attention, namely, the way in which this informs our decisions and actions. It is not the case that authentic leadership calls for a moment-to-moment externalisation of emotions and feelings but for conscious self-administration with due situational awareness and context in focus. Ladkin and Taylor suggest that most humans are subject to a complex, multifactorial inner life, which, in a management context, can be managed well only through a commitment to self-knowledge.

About *relating*, they suggest that this requires both the ability to be present in the moment and the capacity to extend beyond it (p. 71). Here, they enter into the terrain of working with uncertainty and managing “never-before-encountered situations” (ibid). They suggest that enhanced ‘presencing’ (Scharmer, 2007) can be achieved through introspection and a personal narration of one’s current inner landscape coupled with genuine inquiry about the inner landscape of the other (ibid).

The demand on attention implied here exceeds the limits of what can be achieved without a high level of reflexive practice. It is unrealistic to expect that managers can introspect, externalise, inquire, decide and take appropriate action when their attention is also likely to be captured by fear of the unknown or the self-doubts that often accompanies the encounter with

untested, untried scenarios. The basis for relating in the way suggested by Ladkin and Taylor requires a foundational understanding of how attention works, what is required to liberate it from capture, control it and align it with an understanding of deepest intentions, motivations and drives.

This leads us to ‘leaderly choices’, the third aspect of authentic leadership. Ladkin and Taylor argue that managers can

[...] reveal their ‘true self’ and relate well to others and the particular moment, but still not be perceived as an authentic leader because they are not experienced as embodying leadership in a way that is perceived to be ‘leaderly’ (p. 71).

This is stated in the context of an illustration where a police commissioner embodies group dynamics. The example refers to the change in behaviour of a leader, who realises that the drive of her authentic self – to participate in a march for gay rights – is in conflict with the perceived notion of what it is to be ‘leaderly’ in her particular context. The example demonstrates how authentic leadership demands of us that we attend equally to those we aim to serve on the one hand and our deepest intentions, motivations and drives, on the other. This begs the question: what is *authenticity* in relation to *authentic leadership*? Did the police commissioner find a way of aligning her personal beliefs, which, we have to assume, involved the assigning of some significance to being physically present in a march, with the new ways of supporting the gay rights movement that she later chose to apply? Is *authentic leadership*, as opposed to just *being authentic*, linked both to context and to our internal world of intentions, motivations, drives and desires? If that is so, it is a high level of agility in the practice of attention that is called for.

The police commissioner is navigating a situation in which her attention is engaged in the different aspects of reality. She is, in the first instance, attending to her own agenda, her own desire to be an active agent in a common cause. Later, she realises that her group is responding to a different aspect of reality and she has to now manifest a change in her behaviour to signal to her constituency that she has attended to their collective perceived truth about what it is to be leaderly. One can imagine that an understanding of evenly suspended attention (French and Simpson, 2014) in a conscious practice of attention might have enhanced her ability to frame a more suitable narrative of her personal position in relation to the gay rights movement – one that would not alienate her from the group identity that she is articulating through her leadership (Grint cited in Ladkin and Taylor, 2010).

An understanding of different ways of engaging attention seems to be an obvious next step in the development of this story. A practice of attention will also address the crucial question they pose in their conclusion, namely,

What do [leaders] attend to in the external environment which allows them to embody their commitments in a way that is not experienced by others as ‘impression management’? (p. 72).

One might also ask: what would managers attend to in their *internal* environment in order to manage the three aspects of embodied authentic leadership (*self exposure, relating* and *leaderly choices*)? I suggest that it invites us to attend to attention.

2.2.2. Attention and Reflexivity

In order to consider what it entails to develop a practice of attending to attention, I explore below what contemporary literature says about reflexivity that might highlight what it involves to develop practice.

Herbert Mead argued that reflexivity is the “turning back” of experience on itself. He stated that this unique human capacity is an essential condition for the development of the mind (Aboulafia, 2016). Self-consciousness is “a social process involving the capacity humans have as subjects to take themselves as objects” (Mead quoted in Stacey and Shaw, 2006, p. 129). With Mead’s perspective as backdrop, I turn to Weick (2002) who sets out an argument for the need to sharpen our understanding of what he calls ‘real-time reflexivity’. Weick positions attention as the *data platform for deep thinking* and he points out that attention plays a crucial role in spotting excluded voices whilst also recognising that the danger attached to making “[...] attention an end in itself” is present when it comes to an engagement with the idea of “self-as-theorist” (p. 893). Reflexivity, says Weick “is about seeing oneself in the data. It is about advertising and about telling where the author is coming from” (p. 894)

Central to Weick’s position is Kierkegaard’s famous proposition that life must be understood backwards but lived forwards. Weick argues that we cannot understand life as we live it, simply because we cannot, in the moment we live it, find the “resting place from which to understand it – backwards” (Auden in *ibid*, p. 895). Weick states that it is through introspection and real-time reflexivity that we can begin to make sense of life and he states further –

Reflexive liabilities that seem to threaten validity are understood backwards, in hindsight [...]. What we don’t know is how those ‘same’ threats are lived forwards during engaged observing (p. 895)

Here, Weick is setting the scene for exploring Robert Wicklund's important idea of a person's ability to use a multiperspectival lens for understanding another. He explains that Wicklund is describing multiple perspectives as the phenomenon that essentially awakens a person to the fact that there are more ways of understanding, describing, viewing and perceiving an event, object or person. According to Wicklund, the person who actively rehearses the ability to hold different perspectives and "behavioural repertoires" in their minds will develop an enhanced openness to diverse viewpoints without losing focus and direction. The forces that distract from this are when a person faces fear, strong need states and singular goals. He argues,

Their tolerance for social multiplicity decreases and their desire to predict and control the other person's behaviour increases. If that person presents a number of possibilities, this threatens control, and so observers limit their attention to just a few stable features (p. 896).

Weick goes on to explain how we are at risk of stereotyping and limiting each other when such pressures limit our attention. He sets out a range of negative impacts, among them the adverse effect on holistic awareness. Towards reaching his conclusion, Weick identifies four areas for development: 1) the need to be reflexive about new personal categories such as grasp of the wholes, situational awareness, and the big picture; 2) understanding the world of subject/object in light of how this varies according to whether we are living forwards or making sense backwards; 3) the need to welcome the opportunity to explore our presuppositions particularly when ideal moments of encountering the unexpected are upon us; and 4) the necessity to develop the capacity for holding multiple perspectives in order to develop agility of mind as well as behaviour and enable an enhanced understanding of social multiplicity and ways of acting in the moment. I will be returning to what I consider the essences of Weick's key points and their link to the practice of attention and its application in the workplace but we will look first at the idea of *epistemic reflexivity*.

Johnson and Duberley (2003) argue for an important differentiation of reflexivity that is based on the recognition of the role played by epistemological and ontological foundations. They explore how three different types of reflexivity are derived from ontological and epistemological assumptions and present the implications for reflexive practice in management research. Each approach, they say, represents different modes of operation and they state about the essence of this exercise: "in a sense we are trying to be more reflexive about what reflexivity means and confronting the inevitable circularity that is at play" (ibid, p. 1294).

Their idea of epistemic reflexivity is pertinent to this study in that it demands that we become conscious of – and challenge – the givens, the beliefs that inform our personal narratives

about the world. In the case of epistemic reflexivity, Johnson and Duberley argue that this mode implies a participatory approach, serving primarily that the researcher becomes aware of his or her own habitus. They state that “management research cannot be carried out in some intellectual space which is autonomous from the researcher's own habitus” (ibid, p. 1289)

Clearly, Johnson and Duberley are here touching on a few important elements that may inform the development of a practice of attention: the recognition of the role that epistemic and ontological beliefs play and its impact on method. Rhodes and Wray-Bliss (2011) follow up and propose that our methodological duty is to recognise research as the production of *subjective and cultural knowledge*, rather than looking at it as *the production of ‘truth’* that is liberated from context that is, people and culture.

It is not enough to develop a practice of attention that makes attention the end in itself. As Weick warns us, it must be a practice that is reflexive enough to take into account what lies behind, beneath and beyond the stories we tell ourselves about attention, practice and even why we believe this is worthwhile doing. As researchers of our own practice in the workplace, we have the additional responsibility to recognise, own, challenge and try not to confuse others with the “epistemological and political baggage” we bring with us (Kincheloe and McLaren in Johnson and Duberley, 2003, p. 1294).

In a critique of reflexivity, Rhodes and Wray-Bliss (2011) point out that there are risks associated with assumptions about how well we can know ourselves. This needs to be on our radar when we develop a practice of attention based on an epistemic reflexive approach. Can we truly know ourselves to the extent that we can own our ontological and epistemological givens and do we understand better our own habitus through the encounter with others (Johnson and Duberley, 2003)? Is it possible to engage reflexively with attention whilst at the same time using attention as our data platform for deep thinking (Weick, 2002)?

These questions will find no direct answers in this study, but as we consider the implications of multiple possible answers, I will turn from *episteme* to *phronesis* (Hadot, 2004) and explore what may be revealed in relation to these questions in the literature of contemporary management learning.

2.2.3. Attention and Practice

According to Hadot (2004), it was Isocrates who first made a clear distinction between ideal knowledge, *episteme*, and practical wisdom, *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is one of Aristotle's intellectual virtues (Ramsey, 2014) and Hadot (2004) explains this in terms of "know-how acquired by the solid formation of judgment, which allows its possessor to make rational yet conjectural decisions whatever situations happen to present themselves" (p. 51). The notion of practical wisdom, then, is one that combines *knowing as a process* with *action*. To this possible point of departure for an exploration in the context of this study, Raelin (2007) says that "expert knowledge can also be viewed as wisdom in action" – and he continues –

[W]isdom is far more than knowledge, for it characterizes what you are rather than what you have. Wise people go far beyond rational explanations of puzzling phenomena, for they also consider what needs to be explained (p. 503).

It is not sufficient to simply acquire knowledge from empirical observations, says Raelin, for wisdom in practice also encourages the forming of opinion. This represents a form of unification and he explains that this view of wisdom suggests an integration of subject and object and a unification of self and mind (ibid.)

Practical wisdom as unification of self and mind comes to the fore in a study by Mackay et al. (2014) who introduce the significance of *mētis* for management learning. They define *mētis* as a kind of practical wisdom, combining flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism (Detienne and Vernant cited in Mackay et al., 2014, p. 420).

The motivation for exploring *mētis* in the context of management learning is the challenge this attitude, or skill, poses to the habitual "conceptual arrest" (p. 432) we expose ourselves to in our engagement with the "metalanguage" (p. 418) of business. As subjects to these co-constructed human abstractions that give substance to our semi-deliberate beliefs in the existence of organisations, institutions and agencies as tangible realities, we are attracted to, yet also paralysed by, the formless, fluid and chaotic world of myths and the rigidity of the modern world of business in equal measure (ibid). This contradiction in us can create a split and may, for some practitioners, foster a sense of oppositional defiance against one or the other 'world'.

Like Ramsey (2014), whose work will be explored further below, Mackay et al. (2014) position *phronesis* as practical wisdom but as a *type*, rather than a *token* (Wetzel, 2018). The relationship between *mētis* and *phronesis* is translated into what they call 'situated

resourcefulness'. Its 'situatedness', they explain, is due to its circumstantial enactment "resisting abstraction into categories" (Mackay et al., 2014, p. 423), and its 'resourcefulness is' "to indicate the spontaneity of its intuitive, creative responses to circumstances" (ibid.). This is an important point that relates back to how we will explore the importance of *situatedness* when we look at specific cases of a deliberate practice of attention and how it may be developed.

According to Mackay et al., *mētis*, exists in a twilight zone between "logos and chaos" (p. 421) – ambiguities and complexities – because of its call for a "fluid form of knowing" and creative engagement with the moment. It flourishes "when it can manipulate [ambiguities and complexities] so that they discord with our practical understandings of the world" (ibid.). *Mētis* challenges the status quo of human abstractions and invites us to look closely at the danger of manifesting a *private morality* – a potential pitfall of the un-scrutinized application of *phronesis*. *Mētis* urges us to consider our notion of 'good' and take an honest look at our institutionalised minds, habits and epistemic beliefs. This form of knowing thus positions itself in the cracks of our soul from where it forces us to question "knowledge based on stable concepts" (p. 432) and embrace the importance of our "twilight knowledge" (p. 433) from a place of situational resourcefulness.

In Shotter and Tsoukas (2014), we find a concrete example of this. They make the case for new embodied orientations in the practice of *phronesis* by describing a situation in which a junior doctor (Shaleni) is faced with an ethical dilemma at work. The dilemma challenges her to go beyond the institutionally and politically given and enter her own inner complex landscape in order to identify a way of acting with integrity. They describe how Shaleni explored "reality's thickness" (James, 1996 cited in ibid, p. 387) and identified the "contextual nuances, its possibilities and affordances" (p. 389). In order to find her line of action, she had to work both from within her professional context and from within herself. Shotter and Tsoukas state,

This process, then, of *resolving* to a line of action is not at all like carrying out a calculation, or making a decision or choice among a set of already clear alternatives. It involves moving around within a landscape of possibilities, and in so doing, being spontaneously responsive to the consequences of each move, and assessing which one (or combinations of moves) seems best in resolving the initial tension aroused in one's initial confusion (p. 388)

Shotter and Tsoukas frame this as a move from 'aboutness thinking' to 'witness thinking' "that is, thinking in a performative fashion as she 'moves around' within the unique landscape of possibilities she is currently inhabiting" (p. 390). They borrow from Polanyi (1962) the notions of "*focal awareness* of the objective nature of the situation" versus "thinking *with*" to

describe the emerging *subsidiary awareness* that informs and guides Shaleni's ultimate action, emphasising, "what is crucial to subsidiary awareness is its open, dynamic nature" (p. 391).

It is exactly an enlargement of our inner capacities – a unification of self and mind (Raelin, 2007) perhaps – that is involved if we want to begin to articulate subsidiary awareness (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014) and develop an attitude of thinking *with*, rather than just *about* the object. The central point Shotter and Tsoukas make is that we need to perform what they call a 'corporeal turn' from *thinking about* to *sensing from within* (p. 391) and it is this turn exactly – that *movement* – that is facilitated by "intentional attending-to" (Ramsey, 2014, p. 9).

Mindful of Hadot's (2004) interpretation of phronesis above, we see how practical wisdom goes beyond *knowledge about* and, through a unification of self and mind, becomes a *process* of knowing that combines the personal (opinion, attitudes, etc.) with different levels of awareness, be those subsidiary or situational. The outcome is *a way of being* that could be described as transpersonal (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993). Here is an observation offered by Stacey (2012) that points to what I mean,

The exercise of practical judgement is highly context related; it is exercised in highly uncertain, unpredictable and unique situations... [It] calls for a wider awareness of the group, organisational and societal patterns within which some issue of importance is being dealt with. This requires a sensitive awareness of more than the focal points in a situation, namely awareness of what is going on at the margins and of what is being taken as the focus. Practical judgement is the experience-based ability to notice more of what is going on and intuit what is most important about a situation. It is the ability to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty as well as the anxiety this generates (p.108).

What we know thus far is that practical wisdom can be explained in terms of an 'integrative wisdom' (Chia and Holt in Mackay et al., 2014) – a know-how based on practical judgment (Hadot, 2003) that both challenges and goes beyond the inherent incompleteness of formalized knowledge (Mackay et al., 2014) towards intuition (Stacey, 2012). It requires the development of different levels of awareness (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014; Stacey, 2012) and a unification of subject and object – self and mind (Raelin, 2007). The outcome may be a form of situated resourcefulness (Mackay et al., 2014), the ability to see the whole in the parts combined with discernment about what is important in the moment and a capability to take wise action in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty (Stacey, 2012).

Practical wisdom is thus a transpersonal *way of being* that *relies* on a conscious and deliberate practice of attention in each moment.

Having looked so far at the contributions of embodiment, reflexivity and practical wisdom to management learning and explored how these in their different ways speak of a practice of attention by implication, I will now turn to scholars in the field who give attention a more explicit role. Taking the idea of a conscious, deliberate practice of attention as my point of departure, we find in Ramsey (2014) an invitation to develop “[...] a scholarship of practice that centres intentional attending-to as its core” (p. 7).

Ramsey’s primary concern is around the questions: how can managers become wise practitioners and how can they learn to make better judgments in their practice? Unlike the literature explored above, Ramsey places emphasis on *intentional* attending-to. Against the backdrop of an epistemology of practice (Raelin, 2007), phronesis (Aristotle; Eikeland; Flyvbjerg in *ibid.*) and social poetics (Shotter in *ibid.*) she presents a detailed case study from which she concludes that there are three main domains of attention that warrant examination, namely “an engagement with ideas, a practice of inquiry and a navigation of relations” (p. 7). These three domains, she proposes, constitute a scholarship of practice and she emphasises how this “foregrounds the manner in which manager-learners attend to possible relations between ideas and action” (p. 18). She proposes that we should emphasise processes of attentional relating rather than the theory behind it (*ibid.*).

Here, Ramsey points to the rationale for this study, which is based on the premise that a conscious practice of attention affects our actions. Stacey (2003) also makes this point in his complex responsive process theory and says, “when people focus their attention differently, they are highly likely to take different kinds of actions” (p. 415). When we enter the realm of practice, we are back in the territory of practical wisdom and, as we have heard, this invites us to examine our experience and understanding of context. To this end, Ramsey explores how we come to understand and apprehend *context* and how we mediate between our understanding of *this* and *knowledge* and she asks “What activity or what ‘orientation’ [...] enables these cognitive processes to take place?” (p. 9) and, she continues, “how is the relevance of contextual factors adduced? How are clues identified amid noise?” (*ibid.*). Attention, she says, is the answer here but not only that, it is the *manner* in which we attend to our work in context that is important. Were we to focus only on “deliberation, judgement or knowing” (*ibid.*) to understand the world around us, she says, we would be bypassing the crucial first principle of *how* we attend.

Rather than understanding attention as a cognitive process, Ramsey proposes that we need to recognise how we effectively make choices with our attention and we need to recognise the

consequences that follow – essentially, this is akin to the idea proposed in the ‘selection for action’ view presented by Allport and Neumann in Wu (2014) I mention above.

Here, Ramsey touches on what Ganeri (2017), O’Shaughnessy (2002), Watzl (2011) and Wu (2014) also discuss, namely whether we ought to revise the most common narrative about attention: that it is subject to a finite volume – that is to say, if we attend to one aspect of reality, does it necessarily follow that we cannot give attention to another? Ramsey does not, in this context, explore the implications of this idea, but she does go on to introduce different types of attention and with this gesture, she signals that differentiation and a more granular understanding of attention itself is essential.

Ramsey mentions non-judgmental attention, the inner and the outer arcs of attention, and the difference between mindful attention and routine inattention – the latter of these could be seen as a counterpart to what Wu (2014) and others have referred to as *attentional capture*. The net result of routine inattention and attentional capture is in fact the same: an absence of what Ramsey (2014) calls intentional attending-to.

Ramsey is making a strong case for the importance of intentional attending-to and she manages to demonstrate reasons why this requires the development of a scholarship of practice. Whilst she begins to identify areas that warrant attention (ideas, inquiry and relations) she does not address the *how* question – the issue of method – or map onto these areas the different types of attention described earlier. The contribution Ramsey has made is one that undeniably underpins and enhances the argument in this study but it fails to deliver the necessary granularity.

One step closer to articulating what a practice of attention in the workplace might look like is Stacey’s (2003) complex responsive process theory, where we are invited to *refocus attention* onto the processes managers are actually engaged in, rather than focusing on what managers *should* be doing. Stacey is clear about the fact that this theory does not provide ‘prescriptions’ about *what should be done*, nor does it offer applications, rather it focuses on, and aims to make sense of, what is actually happening. Stacey emphasises that complex responsive process theory demands that we “[...] recognise the uniqueness and un-repeatability of experience” (p. 415) and as such, we are automatically prevented from an attempt to fit the perspective of this theory into other theoretical frameworks.

Crucially, complex responsive process theory is as much an invitation for managers to attend reflexively to their inner processes, as it is a way of making sense of what emerges around

them. This also moves us away from the idea that the manager is an objective spectator. This gesture is visible in the specific areas that Stacey identifies as requiring a focus of attention. The areas are: quality of participation; quality of conversational life; quality of anxiety and how it is lived with; quality of diversity, and quality of unpredictability and paradox (ibid).

In terms of attending to the quality of participation, Stacey outlines how a focus on the emerging patterns that arise in response to the intentions of the executives is not only a joint venture between all participants but a joint responsibility. This is a crucial point: the collective attention given to the emerging patterns of participation creates distributed responsibility for what happens next and it is this core matter that is usually attributed to the managers of traditional top-down organisations. Stacey states,

The emphasis shifts from the manager focusing on how to make a choice to focusing on the quality of participation in self-organising conversations from which such choices and the responses to them emerge. It becomes a matter of reflecting together on the quality of participation (p. 417)

There is a sense in which distributed responsibility is also rooted in distributed attention. Ocasio (2011) explores a similar idea and proposes that we need to focus “not only on who knows what others know but who knows what others attend to” (p. 1294). He says that it is crucial to go beyond individual or shared attention when explaining distributed attention on an organisational level – that is, the link between “attentional perspective, attentional engagement, and attentional selection” must be understood (ibid.). Ocasio’s perspective can be compared to Stacey’s in that he views organisational situated attention in terms of distribution and the recognition of emerging patterns of behaviour that become the organisation’s strategy. He calls this ‘attentional perspective’ (ibid)

These ideas, again, highlight the importance of reflexive practice and Stacey’s invitation to give *collective* attention to the quality of participation relies heavily on a commitment to exactly that. Mindful of the powerful influences represented by individual ontologies and epistemologies (Code, 1991; Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Raelin, 2007), or unofficial ideologies in Stacey’s language, the risks of this proposition are the unrecognised challenges that are rooted in diversity. About attending to the quality of diversity, Stacey (2003) says,

Organisations only display the internal capacity to change spontaneously when they are characterised by diversity. This focuses attention on the importance of deviance and eccentricity. It focuses attention on the important unofficial ideologies that undermine current power relations. Such unofficial ideologies are expressed in conversations organised by shadow themes (p. 419)

The core idea presented by Stacey here entails that conversations are the primary vehicle by which we deal with individual or collective unofficial ideologies and their shadow themes. In

describing what he calls conversational life, Stacey differentiates between the deliberate, facilitated form of conversation and those that happen spontaneously in real-time on the margins. However, focused attention on the quality of conversations seems to take us only half way towards dealing ably with shadow themes. The development of a reflexive practice of attention that entails not only an intentional attention-to (Ramsey, 2014) but individual conscious administration of the various types of attention is a necessary condition. The same necessary condition applies in the cases of attending to the qualities of anxiety, unpredictability and paradox – the other two areas that Stacey identifies in his theory.

Stacey (2003) does make clear that reflexive and reflective practice is paramount. He advocates for the importance of a self-reflective development of self-knowledge – taking “one’s experience seriously” (p. 422) and he proposes that the reward is “to find oneself interacting more effectively, not only for one’s own good, but also for the good of those with whom one is in a relationship” (ibid).

Stacey goes on to make the following crucial point that underpins the importance of this study, namely, that the competences and faculties involved in working with complex responsive processes within organisations are not usually on the syllabus in management learning. The internal faculties central to the development of self-reflective and reflexive practice married with the external skills needed to facilitate free-flowing conversations and the ability to perceive, interpret and articulate emerging intentions coming out of self-organised conversations on the margins are not considered essential in traditional management learning contexts. If this is all happening to replace the emphasis on one individual’s intentions and resultant choices then the development of these internal faculties and external skills need to become the principal focus around which other things are taught.

Where Stacey and Ramsey both seem to conclude their engagement with and propositions about attention is where this study begins. The matter of attention and its role in organisational life is clear but there are loose ends to be addressed in both Stacey and Ramsey’s propositions. Ramsey (2014) poses a question that is linked to both Stacey’s and her ideas about the role of attention in the workplace – she asks “how is one supposed to attend, in a scholarly manner, to an ongoing conversation?” (p. 18) and she questions how it might be possible to be an active participant in a conversation whilst also performing the reflective practice here proposed.

In order to understand how, and on what basis, we may develop a practice of attention that can realise the potential of Ramsey and Stacey’s ideas, we need a more fine-grained

understanding of attention in terms of its phenomenology and expressions. We need a conceptual framework and a language for describing our experiences, and to this end, we will need to find out what scholars have said about different *types* of attention and what they entail.

French and Simpson (2015) offer an in-depth exploration of attention in the context of Wilfred Bion's work. It is worth reflecting here on how they position Bion's capacity for attention in terms of knowing and *unknowing*. They describe Bion's ability to attend to what *is* – as opposed to what was, or what is to be – and they explain how this capacity enabled Bion to “see things that most of us simply do not notice” (p. 1). They continue thus, making a crucial point,

Typically, people act as if they *know*. Bion, by contrast, lived according to a much more radical assumption: that what we know is likely to blind us to a far larger territory where, quite simply, we do not know. Attention to this *unknown* dimension of experience is at the heart of our approach – that is, to the truth or reality of the present moment and to questions as much as to answers (ibid).

French and Simpson describe the important role of developing both positive and negative capabilities if one is to give attention to “what is important in each moment” (p. xvii). They refer here to the term ‘Negative Capability’ coined by Keats (French and Simpson, 1999, 2009) also used by Bion. Negative Capability, they say, “depends on the capacity to listen, wait, absorb, reflect, and to remain relaxed yet alert before moving to action” (French and Simpson, 2015, p. xvii).

French and Simpson (ibid) assign to attention a very significant role, which can be compared to the role of attention in Stacey's (2003, 2012) complex responsive process theory. The type of attention we need to practice when we engage with emergence or unknowing is not necessarily the kind of attention we need when we are carrying out a set task with clear parameters, boundaries and hoped for outcomes. Whilst Stacey (2003) seems to consistently use the term ‘focused’ attention or a ‘re-focusing of attention’, French and Simpson suggest that ‘evenly suspended attention’ as coined by Freud (French and Simpson, 2015), is a more appropriate type. Here is how they describe it,

Evenly suspended attention implies an openness that is adequate for engaging with reality in its full sense: it does not focus on anything in particular but pursues truth in completeness. Such truth cannot be known in the sense of being pinned down but it can be disclosed and any disclosure of this kind is transformative for the individual who is exposed to it. Just as a thermometer is predisposed to respond to temperature and a barometer to air pressure, different individuals have a tendency to respond to different aspects of reality. In this sense different individuals tend to pick up, or be transformed by, certain aspects of truth. As a consequence, whilst truth is complete our engagement with it is always only partial (p. 2)

It is in relationship to the engagement with *reality* and *truth* that we here encounter a type of attention that goes beyond what has been described hitherto. We may wish to draw a parallel to Ramsey's (2014) mention of mindful and non-judgmental attention as well as the inner and outer arcs of attention. We also recognise the underlying principals in the attitude of *Mētis* (Mackay et al., 2014), both in light of its positioning between 'logos and chaos' and its call for a creative response to complexity and ambiguity. In philosophy and psychology today, most of the non-reductionist perspectives on attention, as explored by Watzl (2011) and mentioned above, have recognised the dual nature of attention as it is experienced: *focal* versus *global* or *distributed* attention; *on-off* attention versus *degrees* of attention and so on.

However, the idea of an evenly suspended attention offers another perspective again. This form of attention evokes the picture of an umbrella creating an arc over the whole 'scene' and embracing more than what is just in front of us. Yet, French and Simpson (2015) imply that evenly suspended attention reaches both inward, to our own processes, feelings and emotions, and outward, holding the totality of what is – the reality *as it is* in that moment – with all its complexities, ambiguity, givens and unknowing. They note the etymological significance of the word attention – which we will look at in more detail later – commenting,

The idea that attention can open a space in our minds is reflected in its etymology. "Attention" is derived from the Latin verb *tendere*, to stretch or extend, implying two positions or forces pulling against each other (p. 11)

French and Simpson stress how evenly suspended attention, as a deliberate practice, requires highly developed capacities for emotional containment and "depth of awareness" (p. 15). It is an activity of the mind that goes far beyond focused attention and it involves active recognition of and engagement with conscious and unconscious phenomena, as they play out in real-time. Because of this, they propose, evenly suspended attention can have a far greater impact than the immediate need for solutions, "it can be seen in terms of development, learning, movement, openness to change, and moments of refreshment in knowing" (ibid).

Whilst the danger of focused attention is that it can be misdirected, the risks attached to a practice of evenly suspended attention might be caused by an under-developed sense of self, a lack of self-knowledge and accompanying reflective or reflexive capacities. The pursuit of truth, says French and Simpson, involves the courage to face what *is*, and if attention is dedicated to this pursuit, the primacy of developing courage based on self-knowledge is indisputable. This link between attention and self-knowledge weaves through subsequent chapters like a red thread, creating form and coherence between the different ideas we will now continue to explore.

2.2.4. Attention and Ethics

As puzzling as it is to learn that the *practice* of attention has such a relatively tenuous presence in the literature of contemporary Management Learning, it has been just as bewildering that my research found no trace of literature on the ethics of attention in this field. In order to position findings of this research within a theoretical framework, I have therefore had to take a look beyond Management Learning and see what contemporary scholars say about this critical issue of our time. I will focus in on two academic contributions in what follows.

Matthew Crawford's (2015) analysis of what he calls the *cultural crisis of attention* is an important contribution to this study and we will now look at this in some detail. As I indicated in the introduction, the most visible tension within the landscape of the attention economy has emerged from a surge of developments in digital technology and our ability to literally capture the attention and behaviours of *consumers* in order to capitalise on human experience (Zuboff, 2019). Crawford (2015, 2015a) suggests, however, that we should not simply blame digital technology for where we have come to but look instead at the common epistemological and anthropological foundations for our understanding of what it means to be human (2015, p. ix). He states that we are "agnostic on the question of what it is worth paying attention to, that is, what to value" and this, he says, is a crisis of values "where we are not sure about where we stand" (Crawford, 2015a).

Central to Crawford's argument is the idea that *agency* and *doing things* is an antidote to the kind of fragmentation we experience today both attentionally and socially. Digital devices, he says, are certainly responsible for significant adverse effects – for example, when we lose the ability to attend to things that are not immediately engaging, we are becoming more *similar* to one another because it is only when we develop real competencies that require focus that we become *individuals*. It is his view, however, that merely engaging in self-regulation and excluding distractors are not a sustainable solution to the attention problem. It is more promising to become absorbed in a larger project that elicits intense involvement. As an advocate for the importance of manual labour, Crawford believes that we are rapidly being de-skilled in the attention economy. Our possessions, he says, don't invite us to take them apart, tinker with them and get to know how they work, and he states that this "creeping sense of passivity and dependence is where agency becomes illusive" (ibid.). As we will see, the ethical implications of his analysis pertain to an absence of *caring*.

Crawford proposes that absorption is the most promising objective for our restless attention. In craftsmanship, he says, we find a practice that he calls *ecologies of attention that are well ordered*. By this he means that “the gathering of one’s mental energies to a point” (ibid.) is a helpful contrast to the kind of attention-shattering experience we have during an average day in the office. This observation is closely aligned with the findings on the flow state presented by Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2009), which we will return to when we look at the findings of this study. Crawford (2015a) proposes that when we engage in this way, we create an *ethic of caring* about what we are doing, which fosters a sense of self-reliance and self-confidence. He reflects on the phenomenon of de-skilling as a primary source of the confidence issues so many people in the workplace struggle with.

Crawford suggests that it is our very idea of freedom that is being appropriated when, for example, a new credit card company promises *no limits* and gives us a false feeling of being *in charge*. Whilst he recognises that it requires a certain cognitive dissonance to free oneself from the mind-set of freedom as it is being constructed in the marketplace, Crawford believes that we need to find a different concept than freedom if we want to overcome the fragmentation of our mental states. I take this to mean that he supports a move towards a *freedom to*, rather than the focus on *freedom from*. This is what I see as Crawford’s main contributions to the ethics of attention question: that we should pay much less attention to *what distracts us* and attend instead to *what we are being distracted from*.

Joining the view of Buddhist traditions (Ganeri, 2017), Stoicism (Hadot, 1995) and Psychology (James, 1950), Crawford, too, recognises the transformative role of a practice of attention in our lives. He takes inspiration from Weil (1952, 2000), to whom he ascribes a significant contribution to the *ascetics of attention* – Weil says,

There is something in our soul that has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why, every time we really concentrate our attention, we destroy some evil in ourselves (Crawford, 2015, p 170).

Weil, Crawford says, represents a quasi-religious yet strangely modern view that relies on an effort of *will*. Crawford’s response, however, is to propose what he sees as a more gentle role of attention in what he calls an *erotics of attention* – in essence, erotics of attention invites us to fasten on objects “that have intrinsic appeal, and therefore provide a source of positive energy” (ibid.). I will not explore this notion further but simply link it now to a subsequent investigation in this study of Weil’s ethical attention (Bowden, 1998; Freeman, 2015; Weil, 1952).

Crawford's (2015) general proposition, then, is that a) the attention economy poses a powerful distraction from absorption, b) rapid de-skilling prevents us from engaging with the natural world through manual labour, c) actively engaging with the natural resistance of matter through absorption is valuable because it creates *ecologies of attention that are well ordered*, and d) this fosters an *ethic of caring* (ibid).

With this as our springboard, we will now look at a most recent contribution to the question of an ethics of attention in the academic discourse namely, the notion that our attention is not only prized as the most valued resource in the global marketplace but that it is being traded as part of a much greater agenda that seeks to capitalise on our private human experience.

Shoshana Zuboff, a Professor Emerita from Harvard Business School, saw us into the year 2019 with an epic contribution to this very subject. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (Zuboff, 2019) is over 700 pages long and presents an in-depth investigation of the current state of what Williams (2017a) would call our freedom of attention. It is of course deeply unfair to reduce Zuboff's core message to the following two statements, but for the purposes of this study, I will offer them here nonetheless; they are a) human behaviour is being tracked and traded for commercial purposes in a global digital marketplace led by corporations that are eliminating consumer choice² and b) it is unethical and immoral to commodify private human experience (Zuboff, 2019). Her definition of Surveillance Capitalism provides an excellent summary of the situation she is challenging –

Sur-veil-lance Cap-i-tal-ism, n.

1. A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales; 2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification; 3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history; 4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy; 5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth; 6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to democracy; 7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty; expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty (loc. 69)

Whilst this is a damning, incriminatory narrative with conspiratorial overtones, even Zuboff's opponents find it difficult to disagree with her analysis of the current situation. Certainly, Zuboff has received some criticism from both the academic community and the media for being too critical of Google, Facebook, Amazon, Ford and the likes, as well as making some

² It is more and more common to be charged to opt out of web-based services and the more serious examples are when opting out is no longer an option. Smart meters, for example, will no longer be optional after 2020 in Denmark (Hansen and Hauge, 2017)

methodological errors – for a thorough critical review, see Morozov (2019). Zuboff’s book confirms that even if our current culture is still informed by certain secular humanist values, the underlying neurodeterministic view of what it means to be human legitimises the current behaviour of big business, as described in her book. This is based on the simple premise that if humans are machines, in fact, what is so wrong with the tracking, analysis and trading of our behaviour if this ultimately provides us with *greater access to the things we want*? This view, however, epitomises the crisis of values that Crawford (2015) is talking about when he says that we are “uncertain about what it is worth paying attention to and what to value” (2015a). This is what is at stake when Harris (2019), Skewes (2016) and Williams (2017a) ask us to re-claim *agency* and freedom of attention in the attention economy.

2.3. Coda

From this study of theoretical perspectives on the practice of attention in the workplace, we have discovered how the current debate asks a multitude of questions but provides no unified scientific, philosophical or phenomenological theories on attention (Allport, 1993; Watzl, 2011; Wu, 2014).

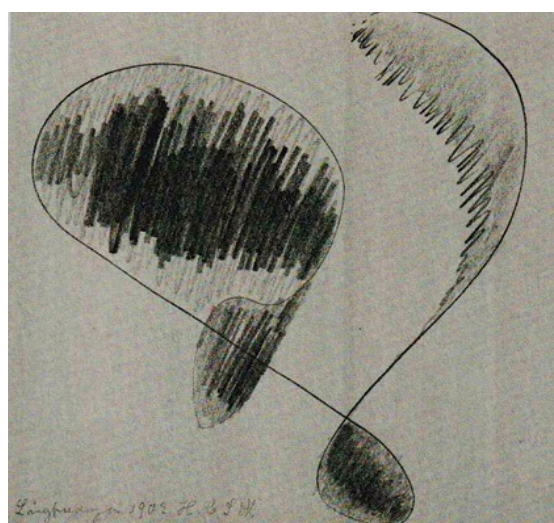
The practice of attention as a study in the field of management learning is still largely ignored when one considers the immense importance and impact of attention in all of our lives. There are numerous examples of scholars who, in my interpretation, are proposing a practice of attention *by implication* (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Ramsey, 2014; Stacey, 2001, 2007, 2012; Weick, 2002, 2005), but only a few who dare to make the significance of a *deliberate practice* explicit (Bion, 1970; French and Simpson, 2015, Weil, 1952, 2000). We also learnt that unless we look at historic and current practices that have roots in non-secular or spiritual traditions (Ganeri, 2017; Hadot, 1995, 2004; Weil, 1952, 2000), fewer scholars still provide actual guidance about how a deliberate practice of attention might be developed.

I have so far suggested that the development of a *practice* of attention entails the conscious engagement with the different ways in which we *administer* attention in a deliberate and contextual manner. Above, we therefore specifically explored ideas that can provide the contours of a theoretical framework within which we will explore what a phenomenology of attention entails and how attention may evolve into a deliberate practice.

With that in mind, I looked at the particular phenomena of awareness and its relationship to attention (Anderson, 2019; O’Shaughnessy 2002), attentional capture (Wu, 2014), focused (Arvidson, 2003a; Watzl, 2011) and distributed attention (O’Shaughnessy 2002),

embodiment (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010), reflexivity (Weick, 2002, 2005), phronesis (Hadot, 1995, 2004) and an ethics of attention (Crawford, 2015; Weil, 1952, 2000; Zuboff, 2019). Towards the end of the chapter, I also brought to our awareness the important connections between attention, truth and self-knowledge (Bion, 1970; French and Simpson, 2015; Weil 1952, 2000) – themes that are intrinsically linked to the overall argument of this study in what follows.

I have indicated that possible reasons for the reluctance to engage directly with the deliberate practice of attention may pertain to the lack of a unified theory or language for attention. The position of this study on the matter is that attention as a *phenomenon* – and the continuing development of its *conscious practice* – can be approached as a path to self-knowledge. This liberates attention as a study from the traditional scholarly expectations and demands of *the knowledge economy* – where we engage with *knowns* in terms of whether and how they are defined – and places it in the realm of *an epistemology of the transpersonal*. We will explore the phenomenological, practical and ethical implications of this in the subsequent chapters. As we proceed, the call for a scholarship of attention (Ramsey, 2014) will be echoed in the findings and answered in the conclusion.



3. Researching Lived Experience

From the outset, my intention with this study has been to explore the practice of attention from the perspective of *practitioners* as they go about their day-to-day lives in the workplace. With the view of making a contribution that is not only relevant to the scholarly field of management learning but also to the ongoing development of its practitioners, I have focused on the phenomenology of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990) and sought to take a practical, reflexive and hermeneutic approach to my engagement with emerging themes (Dowling et al. 2016; Heidegger, 1967; Husserl, 1931; Ricoeur, 1974).

In order to bring the *experience* of attention as a phenomenon alive to the reader of this study, I present the findings and its containing narrative as an exercise in attention. Just as a composer takes the listener of a piece of music on a journey of attention through a soundscape where the different themes stand out, weave and blend, just so is this study a journey with the *lived experience* of practitioners and their colleagues in the workplace weaving in and out of my own reflections and the insights of scholars and philosophers. The reader is invited to engage with the presentation of findings as a multi-coloured tapestry of thoughts, feelings and actions – it is *Bricolage* in practice (Levi-Strauss, 1966), an *artful* approach to engaging with field research “where the ‘artful’ is a tuning into the senses and multiple intelligences of the interconnected body and mind” (Fabre Lewin, 2019, p. vi).

The empirical perspective in this study has been derived from two principal longitudinal research activities that aimed to provide lenses through which to discover the essences of the *what-it-is-like-ness* of senior managers at work. The two activities ran in parallel and were complemented by the study of theoretical perspectives, as described and reviewed in the previous chapter. My intention to provide a multi-perspectival view on the question of attention led to the choice of these particular research activities that represented the meta-categories of *second-* and *first-person perspectives*.

The Second-Person Perspective

Between January 2016 and May 2017, I conducted a study involving ten managers, which included two ninety-minute semi-structured one-to-one interviews with each participant as well as two four-hour cooperative inquiry events for all participants (Dick, 2001; Heron and Reason, 2001; Kvale, 2007; 2008; Reason, 1998, 1999). The core emphasis in this study is on the reflections, observations and stories that senior managers tell about their individual practice of attention in the workplace

The First-Person Perspective

The empirical data representing the first-person perspective in the study is derived from a reflexive engagement with my own practice of attention as a senior manager. Over a period of five years, from October 2014 till September 2019, I recorded my practice of attention in a series of phenomenological descriptions of lived experience using autoethnography (Denzin, 2014; Duncan, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010; Humphreys, 2005; 2010; Kempster and Stewart, 2010). The study is grounded in the empirical data of those accounts, my reflexive engagement with findings from the second-person perspective and accompanying literature that underpins or challenges it.

With this particular combination of activities, I set out to discover what managers *actually do*, how we *present* what we do and how we *experience* our practice of attention in the reality of workplace demands. Before we engage in detail with the methodological setting and the theoretical foundations that underpin the approaches applied in the research process, I will explain how I concretely engaged with the fieldwork and how this eventually translated into the data sets included in this study.

3.1. Conducting the Fieldwork

The research activities were conducted according to the timeline as set out in table 1 below. As described earlier, I continued to work full time during this study, yet, as will appear below 2015 and 2018 both saw two periods where I was forced to put most research activities on hold due to work demands. During those times, the autoethnographic work continued and I soon came to understand the power of a conscious engagement with the first-person perspective. Maintaining the *researcher voice* during this particularly demanding time at work was an exercise in *distanciation* (Ricoeur, 1974) and this provided me with a new way of engaging with one of the most difficult times of my professional career. There are detailed descriptions of the experience of this time in what follows.

In what follows, I will describe the research participants and tell the story of the practical steps involved in the fieldwork before then proceeding to look in detail at what became the methodological home of the study.

TABLE 1

Timeline	Research Activity
<i>First-Person Perspective</i>	
October 2014 to September 2019	Autoethnographic accounts
<i>Second-Person Perspective</i>	
January to March 2016	One-to-one interview (I) with each participant, 90 minutes in person or virtual
May 2016	Cooperative inquiry (I) with all participants 4 hours, in person
October to December 2016	One-to-one interview (II) with each participant, 90 minutes in person or virtual
January 2017	Coding and analysis of one-to-one interviews and cooperative inquiry (I)
May 2017	Cooperative inquiry (II) with all participants 4 hours in person
January to July 2019	Final work on all data sets

3.1.1. Participants

The research participants were selected from a wider network of senior managers associated with my place of work and the Bristol Business School. Three of the participants involved were known to me before we started the process – one was an employee of the organisation I work for, the other two were peripherally associated.

From the beginning, my experience of working with the participants was full of surprises – for example, I had not anticipated the level of readiness to engage in an unpaid long-term project with an uncertain goal and no stated rewards. My initial concerns about the willingness of busy managers to make sufficient time for this study were soon alleviated. None of the candidates rejected the proposal to be a participant in the research and I was met with no concern or restrictions as to what I had asked for. There was a level of readiness to take part that almost pointed to a different theme – the loneliness of management practice. This theme will be revisited as we proceed. Contrary to my expectations, I was met with unequivocal enthusiasm, gratitude and excitement at the thought of working together with others in the same kinds of roles and positions. I will describe below the dynamics present in the interviews and the cooperative inquiry events but first, I present here, in table 2, an overview of participants taking part in the study and their individual profiles. Limitations of this particular group are addressed in sections 3.2.1.

TABLE 2

1	Research identity	Amber
	Gender and age	Woman, 45-55
	Sector and experience	Government (national)
	Role	Senior Project Manager
2	Research identity	April
	Gender and age	Woman, 45-55
	Sector and experience:	Large corporate/commercial, systems; SME/charity, education, compliance (multinational)
	Role	Senior Manager
3	Research identity	Chinta
	Gender and age	Woman, 35-45
	Sector	Large corporate, retail; charity/SME, education, consulting (multinational)
	Role:	Founder, CEO
4	Research identity	Daniel
	Gender and age	Man, 35-45
	Sector and experience	SME, digital technology/retail; large corporate (national)
	Role	Founder, CEO
5	Research identity	Jim
	Gender and age	Man, 45-55
	Sector and experience	Large corporate/commercial, retail (national)
	Role	Senior Manager
6	Research identity	John
	Gender and age	Man, 45-55
	Sector and experience	Charity, education
	Role	Senior Executive, Clergy (international)
7	Research identity	Leo
	Gender and age	Man, 55-65
	Sector and experience	Large corporate/commercial, construction, retail
	Role	Founder, CEO (multinational)
8	Research identity	Shami
	Gender and age	Man, 45-55
	Sector and experience	Large corporate/commercial, retail (national)
	Role	Senior Manager
9	Research identity	Stella
	Gender and age	Woman, 25-35
	Sector and experience	Large corporate/commercial, retail, consultancy, art
	Role	Business Consultant, Artist
10	Research identity	Tajee
	Gender and age	Man, 45-55
	Sector and experience	Charity, SME, religion, education
	Role	Clergy, Senior Executive

3.1.2. Interviews

As I embarked on this journey, I wondered how I could best create a conducive environment for senior managers to tell their stories. The advantage of being a practitioner myself meant that I had some notion of what would constitute an appropriate context within which they

would feel able to share personal narratives about their practice of attention – one of the most intimate aspects of being human that we can possibly share.

The next issue I needed to deal with was creating safety among them as a group and between us as individuals. Starting with the one-to-one interviews proved to be a wise move. In those intimate moments of sharing, we built a space of openness and free of judgment. As a researcher and interviewer, I was met with no hesitation to share details of lived experience. In all but two cases, the stories I was told were deeply personal. Two participants, however, chose to focus in on more general observations but in both of those cases, I learnt as much about *their* lifeworld.

I wanted to explore semi-structured interview strategies, which would allow participants to be active in meaning-making, rather than a conduit from which information would be theorised by me (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The inquiry, being from a practitioner perspective, required that I would be able to make observations on multiple levels. Kvale's six steps of analysis (2007, 2007a) provided interesting framework elements of which I was particularly mindful, including the technique of "sending meaning back" and what he calls "membership validation" (2007a, p.3). In the continuum from description to interpretation, I would take some inspiration from the ideas of meaning coding, meaning condensation and meaning interpretation and aim to keep in mind the multiple levels of meaning – reflexive, dialogic, or performative method, which aims to encourage attention on how a story is told, the audience and the context in equal measures (Denzin, 2001).

Ahead of the first set of interviews, I created a set of nine questions, which would allow us to delve deeply into the research question but at the same time be able to respond to the emergent themes. Dick (2001) recommends that the researcher practices being fully sensitive to the situation and remain "data-driven rather than theory-driven" (p.1). I started each interview by inviting the participant to tell me the story of their work situation and their experience of being in role. These stories would sometimes evolve and progress to include observations about assumed perceptions of their function versus their inner experience of being in the role. We would explore situations from everyday life in the workplace where the participants could recall instances of practicing attention in a routine situation or in a particular or unusual way. Stories they shared ranged from the so-called mundane events at work to the larger, more complex situations, involving multiple stakeholders or high-stakes decision-making. All participants shared stories about both retrospective sensemaking of their practice of attention and actual consciously planned or performed practice in various situations.

Between the first and the second set of interviews, I asked all participants to offer a working definition of attention. I wanted to get a sense for their choice of language, and I asked them to express what attention *feels like*. This would help me to contextualise their descriptions of attention in practice from an epistemological perspective. I will go deeper into the significance of this below and return to it also in the later discussion of findings.

The second set of interviews was focused on a chosen case study, which participants were asked to identify or, indeed, facilitate prior to the interview. Participants brought detailed accounts and, in the context of becoming familiar with the notion of a deliberate practice of attention, the descriptions of their lived experience were more detailed and thoughtful with elaborations on their individual observations. In the interview process, I was mindful of the continuum from description to interpretation (Kvale, 2001a) and attempted to work consciously with the notion of multiple levels of meaning, reflecting on how the story was told by the participant, the audience (in this case, the audience was me) and the context, all in equal measure (Denzin, 2001).

All interviews were recorded, and the data files were shared with the participants after which they were saved securely on the university's data storage drive. My reflections on the experience of listening to the interviews months later are described later in the study. The process yielded an unexpected sense of awe and humility. The sacredness of sharing stories about attention in a professional, yet intimate, manner taught us all about what we do not know or appreciate about the significance of attention in our lives and how unusual it is to talk about our practice of it.

3.1.3. Cooperative Inquiry

The cooperative inquiry events were held away from the workplace and participants gave their time over two Saturdays to participate in the study. I was conscious about their investment and I wanted to ensure that participants had an experience that would enrich them in some way. I was mindful, however, how this desire to make it a worthwhile experience for them was not to colour or influence the research process itself. Consequently, I focused on creating a sense of *safety* through the meticulous planning and careful facilitation of the event itself. Being in a senior management position, I have come to understand the power of our conscious administration of the so-called mundane. The management of all the detailed practical aspects of the event was an important part of inviting the participants to relax into the experience and to feel safe to share – now not only with me but with a group of others in the same profession – their intimate lived experiences of the practice of attention in the

workplace. From conducting and witnessing the interviews, I recognised how unusual it was to be asked to do that and I knew that it would take an extra effort on my part to inspire the levels of trust necessary to expose one's practice, or lack of it, to a group of peers within a relatively short time span.

In the first event, it took a while before participants stopped addressing me and began to address each other as a group. One particular participant rather dominated the discussion, but I noticed how well these senior managers responded to the volume of contributions and skilfully navigated the social implications without offending or irritating each other. This unspoken experience seemed to bring about a certain level of trust among us all, not least in me as facilitator. I appreciated the pedagogical approach taken by some of the participants to also respond to my presence as a co-researcher. I have described below how I worked mindfully with the balance of the facilitator/co-researcher role and how I consciously allowed my own voice to blend in with theirs.

In both events, the conversation was free flowing and unobstructed. Listening back to the recordings, the stories that were shared are powerful and intimate ones, telling volumes not only about the practice of attention of that individual but also about the phenomenology of the workplace as such. I have tried to capture this in the discussion of findings below.

The two events saw two different constellations due to various demands on the participants. At the time, I was wondering how this would affect the findings. I was caught in the detail of wanting the research events to include the same people for continuity. This, however, became a non-issue in the analysis of findings when, in the process of listening back to the recordings, I realised how the group found its own voice in each event. I was not listening to *who said what* but to *what was said*. The concern about the slight variation in the constellation, therefore, was unnecessary.

Both cooperative inquiry events were in every way above and beyond what I had expected. The level and depth of sharing, and the quality of attention given to the group by the group, was extraordinary. I kept wondering whether I had somehow attracted a group of particularly wise practitioners or whether the theme and the context itself called upon the high quality of contributions and attention that was shared. Below, I go into further detail about this experience in light of the power and function of cooperative inquiry from a methodological perspective.

3.1.4. Transcription and Analysis

From the outset, it was clear that the analysis of data would require a rigorous yet multidimensional approach and I started searching for methods that would constitute what I began to understand as a *wide-angle lens*. My conclusion after the second set of interviews was that an appropriate approach would need to recognise the many layers and dimensions of the data – the different underlying epistemologies (Code, 1991; Denzin and Lincoln, 2006, 2011) and the context of the study itself (Denzin, 2001). I was thus looking for a rigorous method that would embody “[...] a critical, multi-perspectival, multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approach to inquiry” (Rogers, 2012, p.1).

My search ended in January 2017 when I encountered *Bricolage* (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005; Levi-Strauss, 1967). I offer a description below of how I approached and applied Bricolage and what this method brought to the analysis of the data. Here, however, I describe the concrete steps I took and what emerged as I experimented with Bricolage in the process.

When the audio recordings were completed, I distributed the sound files back to the individual participants, inviting them to withdraw any material they did not wish me to include in the study. None of the participants wanted to withdraw or change any content.

From the outset, I recognised that the process of transcribing recordings would never be an objective undertaking. The transcription of an interview or cooperative inquiry is an account of a *social interaction* and, as such, it invites researchers to transform fluid and transient experiences into a record of textual, visual and spatial representations (Jenks, 2018). New meaning emerges as the transcript moves from one stage of exploration to another and that makes it a *living* document (ibid). My own narratives inevitably inform every step of the interpretation of the narratives of others and this crucial aspect of the research journey is one I will return to in the following sections.

I was committed to capturing – as accurately as possible – the stories senior managers shared about their practice of attention but I did not want to run the risk of losing the multi-perspectival lens (Denzin, 2011; Rogers, 2012) required by a Bricolage-informed approach (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005; Levi-Strauss, 1967). After a process of experimentation, which I share glimpses of below, I chose to create two sets of *open transcriptions* (Jenks, 2018) with the view to discern from the first one what questions or themes arose and, from the second one, what aspects to investigate further and include in the study (Jenks, 2018) –

The First Phase

In the first transcription, I recorded freely as many layers of an event as possible: verbatim accounts where a particular anecdote was shared, observations and reflections as well as non-verbal events, such as pauses, intonation and audible deep breaths. The transcripts pointed to emerging questions and revealed a set of themes, as follows:

- Captured attention
- Embodied attention
- Focused attention
- Distributed attention
- Evenly suspended attention
- Attention and awareness
- Attention and power
- Attention as virtue
- Attention and self-knowledge

This analysis of the first complete data set informed the development of a framework for the second transcription phase.

The Second Phase

Using the framework developed from the first analysis of transcriptions, the second phase enabled me to allocate participant contributions to themes. The framework included space for uncategorised contributions where new layers of meaning, or other newly observed aspects, did not belong to an identified theme. In this second phase, I repeated the practice of recording own observations and reflections in real-time and I logged previously unnoticed non-verbal events.

The process of deciding to adopt this particular approach was a learning journey with many unexpected turns that revealed the complexity and pitfalls of the Bricolage method. I will share here an example of my experimentation, which demonstrates a reflexive engagement with the limitations of my own attention practice in the process of analysing data about the attention practice of others.

My initial plan was to create a detailed worksheet that would be completed in real time as I was listening to the interviews for the first time. It would prompt me to capture an extensive range of different elements: a) time of contribution, b) actual verbatim contribution, c) emerging themes, d) repeating themes, e) diverging themes, f) the felt social dynamic, g)

impressions of the unspoken, h) my own reflections and i) general observations. As I was preparing to engage with the data, the complexity of the different elements that I wanted to capture created a sense of intense overwhelm. My fantasy about Bricolage was that it would be a liberating, artistic engagement with the data, yet my strong reaction to the worksheet and the mere sound of our voices on the recordings became a difficult motivational roadblock. I realised that I had been overambitious, and I decided to radically simplify my approach.

After a short period of contemplating the matter, I chose to take an open, liberated approach of simply listening back to the interviews with the view to capture what caught my attention, as well as my own observations, impressions or reflections about it. I would not aim to record emerging, repeating or diverging themes, nor try to categorise and organise at this stage. This approach immediately released me from the complex system involved in my initial plan. I recognised in myself a way of working from my earlier, short career as a young musician. Whenever I was unable to motivate myself to practice the complex pieces I had to learn (which was most of the time), I would allow myself to improvise and compose music instead. This would liberate my attention from the capture of goals and ambition, motivating me to enter a creative flow state³.

Another important insight I had during the first stages of experimentation was that I needed to distance myself from the event I was listening to and the personalities involved in it. I had to enter a different inner state in which I was listening to the content with no underlying inner narratives in the background. My inner narratives, I noticed, would commonly be judgments about my own performance as an interviewer, avoidance, shyness or irritation. It took a while until I had mastered this distanciation (Ricoeur, 1974) to the point where I could listen to the interviews with an open mind and without major effort to silence my own inner commentator.

The experience woke me up to a crucial part of the research process as a whole, namely that every aspect of this study was an exercise in the practice of attention. From the first moment I sat in front of a participant to this very moment of writing, I am on a journey with attention. My reflexive engagement with the analysis taught me that the very act of listening, recording my observations, coding or categorising was an exercise in becoming aware of what my attention would be drawn to, where it would lead me and what impact this would have on the interpretation of contributions.

³ I hasten to add that I of course never did become a professional musician – no doubt because of my recurring need to liberate my attention from the capture of goals and the constant avoidance of actual practice. The discipline of focused attention has been an acquisition of later in life.

Inspired by this insight, I embarked on the next stages in the process, now ready and able to engage methodically with emergent, repeating and divergent themes, coding and categorising them across the interviews.

Towards the end of the process, an aesthetically pleasing coherence started to reveal itself. I started to identify literature that, directly or indirectly, would address the core themes and I began to discover which of those had prominence in the various scholarly fields – and which did not. The review of literature tells the story of that journey and most of the core themes that presented themselves are still visible in the index.

The analysis of the data, as here described, became another significant contribution to the argument in this study that self-knowledge and the practice of attention go hand in hand. I proceed to explain this in some depth further on in this study.

3.1.5. Identifying Data Sets

In the remaining chapters, data from the fieldwork will be identifiable and referenced as described in the following.

Interview data

Data sets from interviews will be referenced using research identities (see table 2 above).

When reiterating substantial narrative from data sets, the text will appear indented and in grey italics, denoting the type of event as follows:

Stella described this in detail. As a consultant, she is often feeling the pressure of the competing demands for her attention (Interview).

Where using a direct quote from a participant, the source is indicated as follows:

With our attention captured by fears of failure, we may just choose to run faster in that hamster wheel – that is, until we decide to tell a different story (Chinta).

When referring to material and findings derived from *several interviews*, the text will appear as above but with reference only to the type of event as follows:

Most employees simply cannot afford to experiment. They cannot afford to be perceived as lazy or not producing valuable outputs. The option of switching off to do their thinking time feels remote (Interviews).

When quoting directly from a participant within a description, it will appear thus:

At the end of the study, April would name the same practice with more deliberate choice of language, she said –

Shifting my space, my physical location, body and energy to help create more attention. It wakes me up to my attention again (April).

Cooperative inquiry data

Data sets from the cooperative inquiry events will be referenced as the interviews with the text presented in grey italics and followed by the event title as follows –

Participants in this study spoke animatedly about their individual experiences of captured attention and the constant challenges this poses for them in the workplace (Cooperative Inquiry).

Abstracts from contributions of those events are reiterated and not attributed to a particular participant.

Autoethnographic accounts

Data sets from autoethnographic accounts appear as abstracts and selected paragraphs in the body of the text and will be introduced in italics, indented, single-spaced and, when available, these are titled and dated as follows –

It has been an evolving revelation so far, listening to the interviews. I am aware just how many subtleties there are in what is being said. This is something I keep realising: how layered it is. (Listening to the Interviews: 17 January 2017)

Where I am sharing examples of how I reflected on a particular account after writing it, it will appear indented, single-spaced and indicating month/year, for example –

Learning from the reflection, I concluded that my attention was on the people of the board and what they may feel and think, rather than on the issue. The issue to be presented was the critical financial situation that the Institute had reached, not what the board members might feel or think about it (July, 2015)

3.2. Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical considerations were concerned with the protection of participants and their organisations. This was addressed through the careful management of data from interviews, cooperative inquiry focus groups and any content in autoethnographic accounts that would identify people, locations and organisations.

The application for approval of the field research was submitted in September 2015 and approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee on the condition that all audio files and

confidential material was stored on a password-protected area on the university's server. This condition was met.

Participation in the research was completely voluntary and each individual was at liberty to withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences. Prior to commencing the field research, all participants received, read and signed an invitation and consent form. All data collected during the research process was kept confidential and stored securely on the university's network drive. Each participant received a copy of their own interview in an audio file so that they had the opportunity to listen back and, if relevant, withdraw comments or statements made before the analysis took place.

All data used in this study has been anonymised and prior to the publication of data, access to anonymised information was granted only to the Supervisory Team. Names in this study are therefore all fictional. All data and direct quotes have been changed sufficiently to conceal identities. Where such changes were at risk of potentially compromising the validity or value of the contribution, the study aimed to stay as close to the actual events as possible and participants were asked to provide written approval of the text before it was used. Equally, in all autoethnographic accounts, the identities of people, places and organisations have been concealed in all instances where explicit consent to reveal was not formally granted in writing.

An interesting ethical issue arose in the engagement with data where an ambiguous statement would be liable to inaccurate interpretation or confabulation. I became conscious of this particular issue in the writing up of the findings, analysis and discussion chapter and I made it a practice to stop writing if I suspected that my analysis or interpretation of transcripts was becoming subject to an unconscious desire for this to back up an idea or assumption that I was developing. Where possible, I would return immediately to the raw data and validate my suspicion or confirm my direction of the narrative on the basis of a closer look. Equally, I was aware that my approach included attending to the *unsaid*.

Related to the ethical issue of confabulation, or over-interpreting data to fit my own research agenda, I was mindful of my moral obligations as a researcher and what Kincheloe (2005) calls a "new level of research self-consciousness" (p.324). Here, from an autoethnographic account trying to capture the issues I was encountering –

It has been an evolving revelation so far, listening to the interviews. I am aware just how many subtleties there are in what is being said. This is something I keep realising: how layered it is. I am still finding my way with this. So far, it is becoming easier to create flow. I basically listen and write simultaneously, capturing almost

everything verbatim but sometimes, when it does not seem to matter (and herein lies a danger, I suppose) I reiterate phrases. I stick, as much as possible, to what the person actually says but in order to keep up I will from time to time put it in my own words. When I do, I make sure it is visible that I have done it, by not using first-person language, for example. (Listening to the Interviews: 17 January 2017)

In 2019, I revisited transcripts and data and decided to apply another layer of rigour in the checking and double-checking of raw data. During the process, I also took inspiration and guidance on these and related ethical matters from scholars in the field who have shared their in-depth research on the different ethical dimensions of working with groups, in particular Barbour (2007), Betts et al. (1996), Krueger and Casey (2015), Krueger (1996, 2006, 2006a) and Massey (2011).

3.2.1. Limitations and Preconceptions

Limitations of the research pertain to the sampling size, which was restricted to ten persons and based on convenience sampling. In the selection process, I paid particular attention to the balance of gender, age, experience levels, seniority and work context. Six men and four women participated. Overall, the age ranged from 25 to 65 with only one participant in the lower age range between 25-35 and one participant between 55 and 65. Seniority ranged from middle manager in a medium sized charity to serial entrepreneur, founder and CEO of a larger corporate conglomerate. Sectors and industries covered a wide range and represented national, multinational and international organisations. Another autoethnographic account describes my reflections on limitations and how they affect me as follows –

I notice how different I come across in the different interviews. I wonder how consciously I adapt to whom I am speaking. Listening to the Stella interview today, the John one yesterday and Tajee before that, it is quite striking to feel the difference. I am also aware that some of these were the 'early days' of interviewing and some of them were later on where I had tried and tested the dos and don'ts of it. Perhaps there are also differences in terms of the personality of the person I am speaking to...or the seniority even? Gender also comes into it, I am sure, though that is not so tangible. I am interested if age is a factor. The Stella interview does indicate something there perhaps. She is the only participant significantly younger than the others. I am also sure that the space I was in at the time (what I had been doing and my mood) would have dictated the quality of listening and responding. I am aware that I had to practice a certain type of focused attention in the interviews, which was not always easy. I know that, in some of them at least other things distracted me. I remember struggling in one of two of them holding the attention to the person speaking yet, I am so practiced in that so it would not have been felt...I think...but how will I know for sure (Listening to the Interviews: 18 January 2017).

Here, we also notice another interesting ethical dimension I am reflecting on, which concerns my own emotional state and general mood – another validation of the inevitable impact the

researcher has on the research and the necessity of the mindfulness and reflexive practice involved in this work. This ethical aspect is accompanied by the more obvious sympathy/antipathy responses that I was also consciously managing in the process. In engaging with the recordings later, I was interested to note how my ability to stay neutral and open was generally consistent but ever so slightly affected by levels of stress or tiredness. There are no visible signs of antipathy, rather it would seem that my ability to refrain from reassuring participants is lessened on occasions when I am clearly under pressure.

Journals remind me of what else was going on at that time and I can find the reasons behind subtle cues in the recording. It was only much later in the process that I discovered how these rigorous observations of subtleties that I recorded during my engagement with the raw data were foregrounded in the process of writing transcripts but had little to no impact on the use of data in the analysis and discussion. By the time I was simply learning from what had been said, I was not concerned with whether my level of tiredness or stress impacted on the quality of my interviewing or my level of openness. This proves yet again how important this level of rigour is in the process of translating raw data – later on, it simply gets lost unless autoethnographic accounts of the process are there to remind us.

Looking at the more fundamental preconceptions, assumptions and biases that have influenced the process, I have already mentioned the one that relates to the underlying premise of this study, which is that *a deliberate practice of attention in the workplace has value*. My reasons for working on that assumption are essentially what constitute the substance of this work. Furthermore, the ultimate preconception that influences what I think, say and do is of course my particular ontology – my story of the world and my place in it. There is too much that one could write about that here, but I will tease out a few aspects that may have relevance to how this study has been conducted and what it has become.

Disentangling some of the autobiographical threads running through this work, I look back at a life that has demanded accelerated intellectual and social maturation but prevented a more age-appropriate gradual development of responsibility for self and others. This has resulted in capacities that I value every day and it also comes with a certain level of oppositional defiance. With no means – no time, nor funds – to engage in academic study until later in life, the valuing of practice and application over philosophising and theorising has been survival-driven. There are traces of resentment – how I would have loved to live in University Halls and study full time, not sit at home every evening after a long day at work and spend

weekends in the company of distance learning material⁴. How I would have loved to be a full-time doctoral student without constant interruptions, distractions and operational demands. With this needs-based *earning over learning* story, I was aware of a tinge of arrogance in the early days of this study, particularly when it came to what I called *armchair perspectives* on the practice of attention and my relationship with the academy. As a young CEO, I would try to avoid hiring consultants and executive coaches who did not have a practitioner background – my inner narrative would be *what can you really know about my situation if you have not also suffered sleepless nights over a balance sheet?* Now, as a consultant and executive coach myself, I value knowing intimately what this is like, but it is not *only* those experiences that enable me to understand or guide another management practitioner well. I have reflected deeply on how my own story has affected this journey and I have learnt many such lessons since I started the research.

My narrative about the world and my place in it has changed and were I to conduct the interviews with participants today, I would probably ask different questions. Without a doubt, however, the question of *what a deliberate practice of attention means for the development of self and others in the workplace* is more relevant today than it was when I started. The arrogance yielded by my particular past notwithstanding, this study has only confirmed how important the practitioner perspective is and validated how relatively ignored it also is in the literature of management learning.

I am also ready to own the other obvious bias that my life story has formed in me – that I am still here because of my commitment to self-development (be that therapy, coaching, contemplative inquiry or meditation). When I talk about *a path to self-knowledge*, I am not only concluding that this is of the utmost importance because Hadot's (2004) iteration of ancient Greek culture aligns with the stories of participants in this study. I am emphasising its value because it plays an existential role in my own story and it *is* the conclusion of a thorough analysis of lived experience that it is a necessary condition for what I have come to understand as a practice of attention.

My ontological perspective also rests on other underpinning values that influence the research presented here. To mention but a few – I do not question whether there is such a thing as morality. Whilst I recognise the neuroscientific view of attention, I do not question whether we do in fact have the capacity to make free choices with our attention. I *do* question whether

⁴ I hasten to add that I remain truly grateful to the great institution that is the Open University for what they have done for people in my circumstances. The material was of the highest standard and the tutors excellent.

self-knowledge is possible, but I proceed to talk about it without providing an answer and my narrative in the rest of the study is that self-knowledge is a path we can take. I also make no secret of the fact that I am an advocate for giving time to the practice of attention in the workplace even at the cost of time to *do the business of business*.

As a researcher, these are just some of the important preconceptions that I need to be transparent about and with this, I recognise how this study is also a tale about an ontological and epistemological evolution.

3.3. Phenomenological Lenses

In setting the scene for an engagement with the descriptions of lived experience in subsequent chapters, we will now take a step back and address some of the core concepts in the field of phenomenology. Without seeking to offer an in-depth theoretical explanation, I am here presenting what I consider to be a reasonable methodological backdrop for an application of various ideas in the ensuing discussion. As I proceed, however, it is worth keeping in mind that the development of phenomenology from philosophy to methodology in its various applications has yielded some significant terminological questions and debates about the themes I aim to address here (Dowling, 2007). I will not be reviewing or discussing these debates but focus instead on the implications of my chosen interpretations for this study.

It was Husserl – the father of phenomenology – who introduced the notion of a person’s *lifeworld*. He argued that through a conscious engagement with our lifeworld we could “[...] learn to see what stands before our eyes [...]” and get to the very essence of its nature (Tan et al., 2009, p.4). Good examples of contemporary applications of the lifeworld concept are found in the fields of health, care, social work and education (Ekebergh, 2009) as well as in the transdisciplinary field of social pedagogy (Cameron and Moss, 2011). A rather condensed but accessible definition of lifeworld can be found in Crossley (2005), who states that the it is, in essence, simply *the lived world* and he continues –

The lifeworld is the world as we experience it, a world constituted within our experience by means of the habitual schemas, fore-knowledge and know-how that we bring to bear upon it. And analysis of the lifeworld is analysis of this process of habitual constitution (p. 184)

The idea of analysing the *process of habitual constitution* is linked to the notion of *habitus*. Essentially, the word *habitus* refers to our acquired dispositions or habits. Crossley points out that the word *habit* has suffered radical limitation from its original meaning and that the use of *habitus* is therefore preferred when referring to its original, richer meaning. Crossley states,

Any examination of human experience [...] reveals that we always tend to perceive, in any situation, more than is actually given to experience. Our perceptions are effectively shaped by a habitual stock of schemas and forms of tacit knowledge (ibid).

So, according to this idea, we automatically perceive more than is actually *given* by the experience itself and the pure given-ness of an experience or object may drown in our pre-shaped ideas. Husserl's notion of lifeworld was the foundational, rational structure for a person's *natural attitude* and it consists of the beliefs a person holds about the world and themselves – that is, it is where these beliefs and attitudes are ultimately justified (Beyer, 2016). If we want to engage phenomenologically, then, consciously engaging with the content of our lifeworld is paramount to facilitating an experience that is as uncluttered as possible.

Epoché, or bracketing, is the core component that enables us to engage phenomenologically with the lifeworld in Husserl's theory. There is no quick way of explaining the different views that have emerged since Husserl first introduced it (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008; Gurwitsch, 1964; Van Manen, 1990, 2014, 2017; Zahavi, 2005). Once the multitude of perspectives on this is acknowledged, however, one could tentatively propose that bracketing essentially means to park one's assumptions, judgments and habits, as far as one is aware of these, in order to avoid distortion or projection in the analysis of the experience. Husserl proposed that there is a *universal* and a *local* epoché – the former implies that one has to bracket all assumptions about the external world and the latter, that only certain assumptions are bracketed, contingent to the nature or character of the object of the study. I shall not enter into a further explanation of the different aspects to this but simply recognise that this distinction exists (Beyer, 2016).

In my use of epoché, I think of it as an *inner gesture*. This inner gesture aims to suspend one's natural belief in the existence of the object (or experience) of a phenomenological study. It is important here to look briefly at Husserl's notion of the *noema* (Husserl, 1931), which refers to the *content* of an experience regardless of whether the experience is veridical or not⁵. The noema of an experience of hallucination (as an example of a non-veridical experience) can be the object of phenomenological investigation (Beyer, 2016) just as the noema of the experience of driving with a flat tire. Epoché (the bracketing of my *belief in* and *pre-understanding of* an object) is a phenomenological *attitude*, or inner gesture, that I adopt to study the noema (the content of an experience/or object) regardless of its veridicality. The

⁵ It should be noted that the concept of noema is one of the most widely debated within the community of Husserl scholars. I therefore wish to state that my chosen interpretation of the term is informed by the referenced scholars only and can therefore only be considered in that context.

attitude of epoché serves to ensure that the experience of noema is not coloured by my beliefs about reality or habitual ontological narratives about the world. The point of the phenomenological investigation, therefore, is not to determine *what is real* but to attend to the *what-it-is-like-ness*, the quality, of the experience. As we proceed to the discussion of findings, we will explore how the attitude of epoché relates to what Freud (1975) called the *Analytic Attitude* and the state of *evenly suspended attention* (French and Simpson, 2015).

After Husserl, a number of other scholars developed different versions of epoché. Ricouer (1974), for example, introduced the notion of *distanciation*, which essentially points to the significance of a managed distance between *the experience* and *the experiencer*. The aim of distanciation is to create conditions for encountering what Ricouer called *an enlarged self* through textual representations of lived experience (Tan et al. 2009, p.4). Ricouer talked about the importance of avoiding projection of oneself into the text in order to allow the potential emergence of a *new self* to the *old self* (ibid). In the development of the distanciation argument we have an evolution and extension of epoché, which opens up the possibility for an encounter with a *new self* in an experience of an *old self*, contingent, however, to a conscious engagement with existing ontological narratives. In studying the noema of an experience we are invited to – and phenomenologically justified in – attending to what emerges rather than seeking validation of existing beliefs. A phenomenological study of lived experience requires that we suspend assumptions about what we take to be reality in order to create the space for the as yet undiscovered. That implies an inner readiness to *let go* in order to *let come* – this is an inner attitude that will repeat in our investigation and as we engage with the findings, analysis and discussion below.

Without going into great detail, it is nevertheless worth looking here at the principal difference between Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). As we explored above, Husserl's approach has at its core the idea of epoché, an inner attitude, or gesture, serving to ensure that the experience of the phenomena is not encumbered by personal agenda and positioning. Heidegger rejected the Husserlian idea of epoché and the notion of *being as dualism*. His main issue with the notion of epoché was based on the fundamental objection to Husserl's tenet that it is possible to "explore consciousness separate from the world in which the person is situated" (p. 2). Heidegger claimed that subject and object are inseparable, and he supported this stance by introducing the idea of *Dasein*.

Dasein can be understood as "an entity that has an understanding of its own Being and possibilities" (ibid.). Heidegger's *Dasein* includes the exploration of Being through observing *average everydayness* and *the self* with regard to "average everyday existence through

interaction with others” (ibid.). Dasein’s existence, says Heidegger, is one of Being With the world, but this Being is influenced by the “they” – coined by Heidegger as *das Man*. Das Man is another way of understanding the *otherness* that reflects back to Dasein the views it holds of social realities and it is those views that inform encounters with other Dasein (p. 3).

The Heideggerian recognition of the influence of Das Man on Dasein is directly linked to the use of personal narratives foregrounded in this study. We are exploring here what happens when we suspend our attention evenly in a gesture of embracing the truth-in-the-moment (French and Simpson, 2000) but in so doing, we are looking to remain situated and learn from our biases and assumptions, not pretend that we can transcend them. What we want to achieve in this study, therefore, is to engage consciously with otherness – the “they” – and understand how this influences our stories in a given moment. There are many Heideggerian ideas that deserve further exploration – lived experience, everyday ordinariness, Dasein, being in the world, being with, encounters with entities, temporality, and the care structure (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016, provide a useful overview) – yet, for the purposes of this study, it is the Heideggerian commitment to exploring the meaning of *everydayness* and the beauty of our ordinary human existence that is in focus.

Questioning, but not dismissing, Husserl’s idea of bracketing and what has been framed as his transcendental phenomenology, I want to acknowledge that the disagreement between Heidegger and Husserl becomes particularly interesting when we are dealing with the veridicality of experience. If we, as Heidegger seems to suggest, cannot escape the *everyday ordinariness* in the phenomenology of lived experience then what happens when we engage with dreams, confabulation and so on? If phenomenology is not to determine *what is real* but to attend to the particular quality of an experience, then we need to understand better how Heidegger suggests we engage with the content of our lifeworld and the conscious or unconscious stories we tell about it.

In summary, taking a phenomenological approach to researching lived experience means to engage with the quality of an experience. The process is not concerned with an evaluation of the veridicality of experiences. So that our habitus and pre-understanding of the world does not distort the process, we can adopt an attitude of *époché*, or we may practice distancing (Ricouer, 1974). If we follow the Heideggerian approach, we work with the notion of subject-object unity and seek to understand Dasein in the world and the “they” that inhabits it. As an inner gesture, this invites the emergence of new worlds (Cuncliffe, 2008; Van Manen, 1990) – or the appearance of a new self in an experience of an old self (Tan et al., 2009). Paramount to the process is a readiness to *let go* in order to *let come*, which is to say that we must be

willing to entertain the possibility of the as yet undiscovered within the very phenomenon of our lived experience.

Lastly, a word on the prominent role of reflection: we cannot describe the quality of an event as we live it – the description we end up with will always be an account of a pre-reflective state (Van Manen, 1990). Gallagher and Zahavi (2012, p.61) propose that pre-reflective self-consciousness is necessary but not sufficient for first-person knowledge. They say: “In order to obtain knowledge about one’s experiences something more than pre-reflective self-consciousness is needed” (p.61). It is important to note that Gallagher and Zahavi are not suggesting that we are unconscious of experiences in our pre-reflective state but that our attention is on the object of the experience and not on the phenomenology of it. Even though my attention is not on the *mineness* of the experience, my *ownership* of it, as it were, still “[...] figures as a subtle background presence” (Zahavi, 2005, p.124). If we engage phenomenologically with direct experience, then we must engage *reflectively*. We have to accept that the reflective act will never yield an accurate reproduction of the experience so we must assume that our experiences are transformed in the act. If we are willing to loosely commit to this interpretation of Zahavi’s logic, it follows that what we end up with is in effect a new phenomenon. Taking this view does not devalue a description, or reduce it to a made-up story. Rather, it authenticates it for what it is: a phenomenological description of what Van Manen (1990) calls a *possible human experience*: “It is in this sense that phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character” (p.58). It is also in this sense that the veridicality of the experience is completely and utterly secondary to investigation into the *quality* of the experience, qualified only by the person who has it.

In this study, I have consciously approached the phenomenological descriptions that follow as new phenomena. These are accounts of lived experience and they are *born* out of the pre-reflective state, *midwifed* by a desire to understand and *transformed* by a reflective act.

3.4. Reflections on Method: Second-Person Perspective

My thorough exploration of different approaches to the analysis of second-person data was accompanied by scholars, such as Brook (2015), Denzin and Lincoln, (2005, 2011), DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), Dick (2001), Kincheloe, (2001, 2005), Kvale (2007a, 2007) MacIntyre and Levi-Strauss (1967) Reason and Seeley (2008) and Van Manen (1990). I am naming their work because it has contributed immensely to my understanding of methods and techniques in the field of practice that offered a multiperspectival lens through which to look at complex, layered and emergent material. Once I had understood that it was a wide-angle

lens that was required here, I began to engage with Dick's (2001) notion of emergent theories in a new way. In relation to emergence, he states that "[t]he theory is 'discovered' gradually in the data, as each datum adds to and refines the interpretation. That is, the theory is responsive to the data" (p.5). I wanted to ensure that my method afforded room for this as well as a sense of coherence between the elements of *process*, *content*, *form* and *method*. Without creating a complex design challenge, or indeed chaos, my aim would be that these elements would interweave.

Academically, there is nothing unusual about taking this approach. There is a growing community of scholars engaged in a wider range of pluralistic qualitative research methods that have discovered, tried and tested rigorous approaches to multi-methodological analysis that allows for emergence. Equally, in the context of phenomenology I found that the idea of mirroring the dynamic of the interview process in the description and presentation of analysis is not uncommon. For example, I was interested to learn from Yardley (2008) that "[...] the structure Merleau-Ponty gave his texts mimics his phenomenological argument – ideas growing and developing, coiling back on themselves" and "[t]he form must remain an integral part of the search for, and the statement of, narrative truth" (p.7).

This notion led to my encounter with Bricolage. In a methodological and representational sense, Bricolage became an important source of inspiration and further exploration. The gateway for Bricolage into social science research was no doubt Levi-Strauss' (1966) *The Savage Mind* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Kincheloe, 2001), which became a game changer primarily for structural anthropology (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Levi-Strauss presents a comparative study of the *untamed* state of mind versus the *scientific* or *domesticated* state of mind, and he describes in detail the attitude, function and method of the *Bricoleur* (ibid.), the latter of which have influenced scholars and methods particularly within pluralist and interpretive qualitative social science research (see also Atkinson, 1998; Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Grbich, 2007; Kincheloe, 2001; Kvale, 2007a, 2007; MacIntyre and Levi-Strauss, 1967; Rogers, 2012).

The various applications of Bricolage as an approach to analysis of qualitative data opened my eyes to a new way of looking at the interviews. Through my study of this approach, I began to recognise the potential advantages and pitfalls of transdisciplinary and multi-methodological approaches. Among scholars who have used the descriptions of the Bricoleur presented by Levi-Strauss to influence their research practice, Denzin, Lincoln (2003, 2011) and Kincheloe (2001) have taken the approach to a new level by developing rigorous methods for analysing data that address layers of meaning, complexity and diverse epistemological and

ontological foundations. They have also argued why this approach is an important contribution to the field. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that Bricolage as a method “[...] respects the complexity of meaning-making processes and the contradictions of the lived world” (p. 5) and they suggest –

[T]he combination of multiple methodological practices, and empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to an inquiry (ibid.).

Rogers (2001) says about Bricolage that it is not a “[...] simple eclectic approach [but] denotes methodological practices explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality” (p.1). He continues to describe how the Bricoleur approaches the examination of phenomena in such a way that this may embrace, rather than deny, multiple and even competing perspectives, as well as what Denzin and Lincoln call the “contradictions of the lived world” (ibid.). Various scholars have experimented with Bricolage as an approach to analysis and there are many dos and don’ts to learn from. Yardley (2008), for example, reflects on her experience as follows –

I am, as a researcher, a bricoleur, a maker of patchwork, a weaver of stories, an assembler of montage (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.5) by which means I construct and convey meaning according to narrative ethic, an approach to research that is neither naïvely humanistic nor romantically impulsive – nor, by any means, easy to achieve (p.5).

Through my work, I have experienced first-hand the multiple layers, dynamics and complexities involved in the workings of *systems within systems* (Long, 2016). As my research is situated within the context of management learning within the workplace, I acknowledge the vast and varied backdrop of theories within the field and although I am not attending directly to those in this study, I wanted to ensure that my analysis of data would not end up crude and reductive (Steffen, 2012), nor suffer an over-simplistic evaluation. The approach of the *research Bricoleur* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Kincheloe, 2001) intrigued me for that reason, but I wanted to be mindful of the potential risks of entering into this territory. Immediately, I was concerned that Bricolage as an approach would carry the danger of creating unnecessary complexity or confusing the analysis with the inclusion of too many layers. Would there also potentially be a risk here about unhelpfully *diffusing* my attention by having to simultaneously keep track of and applying rigour to a scattering of methods used in what would at best be a *Bricolage-esque* type analysis? Would this be received as Kincheloe describes: “[...] bricolage, oh I know what that is; that’s when you really don’t know anything about research but have a lot to say about it” (Kincheloe, 2001, loc.32). We know from my description above how this concern was validated in the early stages of the process and I have explained how I eventually addressed it.

Kincheloe puts the wider debate of disciplinarity / interdisciplinarity at the centre of the discussion about the legitimacy of Bricolage (loc.57). His view on this debate is that we now occupy a scholarly world where boundaries between disciplines have already faded and he concludes that the time for questioning the validity of interdisciplinarity has therefore passed (loc.140). The challenge, he states, is rather to define what we mean by interdisciplinarity and apply the appropriate rigour in the process so that this may take account of complexity and reveal new ontological insights. With regards to the question of legitimacy of Bricolage, Kincheloe concludes –

[...] given the social, cultural and epistemological, and paradigmatic upheavals and alterations of the past few decades, rigorous researchers may no longer enjoy the luxury of choosing whether to embrace bricolage (loc.70).

In the context of my own practice in the workplace, colleagues and I have spent the last decade researching and exploring the meaning and application of interdisciplinarity versus transdisciplinarity. We have so far concluded that the latter approach involves attention to that which lives *between* disciplines, *across* disciplines and *beyond* any individual discipline – an articulation offered by the late Chris Seeley, a scholar in arts based and collaborative action research (see also Reason and Seeley, 2008). Over the years, we have found that the space between, across and beyond disciplines offer the challenge of engaging with *unknowing* on the one hand and, on the other, the opportunity of engaging with what we may call a *negative space* within and out of which new connections and insights may emerge (Dick, 2001).

I also took a great deal of inspiration from Denzin's reflexive interpretive interviewing approach (Denzin, 2001), which he describes as a "[...] simulacrum, a perfectly miniature and coherent world in its own right" (p.25). Denzin is an advocate of a social science that *empowers* as well as reveals worlds within worlds. His reflexive interpretive interviewing approach, he states, creates a space where "[...] humans can become who they wish to be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination" (p. 21). The stories participants told me of their practice of attention in the workplace were, I have to assume, a representation of their lived experience, but can I also assume that it could be a narrative in which they presented themselves in a particular light? Whatever that light, it would likely reveal something of how they perceive and experience themselves within a story about who they wish to become. Viewing the stories through this lens could also potentially reveal to me more of the landscape of their attention in practice. Should I choose to attend to this layer in the analysis, I would need to consider carefully the risk of projecting my own stories and aspirations into theirs. Levi-Strauss (1966) said: "The 'bricoleur' may not ever complete his [*sic*] purpose but he always puts something of himself into it" (p.14). I considered, once again, the implications of this complex and interesting *dance* with Denzin (2001) in mind –

As researchers, we belong to a moral community. The reflexive interview helps us create dialogic relationships with that community. These relationships, in turn, allow us to enact an ethic of care and empowerment (p.21)

That *ethic of care and empowerment* belongs to the co-created new world that emerges out of the interview and which is situated within the larger world of human affairs (Denzin, 2001), a political landscape that offers multiple pitfalls when we allow ourselves to believe in the authenticity of human experience (Yardly, 2008) and the legitimacy of its representation. Whether we believe there is a *real world*, or whether we believe with Denzin that there is not, the reflexive interpretive interview is an opportunity to understand and observe how people construct meaning and make sense of the world *they* inhabit. Bricolage allows me to go

“[...] down those fascinating cross-disciplinary roads... [T]hose fascinating side roads and intuitive diversions often lead somewhere important however obscure the route might seem in the beginning. Why let them go? Why not pinpoint them on the philosophical map, find which line on which they belong and make connections? (Yardly, 2008, p.4)

Rogers (2012) describe five types of bricoleur: the interpretive, methodological, theoretical, political and narrative. I was interested in the *interpretive* Bricoleur about whom he states that they “recognize that knowledge is never free from subjective positioning or political interpretations” (p. 4). The researcher, says Rogers, must be mindful of their “position and knowledge creation in the context of the research itself and the position of participants” (ibid.).

When I collected from each of the participants their individual definition and understanding of attention, this was done in order to contribute to an epistemological contextualisation of each interview. Epistemologically, says Rogers “Bricoleurs explore how the foundations of knowledge of a given context surround an object of inquiry” and, he explains, “[they] will examine the histories of thought that shape a phenomenon” (p.10). So, within my study – and to do justice to this aspect of the data – I had to dig deeper and understand more about the participants. With this in mind, I decided to get to know them all better and engage in further dialogue with them between interviews. This proved to be rewarding in all respects.

Participants responded well to the invitation to share their insights, questions and reflections, not only with me but also as part of the cooperative inquiry between sessions with each other. In this process, I was enabled to expand certain levels of my understanding of their context, their way of thinking about and viewing the world. Yardley (2008) observes about Bricolage that the approach may serve to bridge gaps between different ways of thinking and seeing, and between different bodies of knowledge (p. 4). She speaks about offering herself and the reader the opportunity to become textually multi-lingual through extending the boundaries in

which one may explore a philosophical question. This aligns with what I observed and the feedback from participants during this time validates the sense that this time saw a development of new languages.

Inspired by Kvale's *ad hoc* techniques (Kvale, 2007a), I started to look for patterns and themes, counted and clustered, searched for plausibility, contrasted and compared, differentiated and made connections. Encouraged by Denzin's exploration of multiple layers (Denzin, 2001; 2014) and Kincheloe's (2001) invitation to engage with the "[...] dangerous knowledge of the multivocal results of humans' desire to know themselves and the world" (loc.294), I was attending in equal measures to what was *not present* and *not being said* in the interviews. As I state above, this activity of attending to that which wasn't present or said, made me acutely aware of my obligations both to the moral research community, as presented by Denzin (2001) and need for a higher level of research self-consciousness" (Kincheloe, 2005) when dealing with multiple contexts and layers. I was touching the edges and boundaries between disciplines and I felt mobilised to engage creatively with *unknowing*. The echo of Kincheloe's words was ringing in my ears:

[W]e must operate in the ruins of the temple, in a post-apocalyptic social, cultural, psychological, and educational science where certainty and stability have long departed for parts unknown" (loc.82)

As I listened to the interviews, I was aware that I was entering the lifeworld – the world of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990, p.53) – of the other and s/he was inevitably entering mine. In the interview process itself, I attempted to set aside, as much as possible, any taken-for-grantedness or givens that I may be holding so that I, in dialogue with my co-researcher, could make new discoveries rather than seek to validate preconceived ideas or beliefs. Equally, in engaging with the data I attempted to suspend my presuppositions so that I could enter into the lived-experience-description whilst being mindful that the description invariably differs from the experience itself. Avoiding immediate causal explanations and analysis was hard. I wish to dwell here on the significance of performed intersubjectivity and the universal character of phenomenological descriptions and I do this whilst trying to situate myself as a listener and analyst of the data.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) intersubjectivity is "[...] based on the premise that two or more subjectivities become intersubjective as we coordinate our responses with others" (Cuncliffe, 2008, p.129). I look at this in light of Cuncliffe's Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism under the title of which she studies the multi-layered, complex nature of dialogue and how our understanding of *possible worlds* is embodied, embedded in our actions, informed by intuition and a 'mundane' form of intersubjective taken-for-grantedness.

I witnessed in listening to the interviews that we do indeed relate and respond in intuitive, habitual and often pre-lingual ways. I sensed how ‘at home’ we are in our internal surroundings and ways of being with others – so much so that we do not in the moment notice the taken-for-grantedness that dominates much of the interaction (ibid.). In the following, I provide an example of my own inattention in this regard –

In one of the interviews I realise that I have been distracted for a moment. As I re-focus my attention on what the person is saying, I am unable to make sense of it. Clearly, I missed something essential and I cannot reconstruct the story quickly enough to get ready to respond. I know I don’t have much time. In a moment the person will stop speaking and I will not know what to say. A feeling of embarrassment dominates for a while but I do know just what to do – I have been here many times before over the years of sitting in so many meetings.

Here is what I did not say at that moment: I lost my concentration just then. I feel embarrassed about that because I know you have given me an hour of your busy life so that I can interview you for my field research. I need you to tell me that story again from the beginning so that I don’t miss anything essential.

Here is what did happen: As the person ends their story, I start by reassuring them that it was interesting –fascinating – what they just said. Then, in an engaging tone of voice, I ask them to unpack their story for me so that we can look at it in more detail. The person agrees to do that. I am officially out of trouble now, but I am left feeling that I have not been entirely honest. It is not a serious offence to lose concentration, but as I listen to this event, I realise that my behaviour in this instance was habitual and based on an unchallenged assumption: I am taking for granted that this person will be offended if I reveal that I lost my concentration. I assume this knowing that most people lose focus multiple times during any contribution I make but I am used to that. On rare occasions when a person tells me that they lost the thread, I feel invited to repeat what I said, making my contribution clearer and more concise the second time. It is no longer improvised, of course, it is now rehearsed, so something is lost there but I am not put out by that, rather I feel trusted (January, 2017)

The reality I created in the instance described above was informed by my pattern of behaviour, which is undoubtedly informed by multiple influences on me. The reality of that event is, as Weick states: “[...] selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively and negotiated interpersonally” (Cuncliffe, 2008, p.128). Stacey’s (2007) work on complex responsive processes provides a language to help me make sense of these as our “[...] patterns of communicative interaction and figurations of power relations” (p. 300). This brings me to cooperative inquiry in which I found myself part of the constellation and exercising a delicate balancing act.

It was John Heron who back in 1971 articulated the original ideas that inform experiential inquiry. Since then, it developed into what is now referred to as cooperative inquiry and understood as “a methodology for a science of persons” (Reason, 2002, p.169). Ospina et al., (2008) state about cooperative inquiry that it “[...] is a systematic process of action and

reflection among co-inquirers who are tackling a common question of burning interest” (Ospina et al., 2008, p.131); this methodology, in their words “[...] gives primacy to practice as a source of knowing” (ibid. p. 132). I chose the method for this study because I was interested in finding and articulating the connections between theory and practice in an effective but also collaborative way (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2001; Ospina et al., 2008; Reason, 1998, 1999). In recent years, social science researchers have embraced this method as an action-based approach appropriate to their field. It sits comfortably within the family of action research methods and the debate about its legitimacy has been tempered by its useful and wide application – in fact, Lather (1993) refers to discussions about legitimacy as the “fertile obsession with validity” (Bradbury-Huang and Reason, 2006, p.343). Cooperative inquiry, as one the articulations of action research, is supported by arguments that are grounded in certain epistemic beliefs, including “the participative worldview, the human person as agent, critical subjectivity, the political, epistemological ecological, and spiritual dimensions of participation” (Reason, 2002, p. 169).

Cooperative inquiry can be regarded as a way of conducting focus groups. Over the years it has largely been agreed that “[...] qualitative research in general, and focus groups in particular, are best suited to exploratory, formative, or process evaluation research” (Betts et al., 1996, p.279). Barbour (2007) draws our attention to the confused uses of the term focus group and defines it as follows: “Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction” (p. 2). Krueger and Casey (2015) make it clear that the overall purpose of focus groups is to gather opinions and better understand how people feel and think about an issue (loc. 357). They state that one of the important roles of the researcher is to create a permissive environment in which participants can share perceptions and views without the need for consensus: “A focus group is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (ibid.). Krueger and Casey furthermore recommend that groups are led by an experienced moderator or interviewer and do not exceed ten people. Whilst I did not exceed this recommended number of participants, my approach was to facilitate only the beginning and the end of the cooperative inquiry. As yet another practitioner in this research, I wanted, as far as possible, to be a participant – a co-researcher and inquirer.

Barbour (2007), Betts et al. (1996) and Massey, 2011) represent different perspectives on what constitutes good practice, however, there seem to be agreed means of determining whether what has been conducted was or was not a focus group and there are also a range of suggestions about what may or may not represent use or abuse of the focus group as a forum

for research. There is also general agreement about the limitations of focus groups in relation to external validity. Those pertain to issues like the potential for generalisation because of the limited participants involved, biases of the moderator in the questioning process, biases in the selection processes of both participants and data, subjectivity generally – if that is considered a limitation – and so on (Barbour, 2007; Betts et al., 1996; Krueger, 1996, 2006, 2006a; Krueger and Casey, 2015; Massey, 2011).

Given that this study is concerned with the practice of attention in the workplace, Heron and Reason's (2001) insight in relation to research outcomes is pertinent: "The emphasis... shifts from the traditional emphasis on propositional knowledge and the written word to practical knowledge and the manifest deed" (p. 149). It is exactly the *practical knowledge* and the *manifest deed* that is central in this research.

The data from the second-person perspective has been extraordinary to work with. Not only have I learnt from the actual insights offered by these colleagues, but I have also learnt from observing and then reflecting on the process of gaining of those insights and the development we have all undergone during this time. These observations and the recording of them in autoethnographic accounts has been an anchor. I will proceed to explain what it has come to represent in this study and how this method is entwined with the inquiry of attention in multiple ways.

3.5 Reflections on Method: First-Person Perspective

I have given a prominent place to the first-person perspective in this study and there are several reasons for that. My earliest encounter with ancient Greek philosophy goes back to the age of ten and I was so fascinated that I copied the content of books into my own journal – most of it was completely incomprehensible to me but I think it was my way of 'getting in under the skin' of it without needing to grasp or explain it. My interest in this has never diminished and so, from the outset of this study, I naturally took inspiration from Stoicism and related traditions where attention is not only a human characteristic but also an inquiry into the *Self* and a conduit for change. The Stoic attitude of *attention to self* and the emphasis on self-examination (Hadot, 1995, 2004) encouraged me to consider what I could do in this study to mirror this commitment to personal development as part of the research. I remembered from my late teens where I was studying alchemy and early Christian texts that the advice given to the neophytes and monks was to write down every day all actions, feelings and states with such rigour that the corners of the soul would be laid bare (2004, p.

243). This may have been an inspiration to a life of journaling and keeping a record of my thoughts.

My journaling practice stretches back to childhood and I have an unbroken written record of the last thirteen years of meetings, experiences and observations relating to work and study. It felt natural, therefore, to choose as part of my methods a first-person research tool that would have the academic rigour and standing required for this study to make a valid contribution. I noted with interest how autoethnography has begun to gain a stronger foothold in academic research in recent years. It is still met with some scepticism and is “[...] dismissed for social scientific standards as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.8). I can understand why there are questions, having engaged in this for a longer period of time now and I address some of these issues in my analyses. However, I meet a growing number of co-researchers and colleagues that now use this as a means of formalising and analysing their own practice in research contexts, as well as in the workplace, so it felt apt for the purposes of my inquiry.

Van Manen (1990) says about hermeneutic phenomenological writing that it “encourages a certain attentive awareness to the details and seemingly trivial dimensions of our everyday educational lives” and that it can serve as a “systematic attempt to uncover and describe the [...] internal meaning structures of lived experience” (pp. 8-10). Other contributors to the field have also informed the way in which I approached my process of keeping fieldnotes in this inquiry (Duncan, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010; Humphreys, 2005; 2010; Kempster and Stewart, 2010). Denzin’s (2014) interpretive approach to autoethnography, in particular, has added a new dimension to the way I engaged with it, and notably that “experience has no existence apart from the storied acts of the performative I” (loc. 238), which is reminiscent of what Derrida said in 1972 –

“[...] there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and symbolic statement. Hence there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement, including an intention or a meaning” (cited in *ibid.*)

This has been a useful insight to work with in my own process. In the early days of my autoethnographic practice, I experienced a growing irritation at my own distillation of events and the inadequacy of language to describe them. As Derrida says, language can be like a glaze and my experience was that my own words would often obscure the remembered accuracy of the account. Equally, I have sometimes found that the process of articulating the events of last year has shifted my views on them and in some instances changed my views of myself.

In one of Denzin's case studies, a participant describes something similar to this and says about autoethnography: "I'm rewriting my life story to create the conditions for changing myself and my past" (Denzin, 2014, loc.272). To me, this connects to hermeneutic phenomenological writing, where Van Manen (1990) encourages the writer to develop sensitivity to language, its subtleties and undertones. He invites us to stop and listen to what it reveals about us and to attend to what "the things themselves speak" (p.111). In practicing this, I have come to appreciate the power of autoethnography whilst also acknowledging the pitfalls of my own emotional engagement with it.

In what follows, I will demonstrate my autoethnography practice in some detail. The account below, and its analysis, is an example of how I utilised this method as a first-person perspective on workplace experiences and how reflective and reflexive practice would lead me to new insights about the study of attention, my practice and way of being. All the descriptions in this study are positioned in the broader methodological domain of hermeneutic phenomenology (Dowling, 2007; Gadamer, 2004; Husserl, 1931; Ricoeur, 1974). In the particular approach I am taking to the reflective and reflexive practice that I engage in as I digest the accounts, I employed and took inspiration from the phenomenological methods articulated by Van Manen (1990, 2014, 2017) but with the added dimension of bricolage in the analytic perspective (Denzin, 2001, 2007; Kincheloe, 2001, 2005).

A couple of points to note: the account I have chosen is deeply personal and in the process of analysing it that followed about five months later, I chose to speak of myself as 'the subject'. I decided that this was a good approach at the time as I was able to distance myself from the narrative. The first draft was therefore written in third person, i.e. "the subject"/"her". Returning to the accounts two, three and four years later, however, I realised that this *objectification* of my own voice in the story felt inauthentic and it was no longer needed in the analysis. I therefore changed the reflection and analysis to first-person language.

Here first, the autoethnographic account itself:

I am sitting on the stairs in Chamberlain's Care Home, Edinburgh. We are spending time at my father-in-law's deathbed. He hasn't got long. It is a beautiful event with the whole family gathered. I am in the hallway and I have to call into a Trustees meeting at the Institute. I am the Chief Executive, the founder of the organisation, and I have to let the board know that the Institute is facing severe financial difficulties.

Just before Christmas, when our new Finance Director took over from his predecessor, we discovered the potential of the problem for the first time. I monitored the situation closely and kept the information confidential within a small group of three people: the FD, the Chair of the board and myself. I had a tortuous Christmas –

I had the feeling that something big was coming. Now I have to bring this news to the board – from the hallway on the stairs in the care home, from my father-in-law's deathbed.

We lost our Head of Faculty to a brain tumour just before Christmas and then a friend who died from motor-neurone disease a few days ago. We are now losing a much-loved family member. The loss of the Head of Faculty escalated the financial problem I am about to report on. As I sit there, I don't yet know that a major contract will fall through. I don't know that another few will emerge or that the impossible was to become possible.

All I know is this: I have to say it out loud – there is a critical and serious cash-flow problem at the Institute, and we have to solve it. I have to know that we can solve it in order to report it. Our turnover is about a million and I need to find a quarter of that in six weeks.

The late Head of Faculty said this "In action research, all data is good data". I decide that I am collecting data on this call. It helps me to think of myself as a researcher. This is how I developed the organisation – working with what we had to do as inquiry. Everyone in the organisation learns about this approach when they join. We run an induction programme for new staff in this. I can do it, once again.

I come off the phone after the meeting. I am feeling a combination of relief and disappointment. I have moved several times during the call – up the stairs, making space for nurses to pass me with trays of dubious looking food and for visitors to go up and down to find their loved ones. I have sat on the steps, perhaps most of them by now, and I have had the phone on mute when conversations in the hallway were too loud. My attention has been multitasking between the meeting itself back in the boardroom at the Institute where they were all gathered, the inner state I am in, the immediate environment with the smells and the particular mood of a care home, my family waiting by the deathbed – perhaps wondering why I left for so long, the challenging social situation of lingering for over an hour in the hallway with my phone. I am exhausted.

The relief I feel is about the fact that there was no blame. The disappointment was about the seemingly cavalier reaction and attitude from the board members – she will solve it. Will I? Will I solve it? Don't they understand that we could be out of business very soon indeed? Are they not worried? Are they being pedagogical and suppressing their true reaction to make it less difficult for me? Were their worried glances going across the room that I couldn't see from my hallway in the care home? When I ring off, I feel abandoned. I was hoping that reporting this would make it feel more of a joint problem – something we can solve together.

I reflect on the report I gave and I realise that, once again, I presented the issue with full confidence, reassurance, measured but truthful – the report of a responsible Chief Executive who is ready to face the issues and talk about them with the board – I gave it with the knowledge that I would solve it. I wonder, as I sit there, what is the right balance between that executive confidence and actually saying what I feel. Is there a difference in the moment I present the issue? Where is my attention as I present the matter to them?

My attention is on them, on the board members, not on the issue. I speak to them as people who will, or should, have concerns and for whom there are serious implications of this problem. If we add it up, they, and I, are responsible for a high number of people: staff, associates, students, schools and centres, contractors,

suppliers, families that are fed by staff who earn their living working for us. They are all directly implicated in this and then there are those they serve. I can't count it. And so I speak to the board in such a way that they will be informed but not panic. I want them to worry and I don't want them to worry. Oh dear. I have created my own executive solitude. (Phenomenological Description of Lived Experience: 6 February 2015)

The following reflections and analysis were recorded during the summer of 2015:

I find myself in a hallway, meeting immediate, situational needs, e.g. making space for nurses with trays and visitors coming up and down the stairs, as well as paying focused attention to the content of the telephone meeting. The backdrop includes the awareness of the social expectations, i.e. the family waiting by the father-in-law's deathbed, and internally I am confronted with the accompanying feelings that arise from all of those factors – separately and in combination. My attention is *distributed* among different elements of the event rather than *evenly suspended* or *hovering* over them. The experience could be described as a practice of *dynamic attention* – the summary of its movements as the subject experienced them could be summarised thus:

- Expanding the focused attention to encompass a larger 'area' (like a camera lens)
- Discerning what requirements of the immediate and wider physical environment are and responding to those without losing widened focused attention
- Simultaneous processing (Huang, 2011) and bracketing feelings and emotions as they arise (Husserl, 1964)
- Managing attentional imbalances (Wallace, 2006)

It is possible to imagine that had I been in the same physical location as the other board members the dynamic, or distributed, attention could – at least in principle – have been more readily transformed into an *evenly suspended attention* (French and Simpson 2015). However, the situation on the stairs in the hallway limited the ability to enter into that particular state. Instead, the attention that was given to the event was moving and breathing within and between various immediate demands, focusing on an enlarged area but in essence *distributed among* several elements.

With a more conscious approach to this, a worthwhile experiment might be to create a similar situation as the one described here and attempt to enter into an inner state appropriate to giving evenly suspended attention. One may assume that certain basic elements must be in place for such a state to be achieved, e.g. the immediate physical environment must be conducive to the *purpose* of the event – the staircase in the hallway of Chamberlain's Care Home in Edinburgh was not, on this occasion. The experience validates again the significance of creating an immediate (physical) environment that is conducive to the purpose of the event and which assists participants in attaining appropriate inner states to fulfil the purpose.

Learning from the reflection, I concluded that my attention was on the people of the board and what they may feel and think, rather than on the issue. The issue to be presented was the critical financial situation that the Institute had reached, not what the board members might feel or think about it.

A number of questions arise: does this concern with the thoughts and feelings of the board members represent a distraction (French and Simpson, 2015)? Is my attention restricted or misplaced – in Bion's terminology, is it an *as-if* state of mind" (ibid.)?

Am I trying to avoid facing the reality of the content of the report or hiding my own feelings behind a concern for the welfare and responses of the board members? How does the state of mind of the subject impact on the group as a whole?

Before providing possible answers, we need to look at what the *purpose* of the event is and what role the report to the board actually plays. If the purpose is to simply share information at an appropriate point in time with the relevant people, then the attention could afford to be focused solely on the issue. Is it possible – or even right – to focus attention on information sharing with no regard for the context within which it is shared? The reaction of the board to this news will determine the decisions they make, and the next steps taken. This in turn will have consequences for the future of the organisation, the Chief Executive, the other staff, associates, students, suppliers and so on. The information sharing itself, therefore, can never be an isolated focus for the report. The purpose of the reporting itself is heterogeneous and multifaceted. From the point of view of the subject, the purpose of the reporting is a combination of the following factors:

- Reporting appropriately – adhering to the job description of the Chief Executive and complying with regulators
- Accountability to the board members – keeping them abreast with developments so that they have a chance to act in accordance with their governance responsibilities
- Care for the board members – allowing them to take in the situation with the right amount of knowledge and a healthy amount of concern without panic before panic is truly due
- Care of self in role and consultation – sharing the burden of the knowledge and seeking support to take the right next steps

Gurwitsch's (1964) notion of the importance to social interaction of the ever-present "horizon" of the *Milieuwelt*, i.e. "the surrounding world" (Arvidson, 2003, loc. 52) speaks to the multi-layered⁶ purpose as here described. As far as this particular event is concerned, the real-time reporting would require careful administration of both focused and evenly suspended attention. Had I been in a more conducive environment, I might have had an opportunity to practice this with heightened awareness also of moral attention, or the Gestalt-connection: unity of relevance (Arvidson, 2003). Arvidson describes this unity of relevance as *compassion* – the key area of concern in moral attention (2003, loc.15). The inclusion of compassion into the equation is important and it relates to the matter of *care* as discussed by French and Simpson (2015) who rightly raise the question of motivation. The interrelationships between motivation, intention, care and compassion⁷ are significant to the exploration of purpose.

The purpose of the event, however, is shared with the board members. They have not come to the meeting to receive compassion and care from the Chief Executive (or have they?). They have come to be informed so that they can fulfil their role as governors. Is their "horizon" of the *Milieuwelt* therefore a different one? Again,

⁶ Widened purpose, that is from being merely about information sharing to include the points presented above

⁷ I do not consider motivation and intention or care and compassion to be synonymous

Gurwitsch's Field-Theory of Consciousness (1964) has much to offer in response to this question and we will return to this later.

For now, however, the questions remaining are any possible avoidance issues (hiding in the care for the board members) that I might have and whether my state of mind influenced the reporting itself and the group. I will not be drawing conclusions at this point but simply point out again that the immediate environment provided a distraction for practicing careful administration of focused and evenly suspended attention and possibly a roadblock to engaging appropriately with moral attention.

In writing the account it was possible to recall feelings as well as inner (emotional) and outer (physical) movements. Through the activity of recalling and writing about the feelings and movements they were 'processed' again, and insights were gained as a result. This is perhaps an experience of a combination of Van Manen's *experiential writing*, *insight cultivating writing* and *interpretive writing* (Van Manen, 2014). Van Manen aptly describes the question of method versus attitude in phenomenological writing in his summary of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's different perspectives. Van Manen states that "[p]henomenology does not just aim for the clarification of meaning, it aims for meaning to become experienced as meaningful" (loc. 9098). The writing process that led to the insight opened up a new layer to the experience of meaning.

Denzin (2014) quotes Moreira, who states: "I'm rewriting my life story to create the conditions for changing myself and the past" (loc. 272). With this in mind, I have to own my process of gaining new insights and, in essence, this represents me changing my experience of the past through writing about it in the present. Retroactive cohesion (Gordon and Bülow, 2012) emerges through the process of engaging creatively, with hindsight, in the experience of inner (mental) states and making connections. Insofar as our past is always experienced in a given present moment of engaging with it, I can support Moreira's statement that it is possible to change one's past through gaining a new experience of it (Denzin, 2014). The enhanced experience of meaning that Van Manen describes (2014) underpins this.

Autoethnography is a territory ripe for projection. Denzin (2014) points out about autoethnography that in the writing process –
[w]e create differences, oppositions, and presences which allow us to maintain the illusion that we have captured the "real" experiences of "real" people. [...] We must become more sensitive to the writing strategies [...] our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline (loc. 337).

So, in this case, my primary obligation is to myself and the other people in the account. The insight that the reporting to the board was potentially loaded with elements of care, confidence, fear, needs, etc. is my own but we cannot escape the *Millieuwelt* (Arvidson, 2003) that the report was delivered into. Hence, if I take seriously the insight, and wish to act on it in the future, a certain rigour would have to be applied as a next step. This could involve an investigation into what the experience of board members actually were: What did they feel as they heard the report? What did they think about it? What echoed in them, as it were, as the report was delivered?

These and more questions would have to be asked of the recipients of the report for the insight to gain a certain additional validity for a future actual *application* of it.

Equally, an investigation of *purpose* would be important to carry out. If reporting as such has *one* purpose, then this needs to be agreed. Above, I have described what I saw as the purpose of reporting, which is multi-layered. Board members would need to agree with the presenter of the report what the purpose really is in order for the insight gained to be contextualised appropriately. In other words, gaining an insight about a past event through an autoethnographic writing process without some form of retrospective second-person validation would render the insight quarantined in a first-person perspective. This may indeed have validity in itself but for the autoethnographer to make appropriate self-developmental steps one would need to give attention to the wider landscape that surrounds the insights gained.

Having raised the issue of projection and the potential for isolation in a first-person perspective, I wish to briefly bring in Gallagher and Zahavi (2008), who offer an important investigation of *pre-reflective self-consciousness*. This notion warrants more attention than I am going to give it here, but there are a few observations that are relevant to the points made above. For now, I will focus on what they write about the trustworthiness of reflection and they ask, “How should one approach the reflective appropriation of lived consciousness? [...] Does the reflective modification involve a necessary supplementation or an inevitable loss?” (p. 71). Gallagher and Zahavi recognise that reflection involves both a gain and a loss. They conclude that whilst reflection is not always trustworthy it does not necessarily have to be untrustworthy (p. 71).

At the end of the account, I realise that I have created my own *executive solitude*. Careful reflection on this has opened up a major area for investigation. If I were to create a definition *executive solitude*, I would take inspiration from the countless conversations I have had with fellow executives in the last decade including cooperative inquiries in this study (2016, 2017). It has been the most widely shared experience among colleagues bar none. The feeling is associated with so many related aspects that it would be impossible to include them all here. Mostly the associated, and often informing feeling, is connected with the following fears:

- Fear of being ‘found out’ – the imposter syndrome
- Fear of exclusion – positioned between staff and a ‘board’ but with no shoulder-to-shoulder professional relationships inside the organisation
- Fear of a lack of concrete knowledge – do I know enough about this to make the right decision
- Fear of losing the overview – do I know everything that is going on and is what I don’t know important
- Fear of other people’s perceptions – am I respected for my decisions or am I the person they love to hate, am I deluding myself about what they think of my management practice and can I count on the feedback I am getting

Many examples could be quoted here but an apt one here from Kempster and Steward’s (2010) autoethnography: “[I]t very much feels like I’m learning as I go. I’m trying to hide this but I wonder whether others realise” (p. 212). *Executive*

solitude, it seems to me, is often informed by a narrative that I hold about other people's perception of me – we shall return to this below – it is also completely self-generated and can only be tackled through self-generated conscious action (Gordon and Bülow, 2012). In the account, I realise that I have conflicting intentions and that the solitude is mine. Could the board have responded differently when the purpose of the report was not made clear and my needs not expressed? Could I have positioned the report better?

If attention is given to common purpose from the outset and the actual authentic needs of the responsible agents involved are expressed in trust, then the likelihood of achieving effective and desired outcomes is increased. The self-generated *executive solitude* can be tackled through a more authentic, inclusive and transparent approach but it lies in the hands of the Chief Executive, in this case, to create the appropriate space for that (July, 2017).

As Varela et al. (2016) state, *experience* is not an epiphenomenal side issue but “warrants thorough phenomenological exploration” (p. xxvii) and *lived experience* is not only a valid way of knowing it is essential for “experiential practices of ethical human transformation” (p. xxix). My journey with autoethnography has proven to be more than a research method for the study of attention in the workplace – it has been a path to self-knowledge and a vehicle for change. It has been an anchor at times when the going got tough and it has been the container for the different ‘stories’ that this study has yielded. The year 2015 became the most challenging year in my professional life and, as I indicated earlier, it was in many ways my *researcher voice* that kept me functional. Autoethnographic accounts were generated and used methodically – not only as a sense-making tool but also for self-transformation. I would like to claim that, on some occasions, the organisation was saved by it.

During this time, I learnt to step in and out of the *noema* of my experience. I was able to empathise but also distance myself – I was at the same time completely embedded and implicated in all that was going on but also looking at it from the outside in. This challenging time has a strange echo and it has left an imprint, or an afterimage, that reminds me of the importance of attention to self on the path of service. When I was not attending to self in the right way, I would quickly lose my ability to serve the process I was in – whether that was the recovery of the business or the emotionally challenging restructure.

The autoethnographic account from Chamberlain's Care Home and the accompanying reflective analysis captures these subtleties. Reading back over the accounts that followed in 2016, 2017 and 2018 the recovery of the business and the healing journey of those involved tell a story of what a deliberate practice of attention really means for the development of self and others in the workplace. This story will unfold in the chapter that follows.

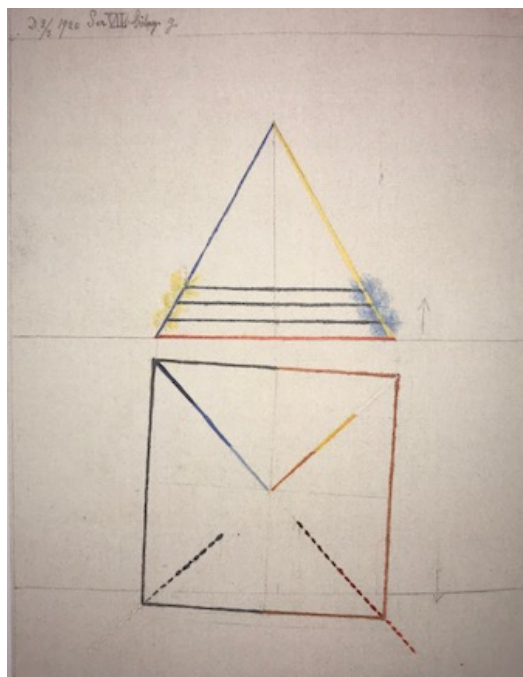
3.6. Coda

This process is as close as I have so far come to an experience of *philosophy as a way of life* (Hadot, 1995), and the research that has come out of it is deeply qualitative. I aimed to weave together the methods and ideas I was investigating as I was investigating them. If the Stoic notion of *attention to self* is indeed anchored in a practice of self-examination, then my hermeneutic phenomenological writing process can be regarded both a way of engaging with my research question and a path to self-knowledge.

Every step of the way, the practice of attention has been an intrinsic part of my approach to the field research. In my engagement with the analysis of data, I remained conscious of recognising the presence of multiple epistemologies (Code, 1991) – including how my own influenced my experience and interpretations – and I have done my best to honour the different ontologies that both inform but also often lie deeply buried in the stories we live by (Stibbe, 2015).

Bricolage provided the wide-angle lens I needed – it became the theoretical and methodological framework for the critical engagement with the data that represented rigour but also the expansiveness required in order to capture insights and meaning on multiple levels.

In this study, I am not drawing conclusions based on critical mass and I am making no claims about what most people say about the practice of attention in the workplace and its impact. Rather, I am reporting on what stories these senior managers tell, how they told them and what happened for them, and in me, as a result. Through autoethnography, I investigated the role of self-knowledge in the practice of attention and what the act of recording one's observations of self and others mean for the *development of self and others* in the workplace.



4. Attention in Practice

Attention is among the most powerful of human psychophysical properties. We pay attention and direct it towards both the *outer* environment and our *inner* world. We have the ability to grant it freely and we use it consciously and unconsciously, moment to moment, in response to a multitude of transactions. It is relational, yet it is experienced as being individually owned. With our attention, we *create* and *terminate* connections and interactions during a single day and during a lifetime. Attention is intimately connected with our identity, how we understand it and make sense of it; it is linked to how we behave and are perceived. Attention is the individuals' gateway to the world but also a gateway to the world of others – that is to say: if you control my attention, you also control the world I inhabit (Skewes, 2016). This is the principle behind the 'attention economy' the impact of which this study is exploring.

Whilst we talk about attention as though we all know what we mean, there is no unified theory of attention (Arvidson, 2003a; Mole, 2017; Watzl, 2010, 2011, 2011a), as we have explored above. Whether we look at contemporary literature in neuroscience, psychology, philosophy or indeed, management learning, we find no consensus about this phenomenon. So, when I ask *what does a deliberate practice of attention mean for the development of self and others in the workplace?* I am positioning at the very centre of my inquiry an *unknown* – a core aspect, quality, or function, of the human being that most disciplines have agreed to disagree on. In the absence of a unified theory, how do we commonly experience and understand attention? As explained earlier, I gathered a set of definitions of attention from participants in order to see what we, as laypeople, understand attention to be. Responses varied greatly. Whilst all participants were non-specialists in the subject of attention, we can see traces of different cultural traditions and influences in the answers. This snapshot of the findings gives a flavour for the diversity of definitions gathered:

Some participants attempted to capture the essence of attention in a few words –

- a. *Attention is addressing something with focus; willingly moving this object over other objects*
- b. *Attention is to be awake and open-minded. To look without staring*
- c. *Attention is an irreducible phenomenon. It is something that presupposes itself in order to be addressed*

Others found an entry point in poetic prose –

- d. *Attention is bringing our sensitivity and awareness into balance, noticing not everything but the thing with which we might assist, purpose not as progress*

(as my grandfather would have it) but purpose as contribution and connection, relationship and response, balance as in temperature, gradual and efficacious change, yearning and learning how to support the fulfilling of unknown, unknowable potentials, thinking with one's whole self, body and soul, appreciating what others can bring [accompanied by a line drawn picture of an amaryllis in a pot]

Others again took a phenomenological approach –

- e. Attention is finding a fixed point within myself from which to operate, observe, think and breathe. Using all my senses to the best of my ability to feel the moment and observe where I am and discern the key task that requires my focus next, one moment at a time*
- f. Attention is like mental breathing*
- g. Attention means placing something in the centre of my consciousness. It is not fixed; rather it moves around, finding new angles, new approaches to behold this thing, to enter it and to hear it speaking to me. When I achieve it, the world grows still and the thing outside of me fills my soul completely*
- h. Attention, which I might previously have thought of as a quality that mainly uses mind, is actually deeply linked to the state of my body. When I remember to breathe, I attend, when I forget, I don't*

Taking a quick look at this sample of definitions a) to h), it would seem that attention is experienced by some as an action – expressed particularly in a), d), e) and f). By others, attention is understood more as a state – expressed in b), c), f) and also g). Interestingly, no one in this study seemed to experience or understand attention as a *filter*, *binding feature* or merely as a *spotlight* (Wu, 2014), nor did anyone deny its existence (Anderson, 2011)⁸.

It would be possible to experiment further with these definitions and explore different categories, crossovers, similarities and differences. For the purposes of this study, however, the interesting observations are that

- Attention can be experienced and described, that is, it is possible to talk about a phenomenology of attention
- Focused, or spotlight attention is by no means the only type of attention described

⁸ Anderson (2011) states: [...] attention has been plurally defined and this leads to inconsistent usage and confusion. More importantly, attention has been reified; it is used as a concrete concept that can act in a causal fashion [...]. This logical fallacy leads to misplaced empirical efforts. In fact, attention never causes anything, because there is no such thing as attention. There are, however, many empirical findings that can be accurately labelled attentional. In a phrase, attention is more adjectival than nominal (p. 1)

- The contribution offered in h) liberates attention from its perceived location in the mind and describes an experience of a more embodied kind
- The exercise itself reveals that we can engage with attention both reflectively and reflexively
- Attention is, in some cases, experienced as linked to agency – discernment, choices, decisions and actions
- Attention is, by some, connected with purpose, or intention

In essence, these observations are a roadmap for the discussion that follows. There are clear echoes here from the themes identified in the literature but also an invitation to challenge basic assumptions and go beyond direct and indirect claims about attention.

As a backdrop to the ensuing discussion, we must first name a current global phenomenon of great significance and influence, namely the idea of an *economics of attention*, or the *attention economy*, as it has been described.

The attention economy has been part of business vocabulary for a number of years now and ever since it started to more or less govern most people's lives, it has been associated both with immense opportunities and serious adverse effects. Using the word *economics* essentially implies that we are dealing with an allocation of scarce resources (Lanham, 2006) and this notion (i.e. that attention is limited) has resulted in a fierce competitive environment for businesses, an unbelievable pace of developments in digital technologies and an aggressive rise in social media consumerism.

Despite the growing recognition that the attention economy has adverse effects on our wellbeing, Odell (2019), Schoder (2016), Williams (2017), Wu (2017) will confirm that the general discourse has not yet offered a coordinated response. Because the discourse about attention builds on the premise that it is a finite resource (Davenport and Beck, 2002) the focus of the current debate is on how to expand, rather than contain, the *attention market* for businesses. At the heart of this is the idea that if we could only learn – or programme ourselves – to process *more* information *faster*, we could turn the volume up on the attentional capture and achieve more, earn more, acquire more, consume more. Direct observation of the attentional behaviour of self and others confirm the direct link between the emergence of the attention economy and the rise of addiction to social media (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2019).

Secular mindfulness practice has been introduced as an antidote to the effects of the attention economy on our wellbeing but, frankly, it has become branded more as a way of dealing better with a lifestyle that is being promoted and maintained, rather than an invitation to challenge and change this. The general view that mindfulness practice can help to develop resilience is not the issue; the question that must be asked is *resilience for what?*

Only rarely do we see a targeted approach to tackling the issues caused by attentional capture. One of those rare examples of taking action is the Center for Humane Technology, founded by Tristan Harris in 2018, and the project ‘Time Well Spent’ (Williams, 2017). Tackling what they call ‘human downgrading’ (Harris, 2019), a group of skilled ex-employees of Google, Mozilla, ExxonMobil, Facebook and the CIA work together to address adverse effects of the attention economy through the development of new approaches to digital technology. Whether giving even more attention to the development of technology is really the answer to the issue caused by the attention economy remains to be seen. The point here is that, on the whole, there are still shocking levels of denial about the seriousness of the issue, comparable perhaps only to the denial and uncoordinated global response to climate emergency.

James Williams, a co-founder of Time Well Spent, calls the attention economy the defining moral and political challenge of our time. The attention economy, he says, doesn’t just shape our lives in its image, it shapes our politics in its image, and it is for this reason that we must start to assert and defend our freedom of attention (Williams, 2017a).

This study builds on the most important insight I have so far gained from management practice and it is this: a heightened quality of our attention can transform social dynamics and change the culture of the workplace. When put simply like that, it may seem like stating the obvious. A quick look at the vast majority of workplaces, however, will reveal that it is not a conscious consideration for most people and not even a recognised factor in workplace experience.

Why is that? In light of the knowledge we have about the effects of the attention economy, regardless of levels of denial, one might expect that more attention would be given to attention itself. I will be exploring possible answers in this discussion. Firstly, however, we will be looking at attention as it is experienced and describe observations about its phenomenology.

4.1. The Phenomenology of Attention

We know what it feels like when we receive a certain quality of attention and we know what it feels like when we don't. As children, we play hide and seek in order to experience the joy of being *found*. A child enters a room and it is our immediate facial expression, body language – our level of attention – that is read in seconds and this determines how this child *feels* in that moment (Miller, 1996). As parents and carers, we may have experienced how the resilience and happiness of our children increases relative to the amount of high quality of attention they are given. This is also why the widespread use of digital technology offers both opportunities and threats to this simple way of being with our children. The child may seek attention because they require certainty, reassurance, comfort or care. It seems that the child seeks to validate their existence through our responses. It is as if the response they get is the mirror in which they see themselves. The levels of attention we receive during childhood are the formative experiences that influence how we give and receive attention as adults. Our social behaviours and needs are closely linked to the legacy and memories we have of being recognised, or not, by parents and peers during childhood (ibid). The quality of attention we were given as children also seems to inform our choice of vocation and how we conduct ourselves in the roles we hold.

Csikszentmihaly and Nakamura (2010) propose that attention holds the key to experiences and, hence, to life as we subjectively know it (p. 180). Along with William James, they maintain that the quality of our lives depends on the habits of attention that we cultivate moment to moment. The giving and receiving of attention are, I would like to propose, intimately connected with an experience of recognition. It is not the recognition of achievement that I focus on here but the recognition of the *being* of the other. One could say that attention becomes our way of *being with* one another.

We are socially conditioned to seek levels of recognition in order to experience and validate our existence (Miller, 1996) and the most important conduit and sensor we have is attention. The seemingly inconspicuous phenomenon of giving and receiving attention – so mundane, yet so profound – plays itself out in the workplace every day with major social, political and practical consequences. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we hold the key to facilitating moments of recognition, validation, reassurance, care and comfort through our practice of attention. We also hold the key to cause the opposite. Unconscious behaviours in the workplace can so easily impact on our physical and emotional wellbeing, our motivation and efficiency as well as our ability to connect with and support others. I am proposing that a deliberate practice of attention can serve to facilitate *intentional spaces of recognition and*

connection in the workplace and that this is crucial for both *personal development* and doing *good work*.

In order to develop such a practice, we need to explore first the phenomenology of attention. In this chapter, we will look at what it is like to give and receive different kinds of attention, how attention feels when it is present, absent or out of our control, and what the implications are for these events. We begin with a look at different kinds of endogenous and exogenous attentional capture and proceed to explore what role contemplative inquiry and introspection may have in a response, in particular, to involuntary captured attention.

Before we proceed to discuss these themes in light of findings from the fieldwork, I want to make a point about language. From the perspective of what Ravenscroft (2019) calls a *platititude approach to folk psychology*, the scholarship of attention and its phenomenology has no language of its own. In researching this field from a non-specialist point of view, we have no choice but to exploit the porous boundaries between other fields like neuroscience, psychology and philosophy of mind. Watzl (2010) demonstrates how the absence of a shared, nuanced language about our experiences of attention becomes evident in attention research: he invites us to imagine that we are participating in a scientific experiment on attention and the scientist asks us to *attend* to this or that object as if we all knew what exactly we were asked to do. It is that sort of situation we are faced with in the field of folk psychology. So, when we are describing our experience of attention, we may not be able to make reference to a particular phenomenological language, all we can do is to make observations about what words we choose to use and then look at commonalities and differences. As we get into the autoethnographic accounts and interviews from the fieldwork, we will see how experiences of attention both blend and stand out. I wish to emphasise that in what follows, I knowingly integrate *attention language* from different disciplines in order to create nuanced phenomenological descriptions. By so doing, I borrow language on attention without declaring allegiance to any tradition or school of thought.

4.1.1. Attention and Awareness

The study of the practice of attention in the workplace inevitably invites us to ask a host of foundational questions: What *in us* or *about us* is experiencing attention? Is consciousness a necessary condition for attention? Is attention a state that affects consciousness or is attention a *gatekeeper* of consciousness? How can we understand attention without understanding consciousness? These are overwhelming for most of us and they often lead to a maze of

possible answers. Unsurprisingly, we find that there is no consensus on the matter within or between disciplines.

I decided early on in this study that I was not going to attempt to find answers to such questions, nor explain the nature of consciousness, in order to investigate the practice of attention in the workplace. It emerged, however, that certain aspects of these wider themes found their way into my autoethnographic accounts and it has proven useful to stay with some of them in order to better describe my experience of attention. So rather than trying to explain attention or the nature of consciousness, my exploration here is about finding ways of describing the phenomena.

In the period 2015 to 2016, my contemplative practice focused particularly on the phenomenology of attention. I asked: is it always *like something* to attend and if so, is there a distinctive phenomenology of attention? I propose above that it *is* possible to talk about a phenomenology of attention – a *what-it-is-like-ness* that can be shared. The current debate about this has not concluded that there is a shared phenomenology (Wu, 2014) and we have already acknowledged how this field lacks a unified theoretical framework and a clear definition to lean on (Watzl, 2010; Wu, 2014).

Further questions included the idea of intentionality, i.e. is attention always about something? Can we always claim to be attending *to* something, or is it possible to attend in no direction, or with no content? My experience is that the attention has intentionality – it has *about-ness*. When I practice stillness of mind (some may call that the practice of empty consciousness), this is achieved only through an act of will, that is to say it requires a level of agency on my part. My experience of stilling the mind and silencing the voices that tell the stories of my thoughts is that my attention initially becomes restless. My attention wants to find a place to *be*. During its search for content, my attention goes from one thing to another. In meditation, it rests only when I find a place for it and give it permission to stay there – and it is only a relative sort of rest. Whilst staying with the *object* of my choice, my attention will commonly explore it from all angles. With practice, it seems that my level of control over my attention, my concentration and ability to focus, increases. Buddhist meditation will invite a practice of attention by focusing on the same object for years (Ganeri, 2017) and this practice is aimed at developing and maintaining a *discipline of attention*. Wallace writes:

"[J]ust as unaided human vision was found to be an inadequate instrument for examining the moon, planets and stars, Buddhists regard the undisciplined mind as an unreliable instrument for examining mental objects, processes, and the nature of consciousness" (Wallace, 1999, p. 176).

The idea that the mind is *undisciplined* unless we exercise a level of agency and control over it is particularly tangible through attending to what our attention is engaged in at any given time. When we do the exercise of quietening the mind and finding a resting place for our attention – holding it there – it becomes evident that the highest level of discipline is required. The experience of the restlessness of the attention corresponds with the idea that the experience of attention is possible in relation to content. Experientially, therefore, it is possible to entertain the idea that intentionality is a necessary condition for attention. A number of my autoethnographic accounts describe a journey of exploration with these questions. I wrote -

In the last few days I have been inspired by the idea that attention is that which structures our stream of consciousness (Watzl, 2011 and the Dynamic Phenomenology of Thought thesis (Anderson, 2018). I have latest struggles to attend in meditation. I have been trying to notice what happens when I cannot meditate because my mind is elsewhere. I have been observing how I seem to 'look inwards' when I attend to my attention. In this process, I have observed that my attention is perhaps more likely to be outward facing...as in, it seems that I am more likely to be 'looking' outwards, rather than inwards by default, though as I write this, it does not feel quite accurate or true.

As a thought experiment, I am now thinking about attention as 'viewing' within or without. I explored this notion of 'viewing' or looking as a metaphor for attention. Once you have your object in view, as it were, and focused on that which you decide to focus on, it is as if you can rest your attention in it and that the object of your attention can experience itself in you. This relates back to the idea that consciousness is 'in the world' rather than in our heads.

Is attention the same as agency or is it not? It can depend on agency or be experienced as agentive, but it is not the same as agency. If attention can also rest and allow something to unfold inside it, as it were, then there is no agency in that. Or is there? (Attention as viewing. 4 July 2016)

As a result of experimenting with the *locating* of my attention and experiencing it as an activity, or state, of *viewing*, I started to wonder what the relationship between attention and awareness might be. This particular question again finds a wealth of interesting answers in Buddhist literature in particular (Ganeri, 2017). Culadasa⁹ says about attention and awareness that they are two kinds of *knowing*. Attention takes in one thing, whilst awareness takes in everything else in the background. Awareness is creating the context for the attention to focus. When the attention is constantly moving, our peripheral awareness is compromised. This is comparable to what happens to the peripheral vision when we are moving our eyes from one thing to another –it doesn't function well. Meditation, says Culadasa, happens when we bring attention and awareness into balance, including what is coming into the mind from the sense organs. (Immergut, Yates, & Graves, 2017).

⁹ A.k.a. Dr. John Yates, Neuroscientist and meditation master

During this study, I conducted a recorded interview with Dr Fergus Anderson, whose first-person research on the dynamic phenomenology of conscious occurrent thinking (Anderson, 2018) has inspired my practice of attention in the workplace over the last five years in particular. The interview found that awareness and attention could be experienced as distinctly different – I share here two pertinent abstracts:

Attention is the ability to be aware of something. Awareness is an aspect of consciousness holding, as it were, the attention. If consciousness is always consciousness of something, then it can be said to have intentional content. If consciousness is always for someone, then it can be said to have subjective character, i.e. someone has it. Thus, consciousness can be seen as having two poles: at one end x) it is about something and at the other end y) it is for someone. These two poles could also be conceived to be x) attention and y) awareness. If we go back to Culadasa then, meditation is about balancing the content pole and the subject pole and that is to bring attention and awareness into balance (Anderson F., 2019)

This interview, coupled with my own exercises, found that it seems to be the *act* of focusing attention that is creating the capture of attention. In this second abstract, Fergus Anderson states further,

I need to let go of focused attention in order to stabilise awareness. Common meditation guidelines are to focus attention on the breath, for example, but maintain a peripheral awareness of what is going on around you. This peripheral awareness can also be called external awareness. It is happening whilst also focusing and it stabilises the ability to focus. It is possible to then shift gradually to introspective awareness – that is, you become aware of everything that is going on in the mind whilst maintaining focus. This is not a splitting of attention – introspective awareness and attention are different. This is why this can be done simultaneously. Getting the balance right is the key to mindfulness. Common barriers to achieving this state are distraction and dullness – distraction is when the attention goes off what one is attending to, dullness is when one loses the strength of attention. One needs introspective awareness to know that either of those two (distraction or dullness) is taking place and if they are, an antidote is needed (Anderson, F., 2019).

Exploring my own experiences of attention and awareness, and inquiring into the experiences of others, made me realise how significant this idea of *awareness as container or context* for attention really is. I will explain that further.

Commonly, our experience is not one of being present in the present. In an attempt to understand and, to some extent, control our environment, we predict and prepare for what is coming by projecting our own stories onto the immediate, medium and long-term futures. These stories are often not considered, nor are they well thought through, rather, they are frequently dominated by fear, hopes or by wishful thinking. Our inability – perhaps even unwillingness – to *be with what is* creates a perplexing landscape for our attention. The landscape is perplexing because it is a conglomeration – *mélange* – of what we *want* to

happen, what we *fear* might happen and what we *believe* is actually happening. As we make all these stories up *the present is happening* and we are not attending to it. Our attention is busy first creating and then making sense of our own stories and there is precious little space for the stories of others, let alone the experience of being in the moment and, what is more, we seem to be unaware of all this most of the time. Fishleigh (2017) quotes a French novelist, playwright, and filmmaker, Marcel Pagnol, who said, “the reason people find it so hard to be happy is that they always see the past better than it was, the present worse than it is, and the future less resolved than it will be” (p. 23).

Through becoming much more conscious of the phenomenology of both awareness and attention, it has brought about a new way of *being with* the present moment. The fear that I have commonly projected onto the immediate future is that I am missing something, or not attending to what is essential. Participants in this study named this very experience as one of the primary fears and they described the phenomenon a number of times. Here, an example of such a contribution –

This fear of missing the point, as it were, captures my attention and derails it from being with what is here now. However, when I miss being present in the present moment, I also miss what is essential. What is essential and that which I need to attend to, is always part of the present moment and almost never part of my imagined future. Purposely bringing my awareness and my attention into balance creates the experience of a safe space where I dare to be with what is in the present. Perhaps this is what mindfulness is trying to achieve. Certainly, it affects the quality of the attention I am able to give to what is going on in the moment and it has a significant impact on the nature of the decision and actions I take (Chinta).

As I contemplated the findings of this phenomenology of awareness and attention, a poem emerged as a response. In true Bricoleur style, I share it here as a provisional conclusion to this section –

*Attention, a wild animal
Alert, vulnerable, freedom craving, hard to master
Aware of capture at every turn
Rests only in places of safety, in spaces that are known*

*Awareness, your guardian
Not commanding but gently holding you
Calling you back when you wander off
Or lose your way in the undergrowth*

*When we meet, I to I
We are that we are
We are with what is
Now.*

4.1.2. Attentional Capture

Ramsey (2014), Skewes (2016), Stacey (2003), Williams (2017a) and Wu (2014) have all, from their different perspectives, proposed that attentional capture is an issue of the greatest importance and concern today. I stated above that attentional capture exists only as an experience as far as I am aware of it happening. If we accept that as fact, we have good reason to be concerned about the impact of the attention economy and how we engage with stimulation overload in everyday life. Wu (in Ganeri, 2017) reminds us that we have to take hold of our attention and bring it to awareness (ibid). According to Watzl (2011) it then becomes voluntary attention. From this state, I can start to connect my *intention* and *attention*, and only then can I begin to make considered choices. We will look more at this claim at a later point. For now, I propose that it is precisely for these reasons that Skewes' statement is of the utmost importance. What follows aims to address his point that –

If you can control my attention, you can control what sort of world I construct – my beliefs, desires and actions. If I control my attention, I can enhance my freedom relative to other people's control (Skewes, 2016).

Attentional capture comes in many forms. For the purposes of this study, it is helpful to go back to Ganeri (2017) and Watzl (2011) who both talk about exogenous attention (i.e. attention that is controlled by stimuli) and endogenous attention (i.e. attention that is internally controlled). For example, the daily schedule of activities and events that constitute my day in the office dictates how often my awareness can take hold of my ability for endogenous attention in the flow of involuntary, or exogenous, attention. The following is a short reflection on what is, for me, a typical experience of a working day –

My day is a flow of successive events, punctuated by specific moments where my awareness takes hold of my attention. Those are the moments in which I make choices about what I attend to. The daily schedule of meetings, calls, conversations, tea making, presentations, lunch, writing or reading is a series of successive experiences that experientially occur in a flow of attentional capture but are punctuated by moments of intentional attending, or intentional action. In waking consciousness, I involuntarily give attention to a number of events during the day (My Day: 2018).

Participants in this study spoke animatedly about their individual experiences of captured attention and the constant challenges this poses for them in the workplace.

It is not just a matter of the attentional capture experienced by each individual, it is also a matter of what these same individuals are asked to do in the name of profit (Cooperative Inquiry).

As Deery (2019), Harris (2019), Williams (2017) and others have pointed out there is a clear, unequivocal expectation on businesses to capitalise on the attention economy. For example, a company, founded in 2019, made the following public announcement about itself:

Attention Capital is a company that buys, builds and scales media brands and the technologies that power them. It's built and operated on the core thesis that: The industry of attention is the largest and fastest-growing segment of the global economy. There are massive inefficiencies in how people's attention is being extracted and traded in today's market (ad fraud, fracking for attention and fake accounts). Properly valuing people's attention represents the largest investment opportunity in the next decade (Attention Capital, 2019)

One immediately notices the choice of language and the story that we are being told boiled down to three main pieces of vital information: 1) The *industry* of attention is the fastest growing *segment of the global economy*, yet it is *inefficient*. 2) Our attention is being *extracted and traded* in today's market. Paradoxically, we are also told by *Attention Capital* that 3) the largest *investment opportunity* is to *properly value* people's attention. One wonders what sort of *valuing* we are talking about here exactly but judging from the rhetoric above, we have to assume that this is a monetary one.

The pressure is on for anyone in a senior role to do what is possible, on behalf of the business, to divert us (the public) from *what we want* to *what we think we want* (Williams, 2017a). Managers are directly, or indirectly, involved in the promotion and exploitation of attentional capture. So commonplace is the idea that we need to do this for survival that we do not question it. The pressure to deliver growth translates into a set of key performance indicators (KPI) and, *if you want to keep your senior position, these will be the focus of your attention for the forthcoming period*. The impact of this is experienced on a number of levels, both personally and organisationally. The *condition* of attentional capture (i.e. the *state* of being captured), as well as the pressure to optimise and promote it for your business (Deery, 2019), has been a major contributor to low self-esteem, high stress levels and anxiety issues in the lives of so many who hold a senior position in the workplace. Participants in this study confirm this:

Towards the end of the first cooperative inquiry – after a good two hours of sharing the phenomenology of attentional capture and how it affects all of us on a daily basis – participants decided to list and share their fears. This exercise was conducted in the weeks that followed. Findings speak first and foremost of the need managers have

to share their experiences in a safe space of peers and, parallel to this, they tell stories about the different types of fear-based endogenous and exogenous attentional capture that those in senior positions experience daily. Here, an abstract from the much longer list developed by the group over the summer of 2016:

- Being seen as lazy*
- Being told off*
- Disappointing others*
- Focusing on the wrong thing*
- Not fulfil expectations*
- That my positive perception of a situation might be deceiving me and the situation is actually different*
- Not being active – in activity, not produce “valuable” outputs*
- Not understanding something*
- Looking stupid*
- Trying and failing, failing to try*

Many of the points on this list speak of fears that seem to be rooted in a concern about perception – one could say that this might largely represent endogenous attentional capture. However, with the growing expectations of managers today to be constantly available, productive and in control – and coupled with the growing external pressure applied by the possibility of instant communication through digital technology – we need to recognise the exogenous lineage of the fears shared by participants. In the cooperative inquiry, it was palpable in the verbal descriptions that a certain resignation sets in when managers realise that however fast they run, they will never get there. We agreed that we cannot tackle the situation by running faster (Cooperative Inquiry).

As I pointed out earlier, the participants’ wish to share their fears with each other was also a measure of the inherent loneliness of executives – the self-isolation that is so prevalent in business is informed by the very same fears as the ones on the list. Each of these are rooted in, and lead to, lack of recognition: to whom can we speak openly about our fears?

As pressures to perform build, the pace in the workplace increases and the expectation of constant availability eats into every moment of contemplation and blissful solitude. We are offered no time to assert and defend the freedom of our attention (Williams, 2017a).

With our attention captured by fears of failure, we may just choose to run faster in that hamster wheel – that is, until we decide to tell a different story (Chinta).

The following autoethnographic account echoes themes explored here but introduces a new perspective that we will explore further below. Here, I was reflecting on a very difficult year at work and preparing to return to work after the winter holidays –

The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.
(Montaigne, 1993)

It is the third day of 2016. The winter holiday has been restorative both physically and mentally. Yet, I did not sleep well the last three nights; anxiety about returning to work has started to creep in.

[...] As I look at next week's work schedule, the fear of going back is rooted in the intense desire to escape the nightmare I was in during 2015. The recognition of what was achieved – staying in business, essentially – did not go unnoticed. I also recognised it myself but now, I am faced with the further development of financial stability and I am painfully aware that we are in no position to rest on any laurels.

Determined to learn from all that has happened, I search my inner archive of methods for working with the unknown. If anything, this is something I can say with certainty that I have had great opportunity to practice in the last twelve months. Every day has offered new opportunities to find ways of being effective, creative, positive and determined within a context of shifting goalposts and the unknown.

I observe how my mind is searching for the 'right thing' to pay attention to now. This is what I always do when anxiety or stress is threatening to take over. When in doubt, go to the higher purpose, the vision and values – go to your colleagues in your mind and to those we aim to serve as a charity...go to the moments at work when you knew you were truly serving the purpose. Go to those places, I tell myself. I must find the foundation for inner peace between now and tomorrow morning. Is now a good time to reach out? [...] All the professionals who offered to be at the end of the phone if I ever needed it are only a decision away.

I conclude, yet again, that I am not a lonely person but I tend to do my inner work in solitude. I decide to contemplate the matter. The search for where I should direct my attention reminds me that there are so many 'places' within me I do not yet know. Those are the ones I want to go and find between now and tomorrow: my silent 'unknowns'... (Returning to work: 3 January 2016)

In this account, I am describing a practice of engaging reflexively with attention and subjecting it to choice. I am taking hold of attention, diverting it from fear and giving myself the choice of attending to the *right thing*. I am reflecting on my state of unknowing and anxiety, caused partly by an unpleasant year that is behind me. In the account, I am not at a point of certainty about anything – I do not claim to know what to do next but the significance is in the awareness of what my attention is doing and in the decision not to allow fear to capture it.

The position at this point in the journey is that I know what I don't want – I don't want the attention to be captured by fear. I may achieve my *freedom from* but what about my *freedom*

to? The logical next step is to find out what the *action* is and in order to entertain that thought I have to find out what my *options* are.

On this particular point, i.e. *what options do I have*, I wish to return to the subject of how we respond to the adverse effects of the attention economy in the workplace. I propose that there is an inbuilt hierarchy that determines our options and abilities to assert and defend our attention (Williams, 2017a) in the workplace. I will explain what I mean by that but first, I must emphasise that I am *not* setting out an argument that speaks against advancing digital technology, nor am I here condemning social media or other means of digital communication. My claim is that the attention economy, if unaddressed, has the potential to undermine personal and organisational wellbeing and in this study, we are looking at the impact on managers and how we might be able to respond.

If we want to explore the inherent hierarchy I refer to, we need to look at another related issue that is emerging in business: Williams (ibid.) speaks about the *treadmill of incompetence*, which is a phenomenon that emerges parallel to the speed with which technology is being developed. We can never achieve competence in how to use a system, programme or gadget before it is upgraded, redundant or replaced with a complex new model that we have to learn. The race is lost before it has started – we are forever the learners and never the masters. The common experience in the workplace is that we are feeling reduced to trainees over and over again. This leads to self-esteem problems and it has severe adverse effects on our self-perception regardless of role and function.

The experience of mastery is critical to our feeling of self-worth and it enables self-authorisation (Gordon and Bülow, 2012). Imagine a carpenter that relies on the mastery of power tools. Every few months, a new upgrade is offered with functions so complex that there is the choice of either sticking with the old tools – a questionable image to present to clients and colleagues – or spending considerable time reading long technical manuals, taking a crash course or simply working it out, still at risk of remaining incompetent. Not only would this situation slow down business, it would also slow down the development of actual know-how and skill. If we are denied the experience of mastery over what could be described as today's essential power tools, we are at risk of assigning our own power to those who are the perceived masters. In this particular case, according to Harris (2019) and Williams (2017a), the entities that lead on the latest development in digital technology are also those who lead the way in the attention economy.

The prevailing experience among managers today is that we are not really leading – we are being led. We seem to belong to an intricate web of developments that we

cannot fully comprehend but which clearly dictates to us what is important and hence, what we must attend to (Cooperative Inquiry).

A good example of a phenomenon that has dominated the attention economy is Brexit. Here is a story that has captured our attention in Europe for years now with catastrophic consequences for business in all sectors, leaving us without anything other than a fascinating example of another *treadmill of incompetence*.

The lack of opportunity to develop mastery is connected also with the lack of time we take to focus on each individual task and the resulting absence of absorption. The vast array of different things on our plate at any given time disables us from the all-important flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2010). The absence of absorption and flow also represents an absence of the positive effects of attentional capture. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura propose that if we experience our challenges exceeding our skills, we become first vigilant, then anxious. If our attention is forced to be like a scattergun, we are likely to lose the ability to sustain it and this can have devastating social implications over time.

Shami described how approaching his sales team was like dealing with a pack of wolves hunting. Their attention captured by moving targets made it difficult for him to have conversations with them about anything else. His experience was that their attention was constantly dispersed between all the different other things they had to get on and do. Shami explained that, as a senior manager, he was keen to create healthy relationships in the workplace but their scattered attention was an obstacle. This account was echoed in the stories of other participants (Interviews).

In Leo's experience most managers suffer a scattered attention. He believes that most people are inherently disorganised and he gave the example of managers turning up to a meeting with a phone that has run out of battery but no charger. That, he says, is just one of the many signs that the attention of most people is not on the detail that actually matters (Interview).

In talking about attentional capture, Leo explained how his own practice involves regular phone-free time for dedicated thinking. His experience is that dedicated thinking time is under threat, if not already extinct. Leo has educated colleagues and family members to respect this time when the phone is off and they know that it can be hours until he is reachable. Leo's seniority in the business enables him to maintain a level of control over what he pays attention to. The question arises whether Leo's employees can also take 'time out to think during their workday? Can they be

unavailable, switch off and think deeply about the tasks at hand? What would be the consequence if they did? (Interview).

My proposition is that there is a hierarchical structure embedded in the attention economy – one that gives those in senior positions more choice about how they manage their attention where people in less senior positions assume to have less. Having experienced Leo in the interviews, I am almost certain that he would not wish to knowingly create or preserve a situation where his employees did not feel they had choices about their attention – this is not about Leo's management practice – however, the example of switching off the phone to claim thinking time is helpful to demonstrate what I propose here.

Amber also made the link between attention and power and she described her experience of attentional capture performed by senior post holders in meetings, both intentionally and unconsciously. The workplace is saturated with assumptions and projections onto managers that they have options and choices that other roles do not have. Think back to the fears listed by participants above. These fears were about being perceived as lazy, not producing valuable outcomes and so on – they came from senior managers and leaders. Now let us imagine the list of fears we would get from other roles in the organisation, those who feel they have less options and less choice. Most employees simply cannot afford to experiment. They cannot afford to be perceived as lazy or not producing valuable outputs. The option of switching off to do their thinking time feels remote (Interview).

Projections and assumptions about the freedom of managers may come from observing working patterns or patterns of behaviour. However, what actually reveals levels of freedom (options, choice, etc.) is the *quality of attention* that a person gives and *what they choose to give it to*. The challenge here is that claiming, or reclaiming, one's attention in the workplace relies on the ability to respond to both the inner and outer environment. It relies on the courage – and the time – to consider one's options, make choices and make conscious decisions about what requires attention. In essence, it relies on *the ability to be in touch with oneself* and this is not what the average workplace is designed to facilitate.

On this very subject, April offered observations about workplace behaviours resulting from various types of attentional capture and it led her to ask the following important question: what does it take to create an organisational culture in which people follow their own principles, rather than unspoken co-constructed behaviours? (Interview)

The question inspired me to wonder whether our workplace behaviour fosters a different kind of attention than the one we may give to things outside of work. In the autoethnographic accounts, we find this entry addressing the issue –

... As I was reading this,

Plato's Symposium, says French and Simpson, reflects "[...] a modern-day wisdom in work settings that informal and shadow conversations have value (Stacey 2007) – in the bar after work, at dinner in the hotel, in a smoking or coffee break, etc. These can be understood as examples of the work of leisure as practiced in the modern workplace although such activities tend to be relegated to the margins and not seen as a truly legitimate practice. Unlike the ancients, however, for whom the creation of spaces conducive to philosophical discourse was a central preoccupation, the benefits of such contexts tend now to be derived by accident rather than design." (French and Simpson, 2016, loc. 188)

... I was inspired to reflect on the 'On-Off Culture of Work and Attention' that we have created. I am interested in the impact of this and how it creates an artificial psychological split between our 'work persona', which we take on when we are 'on' and the persona we embody when we are 'off'. I used to understand this and try to practice it – as it seemed to be the done thing in the workplace – but since becoming an entrepreneur and taking on a leadership role, the boundaries between 'me at work' and 'me at home' have become blurry.

These days, I am always surprised, if not a little offended, when a colleague or a peer talks of this 'split persona' that they seem to choose to have. I admit that I have to let certain aspects of my personality shine through at certain times more strongly than others. I also admit that there are differences between workplace behaviour and home behaviour. This, however, seems to be different from the change of persona that people speak of. Furthermore, I am acutely aware how some of my very close colleagues (people who report to me in the Senior Management Team, for example) do not 'let their hair down' in my presence. I have come to terms with this, but I do not claim to understand it. And it makes me wonder about the impact on our practice of attention in the workplace, about Stacey's point (2007) and about the ideas presented by French and Simpson (2016).

If when we are 'on' we attend in a different way to when we are 'off' what are the different qualities of attention at those different times? And if we, in the workplace, are waking up to the significance of the informal, or 'water cooler', conversations what is the impact on our practice of attention in workplace experience?

I am becoming more and more aware that, for me, being 'off' from work only works when I am truly attending to other matters. Otherwise I can be 'off' from work reading, shopping, playing music or socialising but I am not in fact 'off' at all. This means that I have to identify and create the inner conditions for being 'off' as much as the outer conditions. Usually, we create the outer conditions by going away from the workplace. This becomes harder if you also work from home, or if you do not have an actual physical place of work. Not checking emails and switching off the phone are also outer conditions. The inner conditions for being 'off' are much more difficult to create. This entails that we are not so worried or stressed about work issues that we cannot release those issues from the grip of our attention.

Interestingly, I am rarely distracted from being 'on' but I am often distracted from being 'off'. Only rarely do I struggle to attend to work when I am at work but I

struggle immensely with not attending to work when I am not at work (The On-Off Culture of Work and Attention: 29 October, 2016)

Over the last decade, I have seen a move in many of our peer organisations towards building agile working cultures and for many employees around the world this has been a positive development offering more flexibility and greater personal and professional scope. However, as both Fishleigh (2017) and Winter (2009) point out, other issues emerge that are linked to our investigation of power dynamics and attentional capture. Agile working may address an aspect of April's question in that it could be an opportunity to live a work-life that is more closely aligned with personal principles or values. Addressing my own observations about the on-off culture, agile working may offer employees a feeling of greater freedom to 'be themselves'. On the other hand, the emergence of agile working has been accompanied by the other issue we have addressed here, namely the expectation of constant availability through instant communication – a theme participants in this study discussed at length. Is it possible that new workplace cultures like agile working are in fact also a way for the attention economy to get into our lives and fill spaces that used to be reserved for time out? Is our perceived greater freedom in fact a trade-off for constant availability?

At this point, I will pause and bring together the threads. We have explored the phenomenology of captured attention and the impact of the attention economy on wellbeing in the workplace. We have heard the call to assert and defend the freedom of our attention (Williams, 2017a) and I have shared fears identified in the cooperative inquiry events – fears that participants felt *get in the way*. It would seem that the phenomenology of attentional capture applies both to a) the experience of the individual manager her/himself and b) the pressure they experience to promote attentional capture as part of a business strategy or in setting a KPI for a direct report who carries it out. Whilst managers in this study experience and raise concerns about attentional capture in the workplace, are they nevertheless in a privileged position where there is perceived greater choice and more options available to reclaim attention? Is agile working a way of liberating us from the hamster wheel of the workplace, as we know it, or is it a trade-off for constant availability? I have suggested that a deliberate practice of attention offers a creative response to the issues explored here but before we can engage, theoretically, with the development of such a practice, we need to dive deeper into different types of attention and the phenomenological nuances. This will help us create a language to communicate what a practice of attention might entail.

4.1.3. Focused Attention

When we speak about attention in the colloquial sense, it is commonly assumed that we are referring to various forms of focused attention. This is validated on the train platform when we hear ‘attention all passengers’, or in other situations where we are asked ‘can I have your attention, please’. What we are being asked for in those everyday situations is usually to deliberately select this or that input over other endogenous or exogenous stimuli, make sense of it, archive it, or act on it. It may also inform our state, or way of being, in that moment. For example, if you are asked to ‘take all your personal belongings with you before leaving the train’, we translate that message into the action of taking another look around before we alight. Equally if we are asked to ‘be aware that pickpockets operate at this station’ we will enter a state of alertness as we cram into the tube. It is telling that the international road sign for attention is a triangle with an exclamation mark in it. This symbol is a call for immediate presence of mind and alertness, often connected with danger. It would appear that attention, in the colloquial sense at least, is primarily about focusing on the content of the present in a state of alertness.

Earlier, we explored how neuroscience and psychology talk about attention in terms of *filtering*, for example, *feature binding* or *selection for action*. Arvidson (2003a), Waltzl (2011), Wu (2014) and others provide exceptionally useful overviews and taxonomies explaining what focused attention might *be*. For our purposes here, we are interested in the question of what focused attention might *be like* and what it means for a deliberate practice of attention in the workplace. We will first look at different understandings of focused attention and how it appears in various forms before turning to a case study from the fieldwork.

Research conducted and presented by Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2009), provides a set of interesting phenomenological descriptions of focused attention in the context of the *flow state*. They propose that the experience of flow reflects attentional processes and share the following important observations –

Intense concentration, perhaps the defining quality of flow, is just another way of saying that attention is wholly invested in the present exchange. Action and awareness merge in the absence of spare attention that might allow objects beyond the immediate interaction to enter awareness. One such object is the self; the loss of self-consciousness in flow marks the fading of [...] “me” from awareness, as attention is taken up entirely by the challenges being engaged. The passage of time, a basic parameter of experience, becomes distorted because attention is so fully focused elsewhere. Staying in flow requires that attention be held by this limited stimulus field (p. 92).

In the earlier investigation of attentional capture, I mentioned that the absence of time for absorption and prolonged concentration in the workplace of most managers prevents us from feeling the positive effects of focused attention. The flow state, as described by Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, is one very powerful example of what I mean. These are some of the features of the flow state that the absence of absorption prevents us from experiencing:

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment
- Merging of action and awareness
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
- A sense that one can control one's actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
- Distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process (p. 90).

I am not claiming here that attentional capture and focused attention are in any way the same phenomenon but some of the features listed above represent the resultant experiences of both. As Chinta stated –

When I am absorbed by an activity my attention is captured by the content of the present moment. The experience of time is similar – focused attention and attentional capture may both result in the feeling that time passes faster than normal. This can sometimes be a disturbing experience, for example when we realise that two hours passed whilst we were aimlessly following YouTube autoplay recommendations, but another experience of captured attention – for example painting, playing tennis or writing a letter – can also leave a positive memory of being absorbed, or in flow, that then creates a sense contentment, fulfillment or joy (Chinta).

Such memories are important for the development and rejuvenation of the fabric of our psyche and, to a large extent, it is the archive of our memories that inform our emotional state, responses and behaviours in life (Smith, 2002).

I also mentioned earlier that lack of absorption might result in the absence of the experience of mastery. Most people who have developed a certain level of skill in an area will know that practice – that is, uninterrupted focused attention and absorption in that activity – is a necessary condition for progress. The discipline of sustaining focused attention on one activity for any length of time is challenging for most people even when it specifically serves the purpose of advancing a skill. Focused attention is another important ability that is at risk

in the attention economy. Since the 1980s, it has been widely accepted that the average concentration span is radically decreasing as we gradually allow ever more forms of attentional capture to replace our routine activities (Postman, 2005). Common routine activities that require focused attention have been the natural way of exercising the ability to increase our concentration span. In the attention economy, speed is one of the unique selling points and with the expectation of speed comes impatience. I would like to propose that re-establishing commitment and a healthy relationship to focused attention must be a priority for managers today for the reasons stated.

Furthermore, I have previously alluded to the idea that focused attention is not just a means of achieving mastery of a *skill*. As a practice, focused attention also represents the potential for *personal transformation*. In subsequent chapters, we will explore this idea in more detail. For our current purposes, I will first return to Ganeri (2017) to present a glimpse of the vast contribution the Buddhist tradition has made to this very theme.

In terms of the phenomenology of focused attention, we heard earlier that Ganeri (2017) considers attention a ‘hard link’ between the senses and the world rather than a ‘spotlight’ (p. 165). It is interesting that, according to Ganeri, no word in Pali or Sanskrit describes what we call ‘attention’ in the English language. In Buddhism, there are many different types of attention and one cannot therefore talk about *attention* unless deliberately referring to attention as a *category*. According to Buddhaghosa (whose works are explored extensively in Ganeri, 2017), any search for the *essence* of attention would be a mistake. Buddhaghosa was a 5th-century Theravadin Buddhist commentator and scholar. His most famous work is *Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification)*, which is a summary and analysis of the Theravada understanding of the Buddha’s path to liberation (Law, 1994). Buddhaghosa begins and ends this work by saying “‘Cultivate attention, bhikkhus; a bhikkhu¹⁰ who attends knows things as they are’” (Ganeri, 2017, p. 147). In order to obtain knowledge, or *insight (panna)*, into fundamental moral truths, says Buddhaghosa, one must practice *expert absorbed attention (samadhi)*. Insight is [...] knowledge that is achieved through highly cultivated attention (p. 146). Ganeri talks about the cultivation of attention as a means of “penetrating the individual essences of states. Its function is to abolish delusion, which conceals the individual essences of states” (ibid.) Buddhaghosa states further that attention is an immediate cause for ‘knowing and seeing correctly’ (p. 151). Attentional *skill* serves specifically to gain knowledge of the three foundational domains, namely *impermanence*, *suffering* and *no self*. Expert attention, or

¹⁰ Pali for an ordained monk

distractor-excluding attention is sufficient for the kind of knowledge that is considered ‘insight’.

We can see how focused attention and the development of attentional skill is foundational to the path of personal transformation in the Buddhist tradition. We recognise from the phenomenological description of focused attention presented by Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2009) that the experience of flow can lead to a feeling of *the loss of self-consciousness* and the *fading of “me” from awareness* (p. 92). It is perhaps one of the reasons why the practice of focused attention is seen as a gateway to understanding the *true nature of all things*. In the Buddhist tradition, it offers a road to *no self* (Ganeri, 2017) and in Stoicism it is a path to *phrónēsis* – meaning *practical wisdom* or *mindfulness* (Helskog, 2019). This particular theme is prominent in subsequent chapters when we look in more detail at attention and virtue. Meanwhile, I want to look at the phenomenology of the *perceived causal relationship* between *focused attention* and *knowledge*. We can see where this link comes from – various ancient traditions point to it, as we have heard – yet, our relationship to, and understanding of, both *focused attention* and *knowledge* have changed and I want explore here how the impact of that change in understanding manifests in a case study from the workplace.

In one of his interviews, John shared a story that will be examined at various points in this study. It is multifaceted and for now, we will look at how it reveals the connections we in the workplace commonly make between *focused attention*, *knowledge* and *certainty* – conceptual links that are deeply embedded in the way we *do business*.

John told me how he and his senior management team were suddenly forced by the most critical and unforeseen external events to make a significant strategic decision in a short space of time. The decision would have major impacts on primary beneficiaries, the financial health and size of the organisation. The expectations of the board – and of various external agents – was that John, as the senior executive, would lead a focused, determined and swift process of decision making with his team. It was assumed that such a process would be driven exclusively by survival through maximum damage control and minimal loss.

The process John decided to facilitate, however, constituted a very different gesture. It was a process that allowed spaciousness and time, and which welcomed ‘not knowing’ as a respectable part of the discussion; it was a process that essentially moved the focus of attention from the usual drivers, i.e. to create knowledge where

there is none, facilitate certainty where there is none and take strategic action when we don't know what we are doing.

For a senior executive to say 'we don't know' is usually regarded as irresponsible and it is commonly understood that this sort of response would be anxiety provoking for the team in a crisis situation, yet John took that risk. He repeatedly responded to the board that there were too many areas of unknowing for the team to come to a swift decision. Instead, John invited his team to come to a collective understanding of what could be known about the situation whilst also recognising what could not. The team worked together for a week without making any decisions. By inviting the collective attention of the team to be with unknowing, John prevented anxiety driven attentional capture and avoided a process of fear-based knowledge-creation. The decision making process was highly praised by the team and whilst the result was unexpected, the action that was taken in response to the crisis turned out to be a sound strategic move for the organisation (Interview).

The process that John led was a challenge to the key assumptions that may influence how senior managers commonly behave – and are expected to act – in crisis situations. The idea that we *must* focus our attention on the *problem*, on *survival*, *knowledge* and *certainty* above all, is not only counterproductive but also risky – the potential for collective creative engagement is immediately undermined. In my own experience, the phenomenology of focused attention in a crisis situation is that it is particularly hard to know where it is best directed. Our natural fight/flight response to danger focuses attention on what is right in front of us – thus, the possibility for engaging with *insight* (Ganeri, 2017) or *practical wisdom* (Hadot, 2004) is compromised.

With ancient traditions indicating the transformative effects of a disciplined attention, on the one hand, and a study of the phenomenology of focused attention in the workplace, on the other, I would like to propose that the *conscious and disciplined practice* of focused attention in the context of absorption and flow is a potential source of transformative experiences, whilst the *default practice* of focused attention in a crisis situation is not always the most effective or advantageous kind of attention to rely on. The implication of this proposal for management learning is, of course, that a deliberate practice of attention is necessary if we are to experiment with, or indeed change, attentional behaviours of decision makers in the workplace. John's story is a case in point.

4.1.4. Distributed Attention

Watzl (2011) characterises distributed attention as the opposite of ‘focal’ attention – focal attention, he says, is narrowly directed at a particular object or event and distributed attention spreads over a scene as a whole (p. 847). As we will see, this sounds similar to how we may describe evenly suspended attention but these two types of attention have, in my view, significant phenomenological differences.

Participants in this study had much to share about their experience of distributed attention. It would seem that the mastery we are given ample time to develop is exactly this – how to divide, or distribute, our attention between all the tasks on our list, all the people we are responsible for, or to, and all the different political, social and financial agendas we are dealing with during any one day in the workplace.

Stella described this in detail. As a consultant, she is often feeling the pressure of the competing demands for her attention. The common experience is one of feeling ‘split’ between different dynamics that she is equally accountable to –

- The emerging needs of the group she is facilitating*
- The CEO who signed the contract for the work,*
- The agreed deliverables in the contract itself – which, by the way, may now seem to be in conflict with new learning from the group*
- Her presentation – language, appearance, the company she herself works for*
- Her own intuition about what the company really needs, an intuition that is rarely shared with the people who are embedded in the issues.*

Stella’s account chimed with the accounts of other participants. She described how she would be exhausted from a long day of managing the careful distribution of her attention – some of it driven by endogenous factors, such as fears about how others felt the process was going; some it driven by exogenous factors, such as unpredictable behaviour or difficult new information from a person or team (Interviews).

Tajee’s experience of dealing with competing demands for his attention added to Stella’s narrative of attention to own needs. If the most common experience of the workplace is dominated by the competition of exogenous factors for our attention, where in this ‘race’ are our own needs? Can we truly serve others and offer high

quality attention if we are ignorant of or simply not attentive to own needs? Tajee, being in a senior pastoral role, was aware that he was also serving as a role model. Though managers often joke about the attitude of do as I say, not as I do, the reality is that a senior position naturally comes with a responsibility to be conscious about the tone that is set through personal behaviour. For Tajee, this was an explicit part of the job description and on the theme of self-care the attention distribution required careful managing (Interview).

Daniel's response to the theme of attention to self-care was motivated by having survived a difficult phase of his life where he had no choice but to attend to own needs in order to recover. This had been a lesson for him about getting the priorities right in the workplace. Distributed attention would be ineffective if there was no attention left for oneself. We know this from another mundane event, of course – as we fasten our seatbelt in the airplane about to take off, we are reminded that, in the unlikely event of an emergency landing, we must put on our own oxygen mask before helping others – a counterintuitive move, it seems, if you are travelling with children or vulnerable others (Interview).

The phenomenological descriptions of distributed attention among participants were dominated by implication of stress and fear of failure. This seemed rooted in the reductionist view of attention that is so prevalent today. If businesses commonly view attention as a selective focus on some stimuli to the exclusion of other stimuli (Kane, 2019), it follows that attention distribution is the allocation of a finite individual resource. This aligns with the basic principle of the *economics of attention*, as we have heard.

The collective opinion about the average workplace is that it demands swift, effective and unquestioned distribution of attention to what is in front of you. The attender, or the agent is, just by virtue of being the agent, disqualified from the competition from the outset. Thus, the workday can result in attentional exhaustion from the never-ending attention distribution that excludes own needs. The consequences are significant (Cooperative Inquiry).

My own workplace represents the tensions and complexities of an intense compliance culture coupled with the day-to-day necessity for a creative engagement with real-world situations. I have direct experience of the challenge that is posed by holding that ambiguity. In the engagement with a risk register that poses more than ninety hypothetical risks, the strategic leadership team is faced with the reality that the equally hypothetical pre-emptive measures we record, and on which we are evaluated, are based on the creativity offered by decisions

made in the boardroom. The reality is that this calls for a *mētīc* approach, as we explored above (Mackay et al., 2014) – one that navigates the thresholds between what we told the regulator we would do and what is actually called for in the moment. Attention to both of those at once when the situation arises requires an inner agility that is not naturally inherent in our behaviour unless we are conscious of our practice. In trying to get it right as a team, we are confronted with the power of judgment and not only with a focus on *individual* position but also the *collective*. Shotter and Tsoukas (2014) say that success relies on “the practitioners’ attention to the developing nature of details in their surroundings” (p. 378). This intense distribution of attention to the detail, the big picture as well as our individual inner landscape, is the experience of daily life for a person in a senior role.

What does it look like when distribution of attention works well? How does it feel when attention is allocated to the whole scene (Watzl, 2011)? Is this possible to do in such a way that it does not deplete or compromise the wellbeing of the attender? During this study, I have had ample opportunity to explore the difficulties and challenges posed by distributed attention done badly. I have experienced coming home from work evening after evening in a frazzled state, feeling that very little of value was achieved. When I experienced the opposite, it was always as a result of *taking myself on*. When I was able to apply my will and take charge of the attention distribution as a legitimate priority in itself, I would, at the end of the day, be able to celebrate new findings, even on the difficult days. I share from an autoethnographic account, the following passages on this very theme –

As a governor of a Children’s Home in the Midlands, I am tasked with the job of facilitating that this organisation is ready for an appropriate acquisition. I have been thinking about the multifaceted nature of this and how to divide attention between the various stakeholders in the process. Not only do we, as governors, have a responsibility to the provision itself, which involves the children’s welfare, the parents, the staff, the community, the charity commission (in this case), Ofsted and all those commissioners who placed the children there in the first place, we also have a responsibility to ensure that the organisation’s future is aligned with the founding vision, a robust financial prospect and the idea of adding value beyond the lifespan of any of the current stakeholders. The exercise is to attend to all of those things in the process of making decisions, ensuring that we do not make choices based on fear but on the ultimate benefit for all involved. I also personally feel that the responsibility we have as governors is to make sure that the acquirer knows what they are obtaining – ensuring, therefore, that we hand over an operation that is valuable. This means attending to the current situation and understanding what of it works and what does not in order to present a transparent picture to the organisation that expresses interest.

So, I find myself trying to attend in different directions at the same time. As I am in a position of influence, my role in this regard is to ensure that we are not missing a trick at any time and my attention, therefore, could well be drawn in the direction of self doubt, for example, or the fear that my decisions and actions are not in fact the right ones.

What seems to be emerging here is that my attention has to be distributed in my decision-making processes as well as in my conversations and explorations. I created a due diligence tool, which would serve to develop a holistic picture of any candidate bodies. We assess the vision, values, method, purpose, charitable objects, operation, culture-in-action, finance, etc. And I have asked of the organisation that it self-reflects along those lines as well. I am thus hoping to enable that the organisation attends to itself and its potential host in equal measures during the due diligence process. An attention mirroring exercise... (Mergers and Acquisitions. 2 December 2016)

My inquiry at that time was about how a deliberate practice of distributed attention could be put in service of multiple aims. As well as working consciously with my own attention distribution as a means of being better able to serve, I initiated a process where the organisation involved was invited to turn *its* attention on *itself* as part of an evaluation framework of possible acquiring organisations. I recall vividly the phenomenology of consciously attending to the different factors involved: at the very centre, the welfare of the children in the home and the staff that served them, then, the evaluation of the process itself as it was unfolding and the integrity with which we as governors approached it, the assessment of potential acquirers and the quality of decisions we were making as findings from the evaluation framework emerged. Certainly, this complex experience validated the necessity for self-reflective practice and the constant connecting with intention, purpose and the welfare of beneficiaries. Aptly, we find that distributed attention is referred to as *universally divided attention* or *collective attention* in the Buddhist tradition – the ability to attend to everything all at once (Ganeri, 2017). Perhaps this understanding of distributed attention goes in the direction of the particular type of attention we will now explore.

4.1.5. Evenly Suspended Attention

Evenly suspended attention has its lineage in the psychoanalytic tradition. It was translated from the German *gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit* – a term introduced by Freud to describe a technique he called the *analytic attitude* (Freud, 1975). Since Freud first coined the term, different translations have been proposed – ‘revolving’, ‘mobile’, ‘poised’ and ‘equally suspended’ attention among them (Snell, 2013, p. 184). The analytic attitude, Freud said, requires a ‘hovering’, ‘free-flowing’ or ‘circling’ attention where the analyst avoids focusing in on anything in particular but maintains a non-selective, yet receptive, stance (ibid.). Fixing one’s attention on a particular aspect of the patient’s narrative would pose the risk that the analyst automatically reverts to what s/he already knows. Rather than rushing to the *known* from which own narratives and conclusions arise, the analytic attitude requires us to give *equal notice to everything* (Snell, 2013, p. 41). The danger of going to a default position of knowing would be the same as not engaging with the ‘truth-in-the-moment’ (French &

Simpson, 2000, p. 55). Bion insisted that the analyst must “cultivate a watchful avoidance of memory” (Snell, 2013, p. 48) in order to maintain the inner spaciousness needed for an engagement with what he described as ‘O’. For Bion, ‘O’ is the “ultimate reality, ultimate truth, or, the godhead” (French and Simpson, 2000, p. 55) and it cannot be known. Eigen (1998) describes it thus:

It is impossible to know reality for the same reason that it makes it impossible to sing potatoes; they may be grown, pulled, or eaten, but not sung, Reality has to be “been”: there should be a transitive verb “to be” expressly for use with the term “reality” (p.81).

Whilst ‘O’ cannot be pinned down, it can, on the other hand, be disclosed to those exposed to it with transformative effect (French and Simpson, 2015) but in opening up to this ultimate reality, we need first and foremost to learn to *be with unknowing*.

The interrelationships between *being with unknowing*, ‘O’, and the analytic attitude of evenly suspended attention was promoted strongly in the work of Bion (1970) and this theme has subsequently been explored extensively by scholars such as Eigen (1998), French and Simpson (2015), Snell (2013) and others. These connections are also significant for this study and we will explore it again further on. For now, we will return to the phenomenology of evenly suspended attention and its potential.

I offer two abstracts from autoethnographic accounts in which I describe the phenomenology of my lived experience of evenly suspended attention. The first account describes experiences from my contemplative life. It was written only nine months into this study and the inquiry I am reflecting on here was inspired by the work on attention published that same year by French and Simpson (2015). Their description of evenly suspended attention as a gateway to “engaging reality in its full sense” (p. 2) inspired me to investigate further how such a practice would unfold in ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ life situations:

I have practiced the discipline of a particular sequence in meditation since 1998. The practice involves a commitment to meditation three times a day. The first meditation is practiced between 6pm and 6am, the second between 6am and noon and the third between noon and 6pm. My mother tongue is Danish, my life is lived mostly in English but the mantras of this meditation practice I do in German. As part of this particular practice, the meditator is invited to enter a state that in German is called ‘waches erwarten’. Commonly, this is translated into English as ‘watchful waiting’ (‘suspense’ or ‘expectancy’ is also sometimes used).

The experience of being in this state is the closest I have come to an experience of evenly suspended attention. This is a space within which my attention is not attached to anything but dedicated – as far as possible – to all things. When it works well, I am able to “step back” inwardly, rather than “forward” towards something. The inner attitude of waiting helps me achieve this state. I need to connect with that word

and find the appropriate inner gesture in order for my attention to detach from focussing (Account: 30 July 2015).

In this account, I am describing the search for an appropriate inner *gesture*. We can compare this to Freud's recommendation of achieving the analytic *attitude* (Snell, 2013). I note here how the experience of *stepping back* inwardly helps avoid the focused attention that I seem to drift into by *stepping forward* as if towards something. The other observation worth making is how the idea of 'waiting' helps me, according to this account. The state of waiting is linked to the state of unknowing – when we are waiting, we are by default in uncertainty. We may be waiting for a train that is *supposed* to arrive at a particular time but I think we can all agree that this is not a given. We may also be waiting for other *givens* that we dare to rely on in life, but by virtue of being in a state of waiting, we are projecting onto the future what we are waiting for and whatever it is, it will never in this projected form be part of the *tangible* here and now. It is part of *my truth-in-the-moment* (French and Simpson, 2000) but this is then located in my private *inner* reality. As long as we are in the waiting state, we can never be sure that my idea of what we are waiting for is the same as yours. The phenomenology of the state of waiting, I propose, entails a *being with the unknown* that we do not experience when the (metaphorical) train has arrived. Interestingly, I found much later that Weil made the following proposition –

[...] the ethical quality of 'patiently waiting', avoiding the temptations of self-interested positions, in that waiting, deepening one's understanding of the power that attention conveys (quoted in Bowden, 1998, p. 62)

Weil's observations about the state of waiting have some significance for the practice of evenly suspended attention that we will return to. After studying the literature on evenly suspended attention in the months that followed the above account, I eventually liberated myself from scholarly influences and began a journey of finding my own relationship to the idea. Here is an abstract from an account that describes the phenomenology of what I, in what follows, call 'attention-in-flow state' –

I am three days into a new era at work. My attention has been very much engaged with the conscious administration of itself. Reflections on that process so far include that I have to go at a different pace. I plan my day differently and I am mindful of not rushing each moment. By rushing I partly mean that I have gone to the next event in my mind half way through the one I am in. It seems essential to mobilize the courage and energy that it takes to remain present as much as possible in each moment. And if not in each moment, then at least (as a starting point) in each event – be that a meeting, a moment of writing letters or reports, emailing or undertaking the general administration, or indeed one of those moments that in between where I am deciding what to pay attention to next.

In fact, the decision to be more present in each event of the day has meant that I have to prepare better for each task. This is interesting. It is possible for me to enter a particular kind of attention-in-flow state where my [sense of] presence seems to be

'above' it all and dipping in to focus on one or other aspect of what is happening. In that state, I seem to be able to grasp things from a bird perspective and I feel deeply connected to the event but I suspect that I am missing some details. In fact, I wonder whether I am also missing some important social micro-dynamics when I am in that state. I enter into that state when there has been little or no time for me to prepare emotionally and mentally. Whilst I can do well on knowledge content, I am not prepared for it socially, if you will.

I enter the attention-in-flow state partly to be able to perceive as much as possible, as swiftly as possible – this seems to indicate that the experience of being 'above' things is right. From there (above?) I can see more and I can see it quicker. But I can't sense the social micro-dynamics as well from that inner location.

Grounded attention, as opposed to the attention-in-flow state, necessitates that I have to prepare more thoroughly mentally and emotionally, I think this is because I have to be ready to not only acknowledge but also engage with the social micro-dynamics on a different level. When I am present in this more grounded way, I feel socially accountable to others, and myself, in a different way.

I need to go back into this experience and find out more about what I have just written here. Action taken included researching and just being generally mindful of how I pay attention and how this affects my workplace experience. (Attention-in-flow state: 7 January 2016)

The most thought-provoking element in this account is perhaps the experience that when I am in the attention-in-flow state, I am mindful of missing the social micro-dynamics of an event. This may be a logical result of my attention hovering or circling *above* the event – suspended rather than focused. It is interesting to consider this experience in relation to evenly suspended attention as a psychoanalytic technique. One assumes, perhaps, that the therapeutic space is concerned with attention to detail – the patient's actual account, choice of language, body language and other non-verbal signals. When Freud calls for an analytic attitude that invites the analyst to detach from any distinct element or detail of an event in order to *be with* the 'whole scene' (Watzl, 2011), we need to understand what he is really suggesting. Perhaps there is a clue in Bion's call for a transitive verb that can better capture the right way of *being with* 'O' – the ultimate truth (Eigen 1998).

Before I conclude this particular exploration, I wish to bring our attention to another element from the account that warrants a mention and that is the observation about preparing differently for grounded attention and evenly suspended attention. If evenly suspended attention is about being in a *waiting* state and adopting an attitude of non-selective receptivity, avoiding memory and one's personal archive of givens, it is indeed an exercise in *being with unknowing*. How does one prepare for that? What is important? Here, I invite us to look back at John's account of the crisis he had to deal with at work.

John responded with the courage to invite his team and his board to be with unknowing. We are back in the boardroom where John, swimming against the stream, challenges the natural fight/flight response and facilitates a space for collective creative engagement with time and uncertainty. John was moving the collective focus from the default gesture of going to the perceived givens to unknowing and though this courageous act, he may just have introduced a practice of evenly suspended attention. The response from John's team of senior managers was that this was the most effective process they had ever been part of (Interview).

What if John had shared this with his team as an actual practice of attention? What kind of legitimacy would that give to a repetition of this method or, indeed, a new way of doing business altogether?

By bringing us back to John's story, I am not only making the general point that a deliberate practice of attention is a doorway to new ways of engaging with strategic decision making in the workplace, I am also pointing to the fact that a conscious approach to engaging individually and collectively with different kinds of attention is an area of immense potential for management learning. On a more granular level, I am demonstrating through John's account that deliberate attention practice can cultivate a level of mastery where lateral, creative engagement with focused attention can inspire the practice of evenly suspended attention. Through my study of John's particular case, I am also entertaining the possibility that *types* of attention may indeed be *phenomenologically distinct* but not necessarily *mutually exclusive*.

As for the practice of evenly suspended attention, in particular, Bion (Eigen, 2013), French and Simpson (2000, 2015), Ganeri (2017) and Snell (2013) all propose that it is, in essence, a path to self-knowledge and they emphasise the immense transformative potential this has for self and for others. We leave the exploration of its phenomenology with the foregrounding of two questions arising from the above: a) what is the true way of *being with* the ultimate reality of the truth-in-the-moment (French and Simpson, 2000) and b) how do we develop capabilities of being with unknowing?

4.1.6. Embodied Attention

Earlier, we found that embodiment is tentatively finding a voice in management learning (Dale, 2001; Ladkin and Taylor, 2019; Palmer and Crawford, 2013). To better situate the

ensuing discussion about the phenomenology of embodied attention, we will take a step back to look at embodiment as such.

It is only in the last two decades that the study of the body has been legitimised outside of the natural sciences. Recently, however, we can observe how increased attention on the body in social sciences has released us somewhat from the grip of the reductive, mechanical view that hitherto colonised us in the Western world (Yuill et al., 2010). The contemporary notion of *embodiment* has arisen from the idea that *cognition is embodied*. Still, here is a range of views, definitions and interpretations (Kiverstein, 2012) that makes it difficult to talk about embodiment without implying allegiance to one or other school of thought. This, of course, is a similar situation to the one we encounter in the field of attention (Watzl, 2011). Yuill et al., (2010) suggest that “embodiment understands that human existence is the interweaving of the mind, the body and society” (p. 2) but, as stated, this is but one of many possible definitions.

One of the views on embodiment presented in Kiverstein (2012) is *body-enactivism* of which he says that it articulates “the ways in which the body can enact or make a situation meaningful to an agent” (p. 741). The lineage of this particular view – and the increased attention on the idea of embodiment as such – is the work of Varela, Thompson and Rosch (2016). In their seminal book, *The Embodied Mind* (first published in 1991), they introduce *enaction* as a new conception of science from the perspectives of cognitive science, Western phenomenology and Buddhism. They challenge the current prevailing story of the Western world that we are *a separate self in an independent world* and they invite us to consider the notion of embodiment based on the premise that our *experience* of being and our *story* about being are not, in fact, incommensurable. They propose that lived experience and cognitive science are not necessarily at odds with each other but that they can be understood as mutually enhancing – and they call this view *the enactive conception of science*, or *enaction*. They summarise the quandary as follows –

Either accept what science seems to be telling us and deny our experience – thereby forgetting that lived experience is the source of science, and that science can never ultimately step outside it – or hold fast to our lived experience and deny science – thereby forgetting that lived experience itself constantly seeks to enlarge its own horizons through scientific investigation (p. xix)

The central ideas of embodiment and the approach of enaction proposed by Varela et al. (2016) that have relevance for this study can be condensed as follows –

- Lived experience is not only a valid way of knowing it is essential for “experiential practices of ethical human transformation” (p. xxix).

- Experience is not “an epiphenomenal side issue” (p. xxvii) but warrants thorough phenomenological exploration.
- The body is a sense-making system that is always *situated* and it is in constant interaction with its environment.
- The “lived body, lived mind and lived environment are thus part of the same process” (p. xxxviii).

With this as our backdrop, we will proceed to explore the phenomenology of embodied attention as it has emerged in this study and I want to start by sharing some observations and questions –

It is interesting to note that I did not set out to look for embodied attention in the research – it emerged as a voice in the stories that were told by participants. I did not have a notion of ‘embodied attention’ before I started to use that as a term in the process of analysing the findings. It is my own use of the term that led me to an encounter with embodiment. What interests me about that is that the body found a place in a study on attention without me automatically including it.

This raises two questions about current trends in management learning, a) what does it tell us about the perceived relationship between body and mind and b) what might be the implications of this for the practice of attention in the workplace?

Above, we heard from Dale (2001) that the layout of the modern day office is predicated on the division of body and mind for optimal production output and I propose that this is rooted in a mind-body hierarchy that is being maintained in the workplace. We also discovered earlier that there *are* forms of management that engage with embodiment, for example the idea of *bodily leadership knowledge* as proposed in Hansen, Ropo, and Sauer (2007) and the four qualities of *embodied authentic leadership* proposed by Ladkin and Taylor (2010). I argued that these talk of attention by implication rather than explicitly, so the question is: in what way might a practice of embodied attention express itself in the workplace?

April was the participant that first woke me up to the idea of embodied attention when she shared her practice. She told me how she would move around in her office to see things from different perspectives. She would go and stand in the corner of the room and look back at her desk or shift to another physical sitting position on the chair, on the floor or the sofa, when she wanted to shift what her attention was on –

I need to stand, it seems, to gain perspective. I just tried it one day and was surprised at the stuff that emerged. It allows me to see! I am slightly stepping out of myself to look back at me in role. Just the act of sitting down again connects me. I am me and this is what needs to happen next. No drama. I come back with more perspective (April).

Interestingly, April also shared that shifting physical position and location would also affect how she attends. She told me that, before this study began, she had not made the connection between moving around to shift perspective and how she attends. As she started working consciously with attention at work, she was able to reflect on some of those practices she had been doing intuitively and make sense of them.

Another interesting observations shared by April was that she would close her eyes in a meeting or try to shift the focus and quality of attention by 'going inward' –

[...] My mind quietens for 2-3 minutes, observing what bubbles up; it is like when you are dreaming and you wake to write up and write something down. [...] I see and sense all the chatter. I am looking at what is in the silence that is not being spoken amongst the chatter. There is usually a pause where I can slightly separate from myself to rather access myself [...] Amazing how often something will pop into my head that I am not aware of (April).

At the end of the study, April would name the same practice with more deliberate choice of language, she said –

Shifting my space, my physical location, body and energy to help create more attention. It wakes me up to my attention again. [...] I am reminded of what I did when I was a kid – pacing when I was revising. [...] I can really hone my attention in by deciding to sit on the sofa for a bit. Different places in the office helps me access different parts of myself. It has taken me to this age to be confident to do that. I wish I knew then what I know now (April).

We can observe that April's narrative is beginning to sound like a deliberate practice of attention. Her journey in this study was about becoming aware of what she was actually already doing and making sense of it. She reflected several times how it was interesting for her to hear herself tell the story. Engaging with April, I learnt that her practice of attention becomes deliberate through the telling of the story to another.

The story that Amber shared with me took us back to childhood where she had an experience that she was only able to make sense of years later –

[...] Thinking was not something that is happening in my head but in my whole body. I realised that people [think they] think with the head. I think with the whole body. I feel it all over the show (Amber).

Amber's experience as a child had made her feel stupid. Now she knows differently, but back then, she did not understand how others were so disembodied in the way they understood everything. She used to go up the hill to look back at herself so that she could see herself in relation to everything. Feeling herself in the whole body and feeling the state of the world in that way made it difficult for her to relate to others, she told me. Amber, however, took herself on –

I have done a lot on being with people. Three years on compassion. I needed to spend time looking at – paying attention to – how I could become compassionate. I would meet with awful people and feel where the pain was. Which one was mine? [...] I am increasingly capable and comfortable with being me. [...] I am coherent as a human being (Amber).

During this study, Amber made a number of other pertinent observations on attention, which she would send to me between research events. Two of those relate to the theme of embodiment. The first one was that she did not experience the movements of her attention as taking place in the brain. Instead, she said, “it is an interaction between the brain and the body that enables the attention to be shifted”

Amber's experience of thinking and attending was described in different ways as a holistic experience involving the whole body. It is interesting to note that the experience of being a very ‘embodied’ child was alienating and difficult for her. Just as we struggle to be present in the moment, there is something about being ‘embodied’ that poses a challenge for many in the workplace.

The second observation Amber shared was about drifting. Drifting, she said, is telling us something important. The person you are with never experiences your attention itself but they experience the impact of you drifting, or you bringing your attention back (Interview).

The point Amber is making here is significant: it is the embodied attention that give others access to whether we are present in the moment or drifting off. The attention itself, it would seem, is private to us. Going back to Dale (2001), it is as if the environments we have created for work are designed to facilitate a rather disembodied experience. Amber's experience is up against the narrative that is being challenged by Varela et al. (2016), which is based on the idea that we are *a separate self in an independent world*.

4.2. Coda

In this chapter, we have explored the phenomenology of different types of attention. I have proposed that a deliberate practice of attention can serve to facilitate intentional spaces of recognition and connection in the workplace and I have suggested that this is crucial both for personal transformation and for the entire field of management learning.

We have looked at attention and awareness as two ways of knowing that, when brought into balance, offer a new way of *being with* what is in the present. In the context of the attention economy, this practice becomes even more important as we witness the attention of senior managers and those with whom they work, captured by fear of failure, lack of time and spaces for recognition.

The call to assert and defend the freedom of our attention (Williams, 2017a) is accompanied by political issues pertaining to implicit hierarchies and power structures at play in the workplace. Whilst the introduction of agile working may offer some flexibility, it is often experienced as a trade-off for an expectation of constant availability. The lack of opportunity to gain mastery and the absence of time for absorption can cause an environment in which we may find ourselves caught in a treadmill of incompetence (ibid.). Flow states (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2010) are rare and the impact of that on our ability to engage focused attention may become another roadblock to achieving personal transformation. Focused attention can be a gateway to transformative experiences and when not used as default position to engage with crisis situations, it is part of the liberation of attention, rather than the causing of its capture.

In an environment where distributed attention is a default setting, yet not a recognised skill that requires training and mastery, we find managers suffering from stress, overwhelm and lack of support. Our own needs are at risk of drowning in the pressure to attend to the *whole scene* (Watzl, 2011). The analytic attitude of evenly suspended attention invites us to engage with the truth-in-the-moment (French and Simpson, 2000) and calls on us to resist the temptation of rushing to our archive of givens when confronted with the unknown. Bion's 'O' presents an aspiration that brings together the attitude of evenly suspended attention as a *way of being with* ultimate reality and unknowing. However, from phenomenological accounts of lived experience the questions arise as to what details we may be missing when we are in that state. We are also left to wonder how we may prepare for it. John's account demonstrates the further possibility that different types of attention may be phenomenologically distinct but not necessarily mutually exclusive and, furthermore, that collective mastery of these different

types of attention may bring a new perspective on strategic engagement to the workplace and to the field of management learning as such.

According to Varela et al. (2016) we do not have to perpetuate the ontology that we are a *separate self* living in an *independent world*. Lived experience, when investigated phenomenologically, reveals that *lived mind* and the *lived body* as a sense making system situated in – and in constant dialogue with – its environment constitutes *one* process. The phenomenology of embodied attention, as explored in this study, reveals that we do not need to imagine the practice of attention as a function of the brain rather, we can consider this in holistic terms and include the body in its physical, social and spiritual environment.



4.3. The Practice of Attention

It is interesting that we often use the analogy of light when we talk about attention. The most commonly used notion is the *spotlight* of our attention. Williams (2017a), however, speaks about attention in terms of different kinds of light. The *starlight* of our attention, he says, is a way to navigate our lives. Skewes' (2016) proposition that controlling the attention of another is a way of controlling the world s/he creates and inhabits aligns with the image that we navigate our lives through the relationships and narratives we form about *how* and *when* we attend, as well as to *what* or to *whom* we attend.

Williams further states that when the *spotlight* of our attention gets obscured, we are distracted from what we are doing and when technology undermines the *daylight* of our attention, it erodes our fundamental capacities like reason, reflection, intelligence, metacognition. So when Williams calls on us to assert and defend the freedom of our attention it is the *starlight*, the *spotlight* and the *daylight* of our attention that concerns him.

My interpretation of these different forms of light is that the *spotlight* is our focused attention, the *daylight* is our distributed, and the *starlight* is both embodied and evenly suspended attention – an inner attitude we can develop to engage with a form of attention that is a bridge between the individual and the world (Anderson, 2018; Eigen, 1998; Ganeri, 2017; Steiner, 1999; Varela et al., 2016). It is in this sense that Skewes' (2016) assertion is not just a statement about what is going on in the growing attention economy, as discussed earlier, but it can also be received as an invitation to *reclaim* our attention. My proposition in this study is that we may do this through developing a deliberate practice.

It was argued earlier that there are several examples where the management learning literature points to or *implies* a practice of attention, but very little that provides guidance on how to develop it. It is predominantly in the spiritual traditions and in the emergence of secular mindfulness that we find such guidance. Might this disinclination within academia, as well as in management learning, be the result of hesitancy towards engaging with the indefinable? We have heard that there is no unified theory of attention (Arvidson, 2003, 2003a; Watzl, 2011, 2011a; Wu, 2014 and others) yet there is no lack of indication that a practice of attention is an important component of personal and professional development (French and Simpson, 2015; Ganeri, 2017; Ramsey, 2014, Weil, 2000 and others) as well as a major factor in improving mental health (NHS and Oxford Mindfulness Centre, 2018). A growing number of schools now introduce mindfulness in recognition of its impact on the wellbeing of children and young people (Bostic et al. 2015). James (1950) famously stated that *judgment*,

character and *will* are rooted in the faculty we use to voluntarily and consistently bring back wandering attention. He said,

An education which would improve this faculty would be *the* education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about (p. 424).

Again, we can see that James is clearly advocating for the significance of a practice of attention but hesitates to offer guidance. The question is not whether we can or should develop a practice of attention but whether we are ready to proceed on the basis of the fact that we are working with a faculty that is disputed, collectively undefined and potentially unknowable. Can we, on that basis, develop a practice that recognises the dual nature and phenomenology of attention as shared – public – and individual – private?

At the centre of this study is this question to senior managers: *what does a deliberate practice of attention mean for the development of self and others in the workplace?* It is my unequivocal experience, and my view, that *the development of self and others in the workplace* is one of the primary responsibilities of senior managers. I propose that the *development of self* invites a commitment from senior managers to cultivate the following faculties: *readiness* to be authentic, *willingness* to transform, *courage* to take responsibility for self and others, *trust* in the wisdom of each moment and *love* of the deed. These faculties are, in my experience, the very cornerstones of self-management and the necessary capabilities for offering management to others.

In service of the ensuing discussion, I propose the following working definition of a *deliberate practice of attention*. This definition aims to embrace the indefinability of attention, whilst recognising its intentionality and phenomenology, and it identifies practice as aspirational and emergent, acknowledging the need to foster the attitudes required to meet the challenges that may derail us. In the context of my inquiry, then –

Attention is the phenomena of *being with*. The *deliberate practice of attention* is to discern and realise conscientious ways of *being with* in each moment and to embrace the potentiality of *being without* the certitude of knowledge. For a deliberate practice of attention to be morally justifiable, it must include awareness of the ethics of attention and the ethical attitude of consent.

The themes and implications embedded in these formulations constitute the substance of what follows. We will start our investigation of the practice of attention by looking at an example

from the workplace and use this as a springboard to ask some fundamental questions of an ethical nature.

The emergence of secular mindfulness is the closest we get to a practice of attention in the workplace and management practice – at least in the Western world. The most prominent example is possibly the initiative taken by Google's famous unofficial greeter, the *jolly good fellow* also known as Meng (Tan, 2012, p. vii). Employed by the company as an engineer, Meng's initiative came about as a result of the 20% research time granted to employees. *Search Inside Yourself* is now a widely read book and a course run by the *Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute* (SIYLI), who describe themselves as –

[...] a global community making mindfulness and emotional intelligence practical and accessible. Together, we're working toward a more peaceful world in which all people feel connected and act with compassion (SIYLI, 2019)

The mission of SIYLI is as follows –

We aim to embody the benefits of a well-balanced mind and are dedicated to helping individuals and organizations sustain peak professional performance with ease, grace and compassion (ibid.)

The programme aims to sustain excellent performance, tap into outstanding collaboration, as well as,

- Intensify your focus
- Be resilient in the face of challenge
- Govern stress
- Unleash creative and innovative thinking
- Develop greater self-awareness and emotion regulation
- Communicate clearly and effectively
- Experience greater overall wellbeing (ibid.)

Watching Meng speak about his initiative (Tan, 2012a), it seems that he is indeed closely aligned with the intention of promoting a deliberate practice of attention in the workplace. His philosophical and scientific backdrop is a combination of the secular mindfulness tradition and the latest research (at the time) in neuroplasticity. Google, as well as SIYLI, are keen to promote the scientific justifications for the initiative and they emphasize its secularity.

This, then, is one example of an impulse that is aiming to bring a form of deliberate practice of attention into the workplace. It is a project that suffers a rather severe lack of competition, one could say – and no wonder, perhaps, for who would like to compete with the *Search Inside Yourself* initiative, developed, managed and funded by Google, a global corporation that can only be described as *the* driving force (Zuboff, 2019) in the attention economy? By launching SIYLI, Google is introducing, through secular mindfulness, a deliberate practice of

attention in the workplace and, in so doing, they are addressing the impact of the attention economy – whilst their promotional film on *Digital Wellbeing* (Google, 2019) is very hard to find on Google’s own search engine, unless one knows where to look, it is at least there.

I join Crawford (2015) in not wanting to put all the blame on digital technology and by pointing out that Google is driving the biggest (to my knowledge) current initiative on attention practice in the workplace whilst also leading the attention economy (Zuboff, 2019), I am not here making conspiratorial insinuations or drawing conclusions rather, I am observing and naming a phenomenon.

Another observation about SIYLI worth making at this point concerns the language being used. With the promotion of *world peace, ease, grace, compassion* and *greater wellbeing*, we are clearly also in the business of using the *benefits of a well-balanced mind* for the *sustaining* of organisational *peak performance*. I am reminded of *Attention Capital* who state that “properly valuing people’s attention represents the largest investment opportunity in the next decade” (Attention Capital, 2019). What we need to look closely at is what drives the interest in harnessing our attention. This is where *the practice of attention* meets an *inquiry into intention*, which we will be discussing below. Firstly, however, we need to address a subject that I boldly named *ethics of attention* before I became aware of the growing presence of this exact phrase in the advertising industry and other corporate sectors (Stuart, 2019), in politics (Garber, 2018; Morozov, 2019), in popular literature (Crawford, 2015) as well as in the academic discourse (Pfau, 2014; Zuboff, 2019 and others). I will start by presenting and discussing the current debate in those areas and then proceed to look at the ethics of attention in the context of the workplace and the field of management learning.

4.3.1. Ethics of Attention

The Native Advertising Institute in Denmark is an example of a business that is engaging explicitly with what they understand as an ethics of attention. They have introduced an *Acceptable Ads Manifesto* (which has generated 18,000 followers so far) aiming to provide guidelines for responsible and accountable advertising. Ally Stuart, the company’s strategy Director, says –

We are living in an attention economy. As individuals it has become one of our most valuable yet fragile resources. As marketers we are spending more and more on platforms that command consumers time [...] but if our industry is to sustain itself we have a responsibility to think of the ethics of how we generate attention for our brands. [...]. As an industry we need to put our money where our motivation is – respecting consumers, adding to their browsing experience and being sensitive to their (cognitive and digital) bandwidth (Stuart, 2016)

Observations made previously about the language used here could be made again here. I will simply add that, in terms of intention, Stuart makes it very clear that the responsibility to *think of the ethics* is driven by the industry's need to sustain itself in the attention economy.

Increasingly, the ethics of attention in politics is often addressed *to* the media *by* the media. An example of this is Megan Garber (2018) who, in the article *Attention Games* published in *The Atlantic*, proposes that the Trump administration's constant use of Twitter is a deliberate practice of attention-manipulation, designed and managed specifically to distract us from more serious issues like climate emergency or the risks of a global economic meltdown (Garber, 2018).

I could provide numerous other examples here but frankly, it will suffice to simply read the papers. Recall also that Crawford (2015) calls the current global state of affairs *a cultural crisis of attention* – indeed he says that we are in the middle of a *crisis of values* where we are unsure and confused about what it is *worth* paying attention to (2015a). Equally, Zuboff's (2019) core message – that human behaviour is being tracked and traded for commercial purposes in the most unethical and immoral attempt to commercialise private human experience – exemplifies the crisis of values that Crawford (2015) is talking about.

Regardless of the technical accuracy of Zuboff's (2019) findings, which I do not comment on in this study, the lived experience of what she is describing is hard to argue with. Go online and do a simple Google search on anything, then wait for a few minutes and visit a couple of other sites. Notice what adverts are being posted on any of these sites, as well as most other sites visited in the coming week. We have at our fingertips more proof than we need that *what we want* is being tracked, analysed and traded, and our attention is being captured accordingly. This is the world of *work* – this is the landscape in which senior managers have to operate. In view of this situation, I am advocating that the ethics of attention must become a priority item on the global agenda of ethical concerns.

Looking at the findings from interviews and cooperative inquiries with participants, this study only validates the legitimacy of a much wider conversation within the business community about the ethics of attention. The conversation we need to have challenges us to engage with some fundamental questions: what does it mean to be human, what drives us and what do we value? Conditioned as we are to the immediate gratification of shopping online and the culture of replacing rather than repairing, it may be true that a new ethics of attention will require us to learn to accept a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. Undoubtedly, a

transformation at the level of values will filter down to the level of behaviour with some resistance.

The issues explored here were felt, shared and particularly prominent in the interviews with April, Jim, John and Stella. The inner battle, they explained, was whether the managerial task was to be constantly available and, essentially allowing attention to be captured by a never-ending stream of emerging physical and virtual needs, or whether to allow for absorption and focused attention on the more fundamental or developmental issues – most probably at the cost of the perceived need for managerial ‘omnipresence’.

They described in their different ways how problematic it is to make decisions about work boundaries and how the subsequent struggle of not engaging with emails and calls after hours, not simply reacting to the sound of a new message and not feeling guilty about it often fails. Acknowledging his limitations yet determined to stick to his resolution, John went on a longer study leave from work and before his departure, he instructed his PA to change the password to his email account so that he, in moments of weakness, would not be able to log in. It is interesting to note that how John feels the need to delegate this authority and, thus, a sense of accountability. It transpired that John’s PA never did change his password and, to his astonishment, John only found that out after his return to work. Our expectations of self-control when it comes to emails are so low that we will engage others to safeguard it for us (Interviews).

The participants – all managers who share the deepest sense of responsibility for their task and the people they serve both within and outside of the workplace itself – agreed that making the necessary changes required to liberate attention from the multiple instances of daily capture at work would have serious consequences. The wicked problem they are facing is that the consequences of not making changes to the way they attend have another set of severe consequences (Cooperative Inquiry).

This brings us back to Ramsey who echoes Weil’s (1952) positioning of *truth, beauty* and *goodness* as the result of the application of full and undivided attention, when she asks –

How often do we attend to the truth of the matter in our leadership practice? How fear-based are our decisions and were we to attend to truth, beauty and goodness, would we put the financial sustainability, our reputation and our brand at risk, or would we in fact start to become ethical leaders? (Ramsey, 2014, p. 17)

This question is getting to the core of one of the major issues we are investigating here –

Attention, in the colloquial sense, implies a level of personal responsibility – *awareness*, in the colloquial, is different. Let us imagine that I make a mistake and someone asks me why it happened. If my reply is *I wasn't aware*, then I am effectively claiming a level of ignorance. If my response is *I wasn't paying attention*, then I am perceived as taking a level of personal responsibility. Certainly, my ignorance is also my responsibility but I am perceived as making a very different case when I say that *I wasn't paying attention* than if I say that *I wasn't aware*. It is interesting to note how rarely anyone actually says *I wasn't paying attention*. It is perceived as socially compromising to admit to this. For the person receiving this information, it can feel like a conscious rejection or read as a sign that the content was uninteresting or not important enough to warrant the presence of mind implied in the giving of attention.

The question that inevitably lingers is whether this absence of attention was a voluntary event or an involuntary loss of focus – a momentary ‘zoning out’ – which all human beings understand to be a normal occurrence. We are back to the point made earlier that a social aspect of attention entails *recognition of the other*, which is an important part of our experience of *feeling met*. Giving and receiving attention is a non-verbal intersubjective verification. Though it is the *giving* aspect of attention that is commonly discussed in the literature, the *receiving* aspect of attention is as powerful and important to understand. In the context of an ethics of attention, therefore, we can ask questions about captured attention, but we need to also look at both the ethics of the *giving* and *receiving* of attention. As mentioned above, Amber pointed out how the giving and receiving aspect of attention was linked to power relations in the team and this is exactly where the findings will take us in the following case study. First, a few important points made in one of the cooperative inquiry events –

The discussion revealed that most managers with experience who maintain a regular self-reflective practice will know that the focus of their attention – whether explicit or implicit – sends a myriad of non-verbal messages to the entire organisation about what is or isn't important. The locus of control and the seedbed of organisational culture is not the manager as such but the manner in which they attend and what they attend to. A manager who gives unlimited attention to staff issues will be creating one organisational culture and the senior executive who gives unlimited time to shareholders will create another. If this happens in the same workplace we may experience a culture of conflicting narratives (Cooperative Inquiry).

Let us explore this theme further by investigating the following case study describing an experience that Chinta witnessed –

This particular manager had a team of a certain size with whom he had a longstanding relationship in this post. The manager gave this team his undivided, highest quality of attention. It was a habit of overcompensating for a lack of attention he experienced from his superior, the senior executive. The character and quality of attention that was being given to the team could certainly be perceived as positive but, at the same time, it was also counterproductive and not congruent with the wider context. The team that received this undivided, high quality attention from the manager was unknowingly implicit in a dynamic that was not directly about them – they were caught in a story that was about their manager and his attentional needs, not about them and their needs.

A rather sudden change of the executive represented a radical shift in this dynamic. The new senior executive had the capacity to give high quality attention to the manager as well as shareholders in such a way that neither party feel shortchanged. The new senior executive was also a floorwalker – she liked to meet the team where they work on her first day and the attention they receive from her was exciting and empowering because it came from the managerial level above the manager. They felt, in some way, empowered by it and the new senior executive was nourished by their responses. Her desire to receive this kind of attention from the team was strong – it would drive her to do the floorwalking even on the busiest of days.

The manager, unaware of the reasons for it, experienced feelings of envy and exclusion – this slowly led to a mild depression and it started to affect the quality of attention he was now able to give to the team. The team was confused by the change in behaviour. Their unconscious narrative about the manager was that he was able to give high quality attention. They started to feel alienated and targets were being missed. Things escalated and the manager's performance suffered consequences. A few months later, shareholders demanded his transfer to another team and, if there was no immediate turnaround, his departure from the company (Interview).

We will return to this case study shortly but I will press pause here and capture the point I am making: if the giving and receiving of attention is largely unconscious and not subject to a level of individual scrutiny and mastery, the wrong things likely capture it and unconscious behaviours can lead to unexpected outcomes – utterly inexplicable to the people involved. When viewed from the perspective of the team in this scenario, the manager – so appreciated by them – suddenly fails to perform his duties and is removed. It wasn't just a matter of how he changed his attentional behaviour, his actions also changed, i.e. targets were missed. I

repeat Stacey's (2013) point that "when people focus their attention differently, they are highly likely to take different kinds of actions" (p. 415).

On a *local level*, then, unconscious attentional behaviour can be experienced in the way described above. On a global level, it follows that if we have indeed created a crisis of values and we have lost our sense for what we ought to give our attention (Crawford, 2015a), and if Ramsey's (2014) call for ethical leadership requires the courage to attend to *truth, beauty* and *goodness*, then the implications of *not* being ready to transform and develop a deliberate practice of attention in the workplace become critical. My point is that a practice of attention in the workplace without awareness of the ethics of attention is not morally justifiable.

We have looked at ethical implications of captured attention in the context of the global attention economy and in light of Zuboff's (2019) positioning of surveillance capitalism. We have discussed the *giving* and *receiving* aspects of attention and how the ethics of both are linked to culture, power and social dynamics in the workplace. We cannot leave this topic without recognising Weil's (1952, 2000) specific contribution to the ethics of attention question.

Bowden's (1998) analysis of Weil's practice of attention starts with the observation that common explanations of attention "fail to catch the subtleties, complexities, and anxieties of concrete persons in their attending" (p. 59). This is an important point that this study aims to address. Bowden argues,

In the shifting and responsive context of these involvements, the character of attention is entwined in the imprecise and indeterminate realm of moral sensibilities and its investigation becomes an inquiry in ethics rather than a question of science. [A]ttention becomes something more akin to a continuously variable climate or ethos that is connected with the possibilities and limitations of particular, culturally and historically conditioned lives (ibid.)

Here, Bowden is pointing to a nuanced understanding of attention not commonly found in the attention literature and, as we have seen, this study so far concurs with the significance of not ignoring the complexities and contradictions involved in the giving and receiving of attention.

Bowden suggests, according to Weil, that "*consent* gives attention its ethical quality, signifying a positive disposition in those who attend towards their subjects" (p. 61, emphasis added) and that our inherent human "striving against affliction" (ibid.) is that which represents a person's most sacred aspect, and Weil calls this a person's *impersonality*. It is our individual vulnerability in the context of our individual life circumstances that creates the "*object* of virtuous attention", (ibid, emphasis added). Attention directed towards another

human being is “aimed at the whole of them in their concrete uniqueness” (ibid.). In light of the discussion about captured attention in an age of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), Weil’s notion of *consent* is like the welcome sound of a clear bell. Bowden describes it thus –

We are both equal members in a natural order in which our ‘consent’, our wanting to attend to others, is vulnerable not only to our own internal and external attachments, but also to the impositions of other persons. Ethical attention is, thus, both the virtue that reveals, and a form of our essential ‘impersonality’ that is revealed (Bowden, 1998, p. 62).

In the context of an ethics of attention, as we have discussed it here, what are the implications of the proposition that “consent gives attention its ethical quality”? (p. 61). Clearly, the introduction of consent would address most of the issues presented by Zuboff (2019) and it radically changes our position in the attention economy. We can also test the idea of consent on the example with the manager and the new senior executive presented above. Consent in this context should be regarded *an attitude of ethical attention*, rather than a concrete request for consent or a form that needs to be signed. Let us see how it would change the case study we have just explored in this thought experiment –

The new senior executive arrives but instead of immediately launching into her floorwalking, she takes a long meeting with the manager on the first day. She listens and asks questions – what is the dynamic of the team, in his experience? What was the relationship between the manager and her predecessor, his superior? What got attention in that relationship, what didn’t? What were the main issues between the executives and those who concretely deliver on the targets set by shareholders? These and other such questions are discussed at length. Through this fact-finding gesture, and by giving high quality attention to the manager, the new senior executive sends a non-verbal message of respect and understanding. She verbalises the significance and difficulty of his position – middle management, the most complex role in the business. Instead of fulfilling her own desire to receive attention from the team, to be seen and nourished by their responses to the heightened quality of attention she knows feeds their longing to be closer to power – the new senior executive acts to enhance the confidence of the manager, ensuring that this important role in the ecosystem is not weakened by the novelty factor of her arrival.

The attitude of ethical attention embodied by the new senior executive in this version of the story is anchored in the questions – whom might I be hurting or helping by paying attention in this or in that way, to this person or to that person? This is a first step. The second step is to seek consent. Again, this is not a consent form or even an explicit question rather, the new senior executive simply puts the manager first and, in so doing, she is not assuming her power

but honouring what is. By giving attention to the reality, as the manager perceives it, before making her own observations and then finally deciding on how to attend to the team in a respectful and congruent manner, she is discerning and realising conscientious ways of being with and adopting an attitude of ethical attention.

We have experimented with Weil's notion of consent as an attitude of ethical attention. In the context of this example, it is a poetic way of introducing a gesture of respect, or humility perhaps, and a reminder to us that attention is something that is *given* or *received*, not imposed or captured, tracked, traded and exploited. Bowden (1998) positions Weil's ethical attention as a self-reflexive dimension and this is the theme we will proceed to explore next.

4.3.2. Reflexive Practice of Attention

With *self-reflective* practice we are but scratching the surface. Our capacity for *reflexive practice* must also be developed and employed in the engagement with the multiple dimensions of attention and the complexities involved in the human encounter. As Bowden (2015) says,

[...] attentiveness takes on additional depths of complexity, for not only do individuals struggle with the variability of their own desires but also the inconsistencies of other persons and the reciprocal effects of these dynamics (p. 63).

When Mead proposes that reflexive practice invites us to *turn back* on our experience of self (Aboulafia, 2016) and harness our capacity as subjects to take ourselves on as objects (Stacey and Shaw, 2006), it is a celebration of the specific human quality that enables us to foster situated and holistic awareness (Weick, 2002).

The moment participants in this study were asked if they had a practice of attention it became a possibility. Only two participants felt they had an existing practice when the study began, for all others this idea was novel. The step from not even having a concept of a deliberate practice of attention to the recognition that it is an option is relatively small, they agreed. For a person for whom this idea resonates, it quickly develops into an initial practice of self-observation that is, simply attending to attention. Participants described how just entertaining the very notion of attending to attention as a practice opened their eyes to exploring other dimensions in their management practice. Already in those early stages of the development of a practice, the impact on self and others is tangible (Cooperative Inquiry).

We have heard above that reflexivity enhances our ability to hold multiple perspectives without losing focus or direction and we know that fear, strong needs states, and singular

goals can get in the way (Wicklund in *ibid.*). Before we look at the real-life examples of reflexive attention in action, it is worth revisiting the four development areas proposed by Weick. Above, I summarised them as

- a) the need to be reflexive about new personal categories such as a grasp of the whole, situational awareness, and the big picture,
- b) understanding the world of subject/object in light of how this varies according to whether we are living forwards or making sense backwards,
- c) the need to welcome the opportunity to explore our presuppositions particularly when ideal moments of encountering the unexpected are upon us, and
- d) the necessity to develop the capacity for holding multiple perspectives in order to develop agility of mind as well as behaviour and enable an enhanced understanding of social multiplicity and ways of acting in the moment.

Reflexive attention in practice is best explored through a detailed look at the phenomenology of actual lived experience (Van Manen, 1990) and hence, with Weick's four development areas as our backdrop, I share a detailed autoethnographic account in which I describe and analyse a process of reflexive attentional practice over a longer period of time.

The task I had set myself was to reflect on how I enter my own *lifeworld* (Harrington, 2016; Husserl, 1931) in order to observe and describe details in the landscape of my lived experience. The aim was to let the descriptions reveal and open up the possible *new worlds* (Cuncliffe, 2008; Van Manen, 1990) within my practice. I focused on the process of coaching. The description below, which is adapted to protect anonymity, draws from my experiences during this time –

The inquiry for executive coaching for SWP was forwarded by reception and it said that I came highly recommended. SWP, a very senior leader in the education sector, was seeking to harness his team. In the context of this request, SWP was more senior than I will ever be. My immediate reaction was excitement, swiftly followed by apprehension. I stopped my train of thought and decided to take a step back. I reflected on the speed of my thoughts – how rapidly one would follow another as if they were carriages on a train, connected yet separate and with their own 'customers' on board. Too rarely do I allow myself time to dwell into the moment during an average working day. The speed of my thoughts irritates me. As a reflective person I dedicate precious little time to consciously reflect on events as they happen during the flow of the workday. My workdays are usually scheduled in 15-minute to one-hour intervals so if I wish to dwell or reflect on occurrences, I need to schedule it in. SWP's inquiry and my reflection on the immediate thought process that followed contributed to yet another review of my planning habits. Many previous attempts to do just that had improved my schedule but this time I was adamant that it had to change significantly and for good. I decided to take action and radically limit planned meetings on any given day to allow more time to reflect on and between events. What kind of coach and mentor leaves insufficient time to reflect?

I had my office make contact with SWP and arrange a first conversation. I was away on a business trip so the meeting would have to wait until I was back. Something went wrong in the communication between SWP and my office. To this day, I cannot make sense of it, but the upshot was that SWP wrote and declared that he was going to look for another coach. He was not willing to wait, he was disappointed – this was urgent. When we received the email, I was startled. My first reaction was that this person would not be suitable for coaching with me. I felt a very brief sense of relief followed by a sense of failure. My colleague was mortified and blamed herself, but I withheld judgement. Instead, I proposed an untried approach. I suggested that we completely ignored the content of the email and simply proceeded but with a response rate above the average going forward. I asked my colleague to call and leave a message, then send an email. I drafted the email with her. I wanted her to get the benefit of turning this around, if possible, but I had an intuition about how to approach it that I also wanted to try out. We prepared the contract, terms and conditions as well as a description of how to find the office. She actioned the steps as agreed. SWP replied later that day. It was a pleasant, positive email confirming attendance. My colleague was excited, impressed, surprised. I responded to SWP myself this time. The exchange in the days that followed was unremarkable. I sent guidance on how to prepare for the first session. I asked for any material that would be useful for me to have and in reading it, I was overwhelmed by the scope and the size of the task at hand. A feeling of apprehension and concern returned but I decided to use it to mobilise constructive (as opposed to destructive, or distracting) nervous energy. I had ample opportunity to practice converting my nervousness to a positive energy as a young classical musician, performing on stage for large audiences. Without a contained, constructive allowance for nerves one is liable to make mistakes out of complacency and a mild form of arrogance. I prepared well for our first session and I did this by consciously not doing anything. In the initial phone conversation, I had noticed that I really liked the voice – I thought to myself that this would help me connect with SWP. As we approached the time of the first session, I realised that I harboured mixed feelings. I felt excitement and honoured at being chosen but also intimidation. I noticed that I had taken offence at the impatient response to my colleague at the beginning of the process. I parked my feelings.

The first session

As I welcomed SWP in the hallway, I noted that this was someone who embodied a conundrum – an unlikely person to have come to this particular vocation and position, I thought, not knowing why I thought it. I observed the body language and concluded that this was not a hostile person – this was a troubled person. SWP talks slowly and pauses between words and sentences, taking time to think before speaking. It is not always clear when a pause is an invitation to speak or just a pause for reflection. I allowed myself to slow down my own thoughts and my responses. I had to keep an eye on my natural tendency to read feelings of lack in someone and reassure. SWP sends non-verbal messages of lack. SWP's life journey spoke of a lack of the kind of validation that seems to be an expressed, conscious need. There is in fact no lack of validation: accolades are many. SWP is famous. I had not taken that in.

During the entire first session SWP did not write anything but a few lines. This is highly unusual for coaching clients. I noticed that I really wanted SWP to journal but I did not want to force the issue. The event fuelled the conundrum – a senior leader that doesn't write things down?

The narrative of SWP's presenting issue was interspersed with swearing and strong language. It was riddled with anxiety, fear of failure and aversion to the senior role. I listened intently with an open mind. Paradoxically, I had to focus my attention in order to open it. I attended to the periphery of the narrative and anything that felt

present in it but was left unsaid. I noticed yet again how easy it is to invent a sub-narrative of my own when attending to the unsaid. When SWP paused for long enough, I reflected back what I had heard. I did it without judgment – I sensed I could use humour and tried it out. SWP responded well and it felt as if a spell was broken. A brief moment of connection brought a breath of fresh air into the room. It allowed us both to breathe. As the first session progressed my heart started to open – that is to say, I felt an actual physical sensation of warmth in my chest accompanied by waves of compassion. I could feel that I cared about what SWP was telling me. These physical sensations and feelings were complemented by a growing sense of panic as I realised that I had no clear idea of how to proceed. For a very brief moment, I resented the fact that I am not one of those coaches who sit on a toolbox and have a set of prefabricated next steps ready to go. I decided that it was acceptable for now to focus on truly hearing and living myself into the story. My experience is that a lot is gained from presenting one's issue to an active listener. In my fantasy world, though, SWP was the kind of person who would judge the first session on whether something concrete came out of it. I was acutely aware that I based this assumption on the impatient email we had received. I was hoping that my intuition would guide me now. In my mind, I revisited SWP's appearance and my initial impression that this person embodies a conundrum. I knew then that there was only one way ahead for us both now and I asked gently whether SWP would be prepared to tell me the story from childhood until now. I made sure to mention that whilst I was not a psychotherapist, I would work with elements from this biography to the extent that SWP was prepared to share it with me. There was no hesitation. For obvious reasons, I cannot describe any particulars here and I will therefore not be able to enhance this description with details of my observations – whilst those would be most fascinating to explore in this very context. What I can say is that this was an unlikely journey of a highly conscious and self-reflective practitioner. Pieces started to fall into place for me. A largely unpopulated jigsaw puzzle revealed an image to me. I attended to the feeling of calm descending upon me as I did what I do best: listen, respond, give space and take notes – pen in one hand and highlighter in the other.

The sessions that followed

My experience of working with SWP grew on me after each session that followed. I was observing an inner change in me from feelings of panic about not knowing the next step to a delight in unknowing. I met each session with a mixture of overwhelm and excitement. The feeling of overwhelm was mainly due to the necessary act of creating a completely different space in the middle of a busy operationally heavy workday in the office. Attending fully and with complete integrity to a person for two hours straight whilst holding at bay all the 'things I need to do' is not easy. The challenge tickled me and I planned longer and longer unscheduled spaces both before and after the sessions so that I could prepare inner and outer containment for the event and reflect on it. Humour started to play an important role in our sessions. The initial moment of connection we made over humour in the first session had lasted and was creating a strange cultural bond between us. I attended keenly to the use of humour – it would be important to sense at all times whether humour was being used to mask something by one or both of us. I also attended to alignment – my role, I felt, was not to seek alignment but to recognise it so that I could be mindful about its power. I started to relax and take more risks. I challenged and provoked without fear. During those weeks, I was often reminded of my Rogerian counselling training many years ago and I started to consciously attend to the practice of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard (Rogers 1967) with a gentle nod to my own colourful and random past.

I started to notice certain patterns both in verbal and body language. My sense was that SWP was living with an unnamed leadership trauma. The stories of success did not match the absolute terror and dread that I also heard expressed. In the third session, I took the plunge. We unearthed a treasure chest of material from a previous employment. My attention was on high alert. I was aware that opening up this issue was a major risk. I employed all my knowledge and skill about containment and ethical hygiene. I did not feel out of my depths but I did feel immense gratitude for experience and education that had provided tools (yes, tools) for dealing with this in a safe and well-held manner. As we came to the end of the session SWP expressed deep gratitude. The relief and exhaustion from telling me about the trauma was tangible. I felt that I had done nothing more than ask 'what ails thee' (Eschenbach, 1980) at the right time. The learning from session three opened another door for us. In sessions that followed, we explored new ways of relating to the team at work and developed new perspectives and insights, using the trauma and the biographical material.

The watershed

The difficult second to last session was upon us. I had a sinking feeling that I would struggle within the context of our newfound momentum and I was proven right. The session scraped along, I felt. I allowed myself to be with the growing despondency space and sat with it. In an attempt to not try, I emptied my mind, killed any sense of ambition and went as quiet inside as I could. Then something happened. I saw that I had missed a connection between SWP the inspired, motivated professional and the reluctant, resentful senior leader. I started to speak but slowly – very slowly indeed, pausing between words. Not how I usually speak I noticed that it was new... this is what I said: "Leadership practice is an inquiry – an action research process – and the messiness that it entails is our raw data. As leadership practice action researchers, our role is not to assume knowledge but to be prepared to find out – our task is to be open, responsive to the emergent; to take a stance and to change it, to take responsibility for not acting, to act, and be prepared to be accountable for what happens next." SWP came alive. Everything was written down! I suggested that when we are not in a research frame of mind, we are at risk of quickly satisfying spaces of unknowing with fear. When we step into a research space, we don't do that. SWP recognised this. I was excited – my attention was on the message. Could we transfer the excited professionalism from one field to another? This could be the key to a paradigm shift. I spoke about passion and love for the deed (Plato 1999), of negative capability (French and Simpson 1999, 2009, 2014) and of alchemical leadership practice (Rooke and Torbert 2005). I sent papers, articles and links to books. Time passed before the last session. That day, SWP turned looking different: a new person – a person with a vision, a vision of hope and excitement – messy, authentic, full of fear and full of passion. It conveyed a new paradigm in action, a commitment to embodied wisdom, to finding balance, to asking what it means to thrive and enable others to thrive (Reflexive Attention: 3 August 2017).

The exercise was to enter my lifeworld and be fully awake to what might arise, regardless of its apparent usefulness. I was trying to be completely unprejudiced about the quality of my own observations. In my experience of first writing and then reading the account, I came to a better of understanding of what Kierkegaard (1843) meant when he said "Livet skal forstaas baglaens, men leves forlaens" (p. 306)¹¹. Weick (2002) proposed that our understanding of

¹¹ I offer the following translation: life must be understood *backwards* but it must be lived *forwards*

the world of subject/object depends on whether we are in the forwards motion of *living* or the backwards movement of *sense making*. Weick's (2002) other four points are also visible in the account: we see that before, during and between the sessions, I am constantly noticing and recording emotions and feelings as they arise. I consider the impact of having them both in that moment and in the broader context. I am attempting to be situated and reflexive about *personal categories* (ibid.) and keep a connection with the bigger picture. I am exploring presuppositions and try to remain open to the emergent. Holding multiple perspectives proves difficult when emotions are strong – fear, again, is a stumbling block that claims my attention until I am able to step back – let go. Relaxing into my feelings in the moment seems to release the tension that holds my attention captured and this liberation creates an agility of mind that helps me make sense of the behaviour – both SWP's and my own. Weil's proposition that ethical attention is a reflexive capacity is validated in this account. Bowden (1998) highlights that –

[...] reflexive understanding of the movement of ethical attention away from the self points to a return in enhanced self-understanding. For Weil, the self can gain access to itself from the perspective of the other" (p. 64)

Bowden develops Weil's idea within a juxtaposition of Weil-readers Murdoch, Nussbaum and Lugones (Bowden, 1998). In her conclusion Bowden says "attention transports us to the centre of another person's thought" (p. 74) and we are immediately reminded of Skewes (2016) who says that attention is the gateway to the world I create and inhabit and to the world of others. This again locates the development of the *attitude of ethical attention*, as discussed above, within our capacity for reflexive attention. Our commitment to reflexive practice and our dedication to "the task of ethical attentiveness is continuous, indeterminate and never complete" (Bowden, p. 64).

4.3.3. Intention and Attention

So far, I have proposed that a deliberate practice of attention involves awareness of *the ethics of attention* – that is, the development of an *attitude of ethical attention* guided by a *reflexive* engagement with attention. Ethics of attention as well as reflective and reflexive practice are keystones in the creation of what I propose might be a coherent *attitudinal infrastructure* for developing a deliberate and conscientious practice of attention in the workplace. When I talk about an attitudinal infrastructure, I am suggesting that our internal landscape requires the same kind of order that we might seek to have in our homes or offices. Our attitudes are often the by-products of our personal narratives and those may be inherited or imposed. The internal attitudinal infrastructure – or landscape – can become a wasteland of old thought-forms that are in fact not aligned with who we have become or wish to become. Attending to

the lineage of our attitudes and consciously creating an *infrastructure* of order, rather than random chaos, is a step towards being more in charge of our responses.

Another keystone I want to present is the practice of *attending to intention*. Ganeri (2017) describes how according to Buddhaghosa the act of intending (*cetanā*) is understood as a *coordinating, executive* function which, similar to the view of cognitive psychology, is considered a “variety of attention” (p. 228). Intending, says Ganeri, “is a double effort, doing its own work and causing others to do theirs” (p. 225). It is like a chief woodcutter or head pupil acting as a role model for others – in this case, other internal functions. Unlike Shaw (2006), to whom we shall return below, Ganeri (2017) locates intention and intentional action in the same category and he states that “intending (*cetanā*) is a straining, an exertion (*āhūyana*), of attention, the *directing* of cognitive resources onto a task” (p. 228). Before I explore what that means in this context, I want to make some brief etymological observations that reveal interesting connections between the origins of the following:

***Intention* –**

late Middle English: from Old French *entencion*, from Latin *intentio(n)-* ‘**stretching, purpose,**’ from *intendere* (The New Oxford American Dictionary, 2019)

To *intend* –

Middle English *entend* (in the sense ‘**direct the attention to**’), from Old French *entendre*, from Latin *intendere* ‘**intend, extend, direct,**’ from *in-* ‘**toward**’ + *tendere* ‘**stretch, tend**’ (ibid.)

And attention –

Middle English (in the sense ‘**apply one's mind, one's energies to**’): from Old French *atendre*, from Latin *attendere*, from *ad-* ‘**to**’ + *tendere* ‘**stretch**’ (ibid.)

Aufmerksamkeit, the German word usually translated into *attention*, is a development of the word *observe*. The Germanic word for intention was originally *ettile* from Old Norse *ætla* “to think, conjecture, propose,” from Proto-Germanic *ahta* “consideration, attention” (Harper, 2019). It would seem that *intention* and *attention* have evolved from the same root-word and over time, the stretching, observing, thinking, conjecturing, proposing and considering has developed into the two concepts we know today. These etymological observations speak for themselves and represent some value in our exploration, albeit limited to a particular family of languages and cultures. A linguistic study across a range of diverse languages and cultures would be infinitely richer and I hope one day to come across such research. For now, however, the point here illustrated is simply that whilst there is a visible connection between intention and attention in *language*, this has not translated into the practice of managers in

your typical workplace and this study sets out to bring to awareness how this absence might be addressed.

I propose that managers cannot allow themselves the privilege of being unaware, or even semi-conscious, of the intentions that inform their choices and actions. It is within our complex psychic landscape that we find out what ultimately motivates and drives us and what *informs* our intentions. Without understanding these dynamics, managers are not in a position to comprehend and take full responsibility for what they do in role. The idea of self-exposure (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010) explored earlier implies a *readiness to be authentic* – that is, to be transparent about intentions but also motivations and drives. This is a call for willingness to engage introspectively so that we may come to know what our innermost thoughts and feelings reveal. It also entails the development of self-acceptance, congruent behaviour and readiness to be truly *visible* to others. The manifestation of such self-exposure is difficult for managers to achieve.

The autoethnographic account of distributed attention I shared above tells the story of an intention to practice distributed attention in service of multiple aims. The following account, accompanied by contributions from participants in the study, highlights some of the issues that arise when our workplace requires of us that we give attention to multiple agendas, variables and unknowns in symphony.

Participants described their different approaches to navigating such demands whilst maintaining a connection with intention. Leo, the most senior of the participants in this study, described how he would write his intention in the palm of his hand before entering an important meeting or event. He would write there exactly what he wanted to achieve in a few words and hold that intention, as it were, in the very palm of his hand. He explained how he would then remain focused on bringing about the intention yet not without also being responsive to the environment.

It was interesting to compare Leo's account with the account of Jim, whose practice could be seen as being the opposite. Jim, a senior manager, explained that he would enter a meeting practicing openness to the outcome. He would of course set an agenda if it was his meeting, or know the agenda well if it wasn't, but his aim would be to attend to the emergent and to notice where the energy of the conversation would be going. Jim was describing how in this way his attention would be directed by the intention to stay open.

On the surface of things, Leo and Jim could be described as having opposite practices. Factors playing in here also have to do with the different roles they hold and how they each understand the notion of intention. It seems that Leo's interpretation of intention is connected to purpose or goal, whereas Jim's seems to be about an inner attitude. In the context of this inquiry, however, their practices are exactly the same in that they share a conscious attending to intention before entering a meeting (Interviews).

This practice, rather than the specific interpretation or content of intention, is the keystone I am proposing here. At this juncture, I want to pay tribute to Fox (2011), Hursthouse (2000), Shaw (2006) and many others who have all contributed to the positioning of *intention* within the field of ethics. Philosophically, ethics seems to me to be the rightful context for a hermeneutic inquiry into intention, yet it goes beyond the scope of this study to offer such a positioning. In Shaw's (2006) case for what cannot be regarded as *intention*, we find a set of claims that may provide a helpful backdrop for the ensuing exploration of actual lived experience and I will therefore summarise his main points here before proceeding.

Foresight, he says, is not intention for "we do not necessarily intend those things that we foresee [...]; nor do we necessarily foresee what we intend" (p. 189). Intention is not causation (p. 192) for

"One can intend to bring about anything that one believes one is making more likely, but one does not necessarily intend to bring about something just because one is bringing it about [...]" (ibid.)

Intention is not desire, he continues, and demonstrates this with the following story: Daphne, the examiner, desperately wants Edward to pass and she knows that if she marks those anonymous scripts fairly, this is likely to manifest as Edward is an excellent student. This desire, however, is not her reason for marking the scripts scrupulously and fairly. Daphne marks fairly out of sheer professionalism – "the anticipated and desired upshot, Edward's pass, is not the *intention* of her action, since it is *not* the aim, point or purpose of her action" (p. 196, emphasis added). Intention is not motive and not moral responsibility – "one can be morally responsible for a bad upshot without having intended to produce it" (p. 200). Finally,

"intention is not 'what is done in an intentional action' [...]" for one can accidentally blow up the queen without intending to do so – "intentional action is action done with some intention or other" (ibid.).

This last point of Shaw's is where he diverts from Ganeri's (2017) accounts of the Buddhist tradition and cognitive psychology, as well as what we have learnt from O'Shaughnessy (2002), Waltzl (2010) and Wu (2014).

The summary of Shaw's (2006) ideas that I have provided here does not even scratch the surface of what we could gain from a more philosophical exploration of intention. For the purposes of this study, I allow myself to stand on the shoulders of these giants in the field and continue our investigation in the context of the workplace – the office, the factory, the field, the boardroom, the warehouse and the shop floor with their multiple epistemologies (Code, 1991; Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Raelin, 2007), folk psychology (Doughney, 2013) and breath-taking cultural and colloquial diversity.

We will return now to the perspective of the phenomenological descriptions of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990) and look at two aspects of engaging with intention – a) finding and understanding an intention that is felt to be present in one, and b) forming an intention in the process of that inquiry. I am sharing here an autoethnographic account that describes my practice of attending to intention before an important meeting. I set myself the task to record my practice as part of this study and here is what happened –

I am preparing to go to the meeting. There are more than twenty-five professionals waiting for me. They have difficulties communicating and my role is to facilitate a process by which we can find a common language to describe the presenting issues and then address them together. I have been in this situation over a hundred times in the last thirteen years. Each time I have to do this, my heart rate goes up approximately 48 hours before the event and I struggle to sleep. This time is no different. I know now that this phenomenon is an embodied invitation from myself to me to delve deeply into why I am doing this work exactly on this day in this way with these people. I have practiced this exercise for almost two decades in various jobs and in various ways. I was never taught to do this – it was an intuition that over time manifested as practice. I call the method I use for this 'contemplative inquiry' (Zajonc, 2009), as I am not in a meditative state when I do this. I sometimes choose to walk, sometimes sit as if in meditation. On this day, I walk.

I start by noticing how my body feels. It is tense, accelerated pulse, painful. I ask myself about fear. Am I just nervous or is something causing anxiety in me? I recall how this client asked me and why I was asked to do this. They asked me because they had heard that I am someone who can do this work. They had heard that I could do this work because I have done this work many, many times and the majority of people who worked with me were able to take a new step. I experience a gentle shift – my soul is lifted but a little – so I am not a random choice ... but, but, but that does not mean I cannot fail. Ah, so this is about fear of failure, is it? I peel another layer of the onion (Saint Teresa of Avila, 2003). I go on peeling layers upon layers. I get closer and closer to the core. [...] I am now ready to ask the 'why' question. What is my intention – why am I going at all? I peel and I peel. Outer layers tell me that we have signed a contract and 'this is my job – we earn our keep this way'. Well, I reply, don't we all know that I can earn my keep in simpler ways – and were I actually driven by the level of my own income, I would pursue other paths. A layer speaks about the organisations I am accountable to – the client, my employer, the contractors, the many, many others who rely on my effort at this time and its success. I hear this and I look at it carefully. Here, I notice, is a source of anxiety. I am not doing this just for them or just for me. I have to be good, better than good or I could

| lose everything, yes, but even worse is the thought of others losing out. I walk along, pondering this. Good progress, I reflect, but I am not even close to the core of this. I am a hard-working person, yes, but I am not irreplaceable. I peel more layers. This is turning into a longer walk but I am getting closer and I know this because the layers do not speak of fear and anxiety now. I am now thinking of the people in the room tomorrow. I travel with my gaze around the circle of chairs and they are all sitting there. They are vulnerable, scared – much more so than I am. They are so troubled, so anxious to do the right thing, say the right thing. Those who sound like they know what the right thing is they behave as though they are in charge but they tell me that they too are scared. I am right there with them. I feel this overwhelming sense of compassion. They are afraid of being alone but right now, they are more afraid of being together. Right now, as I contemplate them all, I am not afraid of failure tomorrow. I will be with them because I am ready to walk that path with them – the path of not knowing exactly what is right, the path that is not yet mapped out, the path that will take us to places we never even imagined – I am ready for all of that. This is what I do. I stop for a moment to enjoy the view. Sounds good, doesn't it? Poetic almost. But this is not it. This is all very splendid but all I need now is the soundtrack from the film 'Braveheart' or 'Gladiator'. I am no heroine. And yet, I do feel strangely calm now compared to when I started walking. The idea of not being the consultant that knows – the one with the contract, the obligations and the dependable others – gave space for something else: the feeling of freely stepping into this most complex space to offer what I do have – my attention! (The Practice of Attending to Intention: 2nd of March 2019)

In this account, I am describing the experience of peeling an onion (Saint Teresa of Avila, 2003) – each layer tells a story of what is going on in my psyche. I encounter the fears that led to the experience of an accelerated heart rate and I notice the impact of change on my central nervous system as I name and then address the different feelings as they emerge. Naming the feelings is a significant part of what is being described – it seems as though the naming *is* the peeling. I am peeling off layers to get to an intention that I sense is present. We can tell that there is something I already know when I stop myself and think *no, this isn't it*. It is as if I am testing an idea against an unnamed intuition that I already have a sense for. As I describe myself *getting closer*, it is as if I know what I am getting closer *to* without being able to name that yet. In this process, I am also *forming* my intention – the two aspects of engaging with intention (a) finding and understanding an intention that is felt to be present in one and b) forming an intention in the process of that inquiry) are entwined here. As my intention is revealing itself and also forming, I am released from fear and anxiety about money, contracts, those who depend on me being a success and so on. I am separating myself from the idea that I need to be *the one who knows*.

I recall what it is like to be with them all in that room, sitting in the big circle. I feel the vulnerability, loneliness and fear that about being together – it is a memory from last time I was there. In that moment of recalling there is a growing sense of being able to offer something into that space. As I get closer to it, I eventually find a possible answer to the

intuition that may have been present for me in a non-verbal form: it is my attention that I need to give them – what I have to offer is my ability to *be with* them. The synergy we find in the study of language is found also in this account – the entanglement of *intention* and *attention* – the stretching and extending, the observing, the sense of purpose (The New Oxford American Dictionary, 2019), the conjecture, proposition and consideration (Harper, 2019). I conclude that in this account of lived experience my intention is *not* foresight, not desire or motive, nor is it moral responsibility (Shaw, 2006) rather, it is a *state*. This state is aligned with my felt sense of purpose – that is, the freedom to give them my attention – and with the reality of things as I perceive them to be.

Thinking back to Leo and Jim, my understanding of intention is different again, yet we all share the practice of attending to intention as part of the work or preparing for the important event or meeting. Occasions where I did not do this practice have taught me that without it, things can go a very different way: the heart, still beating too fast, the fear of failure, the pressure *to know* and the presence of the invisible stakeholders in my success, all of this would work against my ability to give these people the highest quality of attention I have to give. Attention offered freely and from a deep sense of purpose is like yeast – a very small amount transforms the bread and makes it enjoyable. An afternoon of *being with* can bring hope – it is the hope of recognition.

The event I wrote about had an extraordinary ending. When the meeting had finished, a participant came up to me and cried. She told me that she did not know why she was crying but she had felt so seen today and it had moved her.

What I have aimed to present here is that the practice of attending to intention can serve several important aims:

- a) dedicating the time to explore the landscape of the psyche, and peeling off the different *layers of the onion*, may give insights about latent fears that can drive and motivate us to attend and act in certain, often counterproductive, ways,
- b) giving attention to what constitutes our fears and motivations may challenge our assumptions about what is important and this may inform what we give our attention to and how we do it,
- c) the process may create a live connection to a sense of purpose that is either unnamed and latent or formed in the process – or, both at once,
- d) creating a live connection to one's sense of purpose may release fears and anxieties, liberating the attention from its capture, resulting in a feeling of *freedom of attention*,

- e) freedom of attention may inspire the will to put it in service of the purpose, and
- f) attention that is given in freedom, anchored in a sense of purpose and put in its service can have transformative effects on self and others in the workplace.

4.3.4. Being Without

The exploration of attending to intention raises some complex questions. Can we truly know ourselves, is it possible to reliably access our own psyche and read it in the way described? Are these observations I offer too subjective to be valuable to others? Is the proposition of a deliberate practice of attention an excuse to engage in navel-gazing and put this in service of so-called higher aims – ethics of attention, the path to self-knowledge and the transformation of self and others – ideas that could all be described as pretentious and self-important? Perhaps. The fact is, however, that the *ethics of attention*, the *path to self-knowledge* and the *transformation of self and others* used to be more important than *work* and *wealth* – these endeavours provided meaning and a sense of direction, and they repeat in literature that engages with all the philosophical questions that arise from this study (Eigen, 1998; Case and Gosling, 2007, 2010; French and Simpson, 1999, 2000; 2015; Ganeri, 2017; Hadot, 1995, 2004; Raelin, 2007; Ramsey, 2014; Weil, 2000). Over time, the focus of our attention in daily life has been re-directed towards the *knowing*, the *wanting* and the *having*.

Our choices and entire livelihoods are informed by the idea that *we must work to live*. From time to time we stop and ask *what is life?* Unsettled by the question, we carry on. Living with this sort of inquiry is unhelpful, we think, for it can *distract us* from getting on with work. This is why, in this part of the world, we run faster and faster. As Citto (2017) says, “our current socio-political situation does not grant us the time of *waiting* or the anticipation in which attention is formed” (p. 172, emphasis added).

Earlier, we explored connections between evenly suspended attention, truth and being with unknowing. I shared my observations about being in a *waiting* state and I asked the question *how do we develop capabilities of being with unknowing?* As we heard in the account about the practice of attending to intention, the letting go of *being the one who knows* was an important and liberating moment that led to a closer connection with a felt sense of purpose. In what follows, we will look at the idea of *being without* and explore its role in a practice of attention in the workplace.

The idea of *Negative Capability* has become important in my personal and professional life. I first encountered it in the work of French and Simpson (1999, 2000, 2009), who explore in

great depth the role of this particular idea in the field of management learning and in professional group work. French and Simpson (2015) have also been an important source for understanding the important connection between Negative Capability and the work of Bion that I have referred to above. The term, Negative Capability, originates from a letter Keats wrote to his brothers in 1817 in which he describes Negative Capability as when a person “is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 2011). Since discovering this mysterious notion in 2014, it has inspired my teaching, leading and living. Latterly, my contemplative inquiry, as described above, has been shaped partly by the idea that *being with* requires an important element of *being without* and Negative Capability offers a study in exactly that –

Keats’ brilliance was to see the significance for high achievement of the absence of an active capability and giving priority to just being, creating what might be thought of as an empty space that is typically filled with thoughts, emotions and activity. The second aspect of his insight was to notice that when there is a vacuum of knowing (‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’) the human tendency can be to respond in ways that seek to fill this vacuum with ‘feeling’ (‘irritable), ‘doing’ (‘reaching’), and ‘thinking’ (‘fact and reason’) [...] Negative Capability is also to be capable of being *without* (Bülow and Simpson, 2019, p. 6).

I will now return again to John’s story and go into more detail in light of the current theme –

John started by describing how he works actively to develop ways of engaging with unknowing in the workplace and how his management practice has taken inspiration from Stacey’s ideas¹² about attending, as described earlier. John gave examples of how he engages with unknowing both in the day-to-day and in the high-level strategic contexts. Leaders, he says,

“tend to avoid engaging with not knowing and therefore it remains something that is a) not known and b) something that creates fear, anxieties and stress”.

John’s telling of his story [as we have heard it above] emphasised the gravity of the financial issue the organisation was facing and that, if not tackled well, this crisis could put the entire organisation at risk.

The first person to hear the difficult news was John himself. It was just before the weekend and he decided not to share it with the leadership team at that time.

Monday, he shared the facts and quite deliberately, John did not allow for questions of clarification or discussion. John invited all team members to ‘dwell with’ the information for a night. “It has taken me the whole weekend to come to terms with this” and he suggested they took the night to come to terms with it also before

¹² Stacey, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2012

meeting the following day. They all gathered in the morning and some people had come prepared with solutions – some had prepared a paper. Others felt it was calling for a fight and others again were quiet. Rather than evaluating the content of the meeting, John attended to how the others were coming to terms with it. He realised how everyone was at different points in a process of accepting this new reality. The team exchanged views and it was fruitful, for the most part. As soon as it started to sound like solutions were being proposed, John stopped the discussion. He thanked everyone and it was decided to meet every day for an hour to take the discussion forward.

Each day, John let the discussion flow until it started to sound like conclusions were drawn, then he stopped the meeting. By the end of a week of meeting each day for one hour without reaching a solution it was as if everyone had come to roughly one mind. Even those who had been seeing things from a completely different perspective had changed to a different one. Those wanting to fight a battle had changed their minds. Looking back, John was reflecting that his main task in that process was to be the one who stopped the team from making a decision. The other thing he facilitated as the week went on was to have the courage to ask what is the worst thing that can possibly happen? By asking that question, the team was able to name their fears. When the process had ended and the team met for a debrief meeting, the feedback was that this was the best decision-making process they had ever been part of (Interview).

John's powerful example of working with unknowing in such a key strategic moment in the life of an organisation is, in my experience, very rare indeed. As he told the story, the situation came alive and one could almost feel the anxiety that so often accompanies *being without* solutions to a critical issue. In his story, John describes how he attends to how team members each come to terms with the situation in their different ways. With this gesture he is loyal to Stacey's (2001) proposition of attending to "what people are doing in the *living present*" rather than "what they are imagining about the future" (p. 230):

The focus is on communicating interactions, the pattern of relating between human bodies in the living present [...] who is talking and who is being silenced, on who is being included and who is being excluded and how all of this is happening. The focus of attention is on the themes that are organizing this complex responsive process of being together in order to undertake the joint actions for which organizations exist (pp. 230-231).

John was doing exactly that – he was noticing patterns of behaviour whilst allowing the *dwelling* with unknowing to create, as if out of itself, a process that led to just such a "joint action for which organisations exist" (ibid.) that Stacey talks about. I recognise from my own

management practice the moments where we know that *this* or *that issue* is an *opportunity* more than it is a *challenge* if, and only if, we are able to engage creatively with it.

When my own workplace went through a major restructure in 2015, I had ample opportunity to practice what we have explored here. Not only was this the perfect storm, it was also a storm that represented a host of wicked problems (Grint, 2005), which called for particularly imaginative ways of engagement from the whole team. The ethical issues reveal themselves more readily when we work consciously with unknowing. When we hark back to *knowing* and *knowledge*, or the aforementioned *archive of givens* that most people use to feel safe in the business of daily life, ethical issues are less stark and visible. I ascribe this to the way our society relates to knowledge generally. I will explore this with a thought-experiment.

Using the story John shared above as our case study for this, we may wish to start by asking whether John made a conscious decision to create out of this vital moment a research project and whether he then included his team members transparently in his practice – did they know that this process was *also* about finding ways of being with unknowing? If team members had been told, what would have been their responses? Perhaps they would have felt that John was an irresponsible manager and that this was unethical. John's and my own observations about common responses from executives and managers to being with unknowing are aligned. Only rarely do we come across individuals who are ready for the practice of *being without*. It is quite likely, therefore, that John would have been met with an issue if he had told his team that this moment was a perfect opportunity to explore unknowing. Because John has practiced *being with unknowing* transparently as part of his management practice over the years, it could also be seen as *John just doing his thing* at a time when the company needed exactly this more creative, imaginative approach as opposed to the more commonplace knowledge and fear-led responses that we see in times of crisis.

Keeping in mind the responses John received from his leadership team after the event, let us now imagine that John has received the news on a Friday night, sent a panic-stricken email to his team that evening and called the board together in the weekend. The energy created by these actions – not uncommon or unusual to a manager at a time of crisis – would be a very different one. The team, not able to do anything but wait for news until the weekend is over, would come to work on a Monday morning anxious, stressed, sleep-deprived after searching for other jobs online and discussing the matter prematurely with family and friends over too many drinks in the pub. The Board, not understanding the detail but all too clear about the overall consequences, would have felt pressured to deliver direction to John over the weekend. Several hours of meeting later, no good solution emerged but the Chair, feeling an

expectation that s/he must be decisive and action oriented, issues some sort of instruction so that John at least leaves with something *to do* about this!

Whilst I am perhaps creating a parody here, this is, I am afraid, an accurate description of the kinds of episodes that I have witnessed. Crisis, we are told, calls for the immediate action of managers in the workplace. No time to waste. Perplexed by the immediacy and urgency of it all, our attention is unlikely to find rest anywhere. Restlessly, it roams from fact to fiction – from fear to fear – to find something to hold on to. Is this the most conducive inner state from which to facilitate the decision-making processes? I am not answering all the ethical concerns I am raising, using John's story, but I am flagging up that our attachment to knowing, knowledge and swift action often conceals the ethical issues involved in the processes that unfold – especially in times of crisis.

My questions from above still stands – how *do* we prepare for working with unknowing? What capabilities do we need to develop? For now, I propose that working with unknowing is not a capability that is developed in isolation. It is part of a practice of attention that constitutes elements we have discussed and explored in this chapter – the coda will offer a summary of these.

4.4. Coda

Attention is the phenomena of *being with*. The deliberate practice of attention in the workplace is to discern and realise conscientious ways of *being with* in each moment and to embrace the potentiality of *being without* the certitude of knowledge.

For a deliberate practice of attention to be morally justifiable, it must include awareness of the ethics of attention and the ethical attitude of consent.

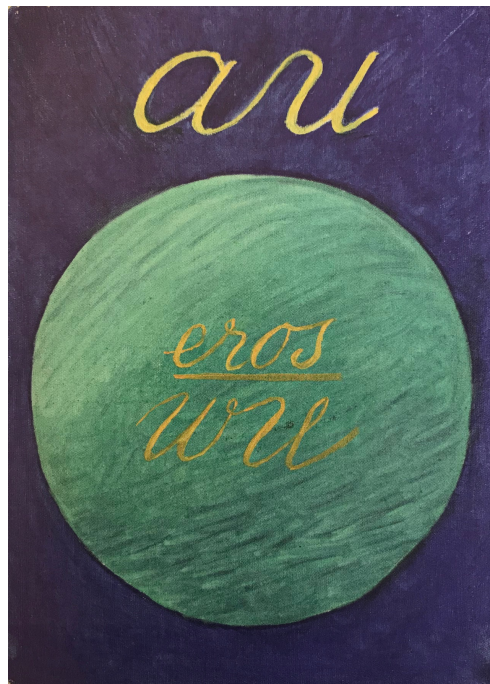
The *attending to intention* exercise provides a good starting point for developing a practice. In the process of *peeling the onion* (Saint Teresa of Avila, 2003) and naming fears – as we also saw in John's account – I am able to take charge of feelings that are unhelpful and may compromise my ability to think clearly whilst staying in touch with the body and the environment.

By asking the questions '*what really matters now*?' and '*what is the worst that can happen*?' I map my inner landscape and begin to sense a live connection to my latent yet emergent sense of purpose.

Once I have identified my fears and established what is important, I must discern *to what* and *to whom* I give my attention. Here, I need to be mindful of the ethics of attention: *who might I be hurting or helping by paying attention in this or in that way?*

I need to engage *reflexively* so that I can consider each decision and corresponding action in the context of the whole (Weick, 2002) and I need to be transparent (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). In so doing, I *suspend* my attention as evenly as possible over the reality, as I perceive it to be – Bion's 'O' (1970) – adopting an inner stance of patient waiting (Weil, 1952; Bowden, 1998).

Being without my attachment to knowing, I am ready to realise in the moment the most conscientious way of *being with*.



4.5. The Virtue of Attention

If we look back at the ancient traditions and the early cultures of India, Egypt, Greece, and others, the practice of attention, the path to self-knowledge, or the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness, used to be more important than work and wealth – these were life-long endeavours that gave the human being a sense of direction and meaning in life (Hadot, 2004). These same themes repeat in much of contemporary literature and the work underpinning this study is no exception (Eigen, 1998; Case and Gosling, 2007, 2010; French and Simpson, 1999, 2000; 2015; Ganeri, 2017; Hadot, 1995, 2004; Raelin, 2007; Ramsey, 2014). Over time, the focus of attention in daily life shifted towards a culture of *knowing*, *wanting* and *having*. Whilst self-interest and greed are by no means modern cultural phenomena (Harari, 2015) we have discussed above how the more recent intensity of focus on the acquisition of more gadgets and constant self-validation (the obsession with *likes* on Facebook being but one example) has had repercussions on mental and physical wellbeing of people living fast-paced lives in the attention economy.

The emergence of neuro-determinism, and the story about being human that it represents, could be seen to offer justification for the behaviours that may have led to an *age of surveillance capitalism* (Zuboff, 2019). From the beginning, determinism brought into question what level of ownership we can really have over our actions if those originate in *causes* rather than *reasons* (Lucas, 1970). I see a strong link between the experience of *not owning one's actions* and the concerns I raised earlier – the lack of absorption and flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2010) leading to an absence of mastery (Crawford, 2015a) and the relentless *treadmill of incompetence* in organisations that Williams (2017a) describes.

Empowerment, inspiration, spiritual, psychic and physical wellbeing is, for most people, deeply connected with the sense of self in the world. A long day of sitting in one position, looking at a monitor that provides a pixelated alternative to the immediate physical environment, does not offer the situatedness, sense of life and sense of self that human beings so long for. Rather, as participants in this study described, most of us feel dislocated and disconnected from the physical world and ourselves after a day of reading and responding to what seems an endless mass of emails. Gadgets respond in unison not to worry – there is always more distraction available if you feel that sense of emptiness. And so, we carry on filling the void with other stimuli (Cooperative Inquiry).

In his book, *Sapiens*, Harari (2015) explains why the current '*capitalist-consumerist ethic*' delivers on its promise like no other previous *ethical system* ever did. Past ethical systems

promised us paradise but only if we committed to overcoming the passions and desires of the Self. The capitalist-consumer ideal is based on the promise of another kind of paradise, which can be reached *if and only if* you stay selfish, make more money and buy more stuff. “This is the first religion in history” Harari says, “whose followers actually do what they are asked to do” (p. 349).

So “whatever happened to wisdom” ask Case and Gosling (2007, p. 87) and why overcome one’s passions and desires, or even entertain the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness, when, as they state,

[...] our (post-)industrialised educational system, driven by the demands of capitalist enterprise and neo-liberal government, is characterised by high levels of functional specialism, instrumentality and secularism, which do not admit readily to the language of “wisdom” (p. 88).

Harari (2015) proposes that the power assumed by human beings on this planet is grounded in the capacity we exclusively have to live in the world of *stories* – to create and live by individual and collective abstract notions of money, religion, freedom, cooperation and so on. The stories we live by¹³ are more powerful than we commonly give them credit for and with the ability to *create* them comes the power to *change* them. Our sphere of influence through stories goes well beyond our own lives and with this comes another unique human opportunity namely, to take responsibility not only for the stories we live by but for the stories we co-create and those we are told.

Every single human transaction is an entwining and entangling of individual and shared stories. The workplace is a melting pot of unconscious behaviour for the unaware but a laboratory for those who seek to understand what is actually going on. As far as individual stories go, there are a number of narratives at play in any situation that involves more than one agent. The first narrative is the story *I* tell myself about *me* in role; the second narrative is *my story* about *you* in role and then there is the powerful third narrative – the story *I* tell about *your* story of *me* in role. In the workplace, it is the third narrative that is the most relentless unconscious driver of social dynamics. The imposter phenomenon (Clance and Imes, 1978) and other syndromes play in and proliferate stories about power and knowledge and end up being a game of who we think *have it*, who we think *don’t* have it and who *wants* it. Stacey (2007) says,

“[...] in our situated, moment-to-moment dialogue with many others we shape our understanding of possible worlds, of ways of orienting ourselves in these possible worlds and of new ways of being and acting” (p. 130).

¹³ for an excellent example, see Stibbe, 2015

In a creative theoretical dialogue with Cuncliffe (2008), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Ricoeur (1974), Stacey has explored in depth the role of stories and embodied knowing in the workplace. His core message is that we are social and embodied beings who are constantly involved in the “intricate flow of complexly intertwined relationally responsive and implicitly knowledgeable activities” (p.129). With this as our springboard, I will share an intimate autoethnographic account that was created with the particular question of the impact of personal narratives in focus.

In this account, I set myself the task of recording my own stories as transparently and honestly as possible during a high stakes event at work and in real time. The aim was to reveal moments of a particular occurrence where my narratives inform how I attend and act in the moment. This was the result –

It is the final approval panel meeting. We are meeting the [Agency] at the offices of our partner organisation with whom we have created this project. We are in the larger boardroom. The panel members, who are internal agency staff and external hand picked experts, have read carefully what we submitted. As they sit there, their different faces strike me. It is so easy to consider a panel like this ‘an entity’. But the reality is that this is a collection of people – some of whom don’t know the others, some might never have done this before, some might be nervous, some may be well prepared and others are perhaps not so. I have sat in a number of these meetings on both sides of the table. I have been the one that was bracketed as part of such an entity and I have been the one bracketing. I remind myself that these people – with whom the power to judge our work now lies – come along with their individual stories, ontologies and epistemologies. I am prepared to witness the internal ‘talent show’ and one-upmanship that the panel – as an entity – might fall into.

*The room is organised to include an actual panel (a row of chairs with a long table) at the front of the room and a half moon of chairs and tables where we are all sitting: our team and team of our partner organisation. As I look at colleagues sitting in the half moon I reflect that we are all one team now and no longer on different sides of the table. Successful approval depends on whether the panel can see that **we** are an entity. I note that we have never been in this constellation before. I look over at the other CEO. As I met him early in the morning, I noticed how he had dressed for the occasion. He was wearing a Stetson and yellow sunglasses. I made a remark and he said that they need to see who we are. I made my own interpretation of the connection between this statement and this look. He cannot hide his nervousness today. He came across rather abrupt with the others earlier but I could see what caused it and was not concerned. I chose to overcompensate with gentle, humorous responses whilst carefully demonstrating to him and the others that I was appropriately nervous, yet confident. It was a ‘social tonic’ of meticulously sourced ingredients. We exchange a few excited glances as the meeting begins.*

The meeting has started. The first questions pertain to the administrative aspects of the project. The conversation is like surfing. Sometimes we are riding on top of the wave and sometimes underneath it, just ahead of the curve. We know everything there is to know about the administrative processes. There is a clear answer to it all. This panel seems keen to move into the content related, philosophical questions about the

project. This is rare. Usually, the more philosophical questions in these meetings come at the end – if at all. I have often come away disappointed with how few questions we get about what we think really matters. As a panel member, I always start there myself, but that is unusual behaviour for your average panel. My mind wanders and I make an effort to return to the present. It starts off well. Their CEO takes over for a while and then suddenly, I sense it...the question that is coming up is one we have not prepared for. No one knows the answer to this one because it is not a question with a 'right' or 'wrong' answer...it is a question about approach and perspective. In my mind, I loudly beg the Vice Chancellor to refer the panel to me. I want to take this one. The woman with the large round glasses from the panel is asking. Then he does it – the CEO leans over the table, turns to me asks – will you answer this one? This is the first time I speak. I start by asking the panel's permission to 'check my understanding'. I do this not to check my understanding in fact but to make her question sound more difficult and better articulated than it was posed so that she, the woman with the large round glasses, can feel good about having asked it and perhaps win a few points with her colleagues. She looks satisfied as I reiterate it, looking straight at her, and there is some general nodding by the other members on the panel. As I start responding in this way, I wonder whether I am being manipulative, or simply appropriately astute. Am I going through these social and political motions in order to get approval for a project that we have worked on for three years and which, we believe, will benefit people in the future? Or am I working the crowd just because I can? So often I wonder where the line is between a timely social intervention in service of a good cause or social or emotional manipulation.

After the meeting, the woman who had asked the question came up to me and revealed that she had posed this particular question strategically to get the panel on board with the overall concept of the design. Apparently, questions had been asked about this issue in their preparatory meeting because it is an unusual project. I thanked her and reflected to myself that she and I had formed an implicit collaboration without knowing it at the time. (Approval Panel: 30 June 2015).

This account is a tale of some of the common elements we may find in any meeting, told from the perspective of an *active agent*, not merely a witness. Common elements include the 'us and them' dynamic, which is prominent in this story – here, there are multiple players and constellations in that there is the 'us and them' between our organisational partnership as one entity and the panel as another, as well as the 'us and them' dynamic between our team and the other team in the partnership. Notice also how I project onto the panel that they are an *entity* – a collective – until I am reminded, from being a panel member myself, that they may be disconnected, alien to each other, nervous, perhaps unprepared and new to the task. The stories we create about *the others* in the meeting, especially when there are power differentials and the stakes are high, are often coloured primarily by our fears – but, as we heard earlier, the sooner we name them, the sooner we can alleviate those fears and avoid unhelpful reactions.

At this point, let us briefly look back to an example we explored in an earlier chapter, where we heard the story of a manager who, in Chinta's version of the story, became subject to the unconscious behaviour of a new senior executive. As a result of the

behaviour of this new senior executive, the manager also changes behaviour, but for reasons he does not understand at the time. Driven by envy and feelings of exclusion, he unwillingly alienates his team and starts missing targets. He is eventually moved to another department (Interview).

In my thought experiment above, the new senior executive has a deliberate practice of attention – she understands how her quality attention to the manager’s team can cause issues for him and she spends the first day at work finding out how she can support him in his role, rather than satisfying her own need to shine in the eyes of the team. The practice of the new senior executive is one in which she is in touch with her intentions and able to administer her attention conscientiously.

Returning to the account from the panel meeting, we can see how I start to question my motives. I have a moment, in real time, of wondering what my intentions are. I reflect on the *collusion* I have created with a panel member. It is benign and unplanned, it is an unspoken and invisible bond and it is created out of nowhere. A moment in time is seized and utilised between us and together, we co-create a narrative about a particular philosophical point that turns out to be of broader strategic consequence – had I known this, would I have acted in the way I did? I wonder.

From the *inside out* perspective, our narratives inform *how* we attend and *what* we give our attention to – from the *outside in*, this very practice of attention informs the stories we are *perceived* to tell. This dynamic movement informs the human transactions of our lives and it is this that links our practice of attention to the virtue of attention. Considering attention in this way – as a *virtuous* practice (Weil, 2000) – there is a sense in which it also becomes an issue of ethics and of individual responsibility.

At this point, we may already feel that we are approaching a gateway to self-knowledge but before we look at what such a path may entail, we will first explore the stories about the one who takes the *leading role*.

4.5.1. Stories of the Self

The story of the self is at the centre of the human endeavour whether we are on the path to overcoming or transforming it, or whether we consider ourselves on no path at all. As we heard earlier, a recurring theme in the attention debate is the connection between attention and agency, *will* or the *self* (Arvidson, 2003a; Ganery, 2017; Skewes, 2016; Watzl, 2011;

Weil, 1952; Wu, 2014). Common to spiritual traditions are the notions of overcoming passions, desires or attachments – stories of the self include the surrender of the ego (Bowden, 1998; Weil, 2000), understanding the *Maya* of world and self (Ganeri, 2017), transforming and purifying the self (Hadot, 2004) and being one with *truth-in-the-moment* (French and Simpson, 2000). In an earlier autoethnographic account on evenly suspended attention (account on *attention-in-flow*, p. 115) we explored how the overcoming of self, the suspending of judgment or ego, establishes this particular practice of attention as an *analytic attitude* (Bion, 1970; Eigen, 1998; French and Simpson, 2015). Stories of the self permeate our endeavours, ontologies and epistemologies, regardless of tradition, culture and creed.

As I contemplate this, four complex questions arise for me. What is the true *value* of this most powerful and ever-present human story of the self? What is the *role* of the self on a path to self-knowledge and what is the role of *knowledge* itself? Can the story of the self serve us as we practice being *human*, being *without* and being *with*? Thankfully, it goes beyond the scope of this study to attempt answers here but in what follows, I will at least offer some observations that may be of value to our inquiry. I will start by sharing this ambiguous statement ascribed to Dorotheus of Gaza (Hadot, 2004) where he speaks of overcoming of the *will* –

He who has no will of his own always does what he wants. Everything that happens satisfies him, and he constantly acts in accordance with his will. For he does not want things to be as he wishes, he wishes them to be as they are (Dorotheus of Gaza in Hadot, 2004, p. 245).

Notice how in the first sentence the person who has *no will of his own* still seems to act in accordance with it. Dorotheus of Gaza appears to distinguish between a ‘lower will’ and a ‘higher will’, an idea that has echoes in Hinduism and mystical traditions, such as the Tarot, Alchemy, Rosecrucianism and Hermeticism. In the Upanishads (Easwaran, 2007), it is through *Ātman*, the eternal self or soul, that we strive to unite with *Brahman*, the underlying reality of all things. Separate and yet interconnected, the story of *Atman* – the higher self, is to seek unity with Brahman – the *all*. In Buddhism, we explore the story of the self through its *non-existence*: *An-atman* (Roshen, 2010, p. 38). Here, the journey is essentially to come to *insight* – enlightenment – about the *illusion* of the self and the world (Ganeri, 2017).

We can draw an interesting parallel to Weil, whose practice of attention is an overcoming of the self. She refers to this as the *decreation* of the ‘I’ or the practice of impersonality, as I described earlier (Bowden, 1998). Weil spoke of suspended, or *unmixed* attention, which, in essence, is the suspension of *thought*. She says, “thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it”

(Cameron, 2003, p. 217). Here Weil establishes a connection between attention and Negative Capability (French and Simpson, 2015). Unmixed attention is not only a suspension of thought but also of the self – a form of *being without*, one could say. Freeman (2015) suggests that Weil is not trying to annihilate thought or disregard knowledge. Instead she says that we need to

[...] hold in our minds within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains (p. 164).

For Weil, the practice of attention and the overcoming the ‘I’ are interconnected and, she says, “there is a forfeiture of personality, in the absence of which supernatural grace [might] descend” (Cameron, 2003, p. 218) – the annihilation in nothingness and “the annihilation in God” (ibid.) are what constitute the practice of unmixed attention. It is important to note also that Weil’s understanding of the ‘I’ is a mysterious one. In Weil’s notebooks, Cameron (2003) found this curious statement: “The ‘I’ belongs to non-being. But I have not the right to know this. If I knew it, where would be the renunciation? I shall never know it” (p. 220).

Weil’s ability to hold such tensions, contradictions and paradoxes gives her an immense capacity for describing the phenomenology of her experiences of attention. For Weil, however, it is a gift of grace to know the reality of the world, not a sign of individual mastery or achievement – “[t]o moral gravity, the natural tendency of humans toward expansion of self and injustice, grace inspires attention as an antidote” (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2018).

Weil’s *virtue of attention* can be understood as a *way of being* through which one comes to an understanding of multiple perspectives and learns to discern on multiple levels. Her proposition about the role of the self in a practice of attention is firmly rooted in her ideological stance – that we are essentially here to imitate Christ. Attention, she says, can be seen as *love*. Attention *consents* to the existence of another and love requires recognition of something that goes beyond *the self of oneself* and *the self of the other*. In this dynamic gesture, the self is de-centred, she suggests – I propose that one could also think of that as *non-attachment*. Our capacity to love is not from the personal to the personal – it is from *God in us* that we can truly love, and it is that in us that makes love *universal* (ibid).

I have proposed that stories of the self – our epistemic and ontological beliefs – play a powerful role in our practice of attention. The more skilled we are in attending, the more we feel justified in our different attention-based beliefs (Ganeri, 2017). As we have just explored,

this is aligned with Weil's proposition about the interrelatedness between attention and the transformation of self.

What happens when we take this inquiry and locate it in the current climate of the attention economy? Crawford (2015) suggests that there has been a radical shift from our belief in the *individual self* to beliefs about *the collective* and he has a point. I am fascinated to live in a world where a 'Selfie-stick' is a thing and it is curious how the most popular of our gadgets are branded in such a way as to play a subliminal but powerful role in the forming of my identity – my 'I' (iPhone, iPod, etc.). Yet, we are nevertheless more and more fascinated by the concept of 'we' – the *wisdom of crowds* and the *hive mind* being examples (ibid.).

Crawford says, "we are told that there is a superior global intelligence arising in the Web itself" (p. 201) and he points out how the prevalent business strategy of the attention economy is to become the *aggregators* of content, rather than *producers* of it (ibid.). The ideologists of the web – "eager to brush the "gatekeepers" of knowledge into the dustbin of history" (ibid.) – created what Jaron Lanier (in ibid.) calls "digital Maoism", or a "new online collectivism". Based on *collectivity algorithms*, we, the consumers, look for new knowledge in content that has been aggregated, and aggregated again, countless times. It sounds like an advantage, doesn't it? Surely, where knowledge is concerned, *more* is just *more*. But if this aggregation process is based on a recycling of knowledge and if it is detached from individual discernment, mindfulness and intuition then there is a risk that we, too, lose our ability to *produce* new knowledge and lose the power of discernment about what is of true value and what is not.

Whilst taking a critical approach to it, I am myself a user of the Internet and I am (just) another active agent in the attention economy. For those reasons, I know that many people share with me the overwhelm that comes with a Google search. How many times during this study have I had to engage with a wealth of hits that I did not know how to relate to. This is the portal to new knowledge of the present-day and what we find – whatever it is that captures our attention at any given moment – shapes our beliefs. What we believe is the source of our narratives and they in turn give rise to the experience of what it is to be a self in this world – whether you are on a path of overcoming it, transforming it or uniting it with the *all*. As another *user* – another consumer and citizen in an age of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) – my concern about the lack of a deliberate practice of attention in the workplace, and the general direction the evolution of our consciousness is taking, is not rooted in an anxiety about the loss of old stories about the self rather, it is motivated by the question of what we are losing it to.

4.5.2. The Path to Self-Knowledge

Placing attention as one of the gateways to knowledge positions this particular human capacity and its characteristics at the centre of our individual ontological and epistemic beliefs (Ganeri, 2017). If attention plays a central role in the stories we tell each other and ourselves about how things are and what we can know about them then our relationship to how we come to *understand* and *administer* our attention becomes an ethical matter of critical importance (Bowden, 1998). In ancient Greece, *prosochē* (προσοχή), or practical wisdom, was the practice of attention in service of shaping one's own moral character. The Stoic attitude of *attention to self* was concerned with the examining of one's every thought so that the content and nature of one's conscience would not be subject to un-self-conscious denial or repression of desire, anger, anxiety or injustice from which immoral actions would arise (Hadot, 1995, 2004). In early Christianity we find strong echoes of the attitude of attending to self along with the advice to do so every six hours and write down the "actions and motions of our soul as if we had them known to others" (Hadot, 2004 p. 243). Writing down one's innermost thoughts was recommended specifically as a therapeutic tool to exercise attention to self with transparency without making the content of the mind so public that it would cause conflict (ibid.).

The meticulous recording of *the movements of the soul* as a path to self-knowledge is explored in this study through the autoethnographic accounts. It is a practice of *attending to self* that leaves no stone unturned – as one unflattering realisation is recorded and swiftly followed by another, this challenging practice requires the continuous and disciplined examination of thought, feeling and will. Perilous and long is the path to *Know Thyself* (p. 21) and the promise of *self-mastery* (p. 244) too often seems far from reach. The motivation to stay on the path and to *be with* what emerges can wane when the findings are disturbing. The temptation to let the self disappear in distraction is almost impossible to withstand when the *way out* is offered so readily by all the promises of the attention economy. So, what keeps us on the path?

I proceed to share a short abstract from one of the longer autoethnographic accounts that reveals an important moment of disillusionment. This particular description is one of the more obscure, but I share it here because it led the way to a cathartic realisation that has informed the latter part of this study. In the section that follows, I describe how I come to understand that I am in fact *not awake* even when I am *not sleeping*. This disturbing realisation was what then led me to a further insight, which I shall explain later. Firstly, here is what I wrote –

I am awake enough to know that I am sleeping. This is in some respects a frustrating position to be in. Rather like ludic dreaming, I am not able to apply my will in any

major way. The little 'deeds of will' become incredibly significant in a state of lucid dreaming exactly because they are so difficult to bring about. After waking, I look back at some minor deed that I undertook through what felt like an immense act of will, and I marvel that it was even possible to achieve it in the lucid dreaming state.

Just so do I experience myself asleep even in my so-called 'conscious waking state'. I experience that I am not truly 'awake', rather, it is a dreamlike echo of what I sense 'awake-ness' to be. But I am unable to embody that. A veil that is more or less transparent, and sometimes just a thick curtain, separates true awake-ness and me.

So if I want to consciously practice attention, I need to embrace this state of affairs: I need to accept that I am practicing this most significant aspect of being human in a padded cell – or 'a personal safety room' as they are now officially called in modern psychiatric hospitals. And in my 'personal safety room', I am in fact not exposed to anything but what I decide is the 'story of now'... I am my own subject in a research project that seems to be entirely designed by me. Any practicing that I do, therefore, is completely built to my own specifications with a few changing goalposts and temporary structures thrown in here and there – perhaps to provide safety in a setting that is supposed to look like "real life". I am both disturbed by finding myself asleep and accepting of it to the point of alarming calm (Lucid Dreaming and the Service-Vanity Trap: 16 April, 2017).

The writing of this account, and the reflection that followed, led me to understand the immense power of our personal narratives and the role that a practice of attention can play in the realisation of them. I describe myself as being asleep behind a veil in a *padded cell* where I am completely determining my own experience of life through the stories I happen to tell. My 'personal safety room' is designed to look like "real life" but I know that it is in fact all my own creation. The rest of the account (not included above) proceeds to question my motives for being *in service* of others and of higher goals. It proposes that this sense of service that keeps me on this path is also a potential *vanity trap*. Thus, the disillusionment emerging from this account is threefold – a) through noticing how my will operates in a state of lucid dreaming, I am challenged to accept that I am in fact not fully present, not *awake*, in my conscious waking state, b) I come to understand that my reality is one that *I curate* with *the stories I tell* and c) the sense of service that motivates me to stay on the path to self-knowledge may at times be rooted in self-interest.

These rather alarming realisations led to a turning point in the study, as well as for me personally. In my practice of attention, I started to notice how my narratives would *direct* my attention, that is, my own stories would take charge of my attention but unintentionally. I became mindful of the recurring experience that waking states do not necessarily entail high levels of lucidity. As a direct result of contemplating the risk that I was potentially also caught in a vanity-trap, the *attending to intention* exercise (as described earlier) assumed an even more important role in my preparations for workplace related events, as well as in my private life. Paradoxically, the autoethnographic account that led to a realisation that *I am*

asleep even when I am awake turned out to be a powerful *wake-up call* on so many important levels. Since then, I have been experimenting with the different personal and collective *stories we live by* in the workplace and in my own life. Students, clients and colleagues have been inspired to adopt practices in which they work actively with their first, second and third narratives, as explained above. The key insights that have emerged include the following.

A story is not necessarily *benign* just because it is a *story* – we are safer assuming that stories are powerful. Equally, my narratives are not necessarily subjective, nor are they restricted to me, even if they are mine. The way I administer my attention – your gateway to my world (Williams, 2017a) – is a direct result of my narrative about self and world. As Crawford (2015) suggests, simply changing the story we have about a problem does not solve it, yet, I propose that if we allow stories to remain unexamined – if we are afraid to challenge and change our beliefs about self and world – then we are effectively permitting our attention to stay captured and we go to sleep in our ‘personal safety room’.

Tajee spoke eloquently of the requirements of his job to leave the padded cell of one's own story. Tajee's role involves conscious role modelling beyond 'just' embodying good, authentic management. His particular vocation requires him to be acutely aware at all times that he is serving something much greater than his organisation – much greater than us all, in fact. As a spiritual leader, he is not only the representative of an organisation – he represents a story so epic and so central in peoples' lives that they commit their faith to it. His attention must be on their immediate needs as well as the long, long (!) view that the ideology of his context symbolizes. Holding on to a meta-narrative as well as attending to the needs of those he serves represents the kind of stretching that the etymology of attention and intention suggests.

The unique combination of person and role, says Tajee, is alchemy. In his organisation, people in senior positions are sent to where they need to serve and the person in role knows that the authority to serve the particular community they are in is only there because of this sending. The power to perform this function therefore comes out of the very act of committing to that particular system in which one does not oneself choose exactly where one lives and serves. This empowerment, rooted in surrender and the gesture of letting go (of one's own will) in order to let come (of a mandate to lead), could be seen as being a purification process (Interview).

It seems that there is an embedded de-centring of the ‘I’, to use Weil’s notion (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2018). Being personally and professionally involved in a system like that requires

intense self-discipline and a commitment to self-knowledge that would seem to go beyond most other roles.

Tajee described how one of his most important practices is concerned with carving out an area in his life that is not driven by external demands. It is vital, he says, in order to achieve self-mastery that we experience ourselves in situations where we are motivated only by our own will. As he explained this to me, I was aware how rarely the workplace provides for this experience, let alone private life unless we consciously create it. It makes sense that we have to create such spaces in life in order to truly understand the movements of our soul and the functions of our will when uncontrolled by external forces (Interview).

Again, the importance of absorption and flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2009), ecologies of attention (Crawford, 2015) and the development of practical wisdom (Hadot, 2004) comes to mind.

As Tajee described his role and explained the levels of self-mastery that is required to hold it, it struck me that rather than considering his situation an excellent but extreme example of self-knowledge, the capabilities expected of Tajee are no different from the capabilities we should expect of any senior executive or manager. As participants in this study have confirmed, self-knowledge is not only required for management practice but also for developing the resilience needed in order to respond with some level of grace to the rat race of the attention economy. The courage that John demonstrated when he gave his management team the gift of time to come to terms with the critical situation the organisation was in, the self-restraint of the new senior executive to pay attention to the one manager rather than satisfying her own need to shine in her new job, and so on, all the various accounts of this study speak of the necessity to be unafraid to look in the mirror. If management practice does indeed entail a commitment to self-development – and if this, as proposed, entails the practice of readiness to be authentic, willingness to transform, courage to take responsibility for self and others, trust in the wisdom of each moment and love of the deed – then those who publicly commit to such a vocation must also commit to the path of turning every stone (Interviews).

To speak of a *path to self-knowledge* in twenty-first century comes across as somewhat archaic and references to Stoicism or *Know Thyself* gives all this an aroma of dusty libraries and leather armchairs. So rather than theorising about the significance of a commitment to the discipline of self-examination, I have offered glimpses from a practitioner perspective. I have also described some aspects of what it is like to be on my particular path – as relentless,

disconcerting and mystifying as it is – and what my attempt of a deliberate practice of attention has meant so far for the development of self and others where I work.

4.6. Coda

So far, my lived experience tells me that attention is a virtue and that its practice is intrinsically linked to committing to the discipline of self-examination. Philosophically, I propose that the deliberate practice of attention is a *necessary condition* for being on a path to self-knowledge and being on a path to self-knowledge is a *necessary condition* for maintaining a deliberate practice of attention.

I will let Basil of Caesarea have the last word on attention in this chapter –

[Attention] means keeping watch over the beauty of our soul by examining our conscience and knowing ourselves. In this way we can correct our judgments of ourselves, by recognising both our true poverty and our true riches; the splendours offered by the cosmos, our body, the earth, the sky, and stars; and above all, the destiny of the soul (Hadot, 2004, p. 243).



5. Conclusion

Can we truly know ourselves? What does it mean to be on a path to self-knowledge and is that important for the development of self and others in the workplace? Is there value in the proposition of a deliberate practice of attention or is it essentially a navel-gazing exercise in service of lofty and over-ambitious aims?

Since this study began in 2014, the world has seen the most extraordinary events unfold. We have experienced the incredible impact of the shift from an Obama administration to a Trump presidency; we have witnessed the gradual demise of what we used to call *our democracy* and observed with astonishment how the *Anglo-Saxon* part of the world has effectively split into feudal tribes who tell different stories about what matters. In one tribe, the story is that Brexit is a catastrophic distraction from climate emergency and we are hurtling towards social collapse; in another tribe, climate emergency is a hoax led by skiving teenagers around the globe and we should get back to the business of individual wealth creation. What these stories all have in common is that *it matters what we pay attention to* – and the extraordinary fact is, of course, that what we pay attention to becomes *what matters*. The obvious question is whether we will ever agree on *what matters* and there are other challenges that follow this question that I will proceed to explain now.

In the introduction, I situated this research at the core of the *problem of attention* and I have proposed above that, regardless of intentions and goals, the impact and demands of the attention economy carry the risk of undermining personal and organisational wellbeing. I have suggested that the level of involuntary attentional capture we experience today might lead to a loss of connection with purpose and that this in turn carries the risk of our losing sight of that which motivates us to do *good work* in the world – and, in some severe cases, to exist at all.

My call for a shift of attention from *individual wealth creation* to *collective health creation* is as much about attending to the health of our natural *inner* environment as it is about the health of our natural *outer* environment. Without attending to the health¹⁴ of both, we are at risk of eliminating what we understand as *life*. What is more, when we forget, ignore or refuse to fathom the power of attention in our lives – whatever reasons we may have for doing so – it is an abdication of moral responsibility. As we grow up, it is the role of our parents or

¹⁴ As stated above, I am using *Health* in its original sense of *Whole* (The New Oxford American Dictionary, 2019)

carers, siblings, teachers, peers, colleagues or managers to show us ways of *being with* that inspire responsible attentional behaviour.

So what happens when this most crucial aspect of our human development is an unconscious process? We inevitably suffer the ignorance of those who raised us; in fact, it seems to be part of the human journey that we must learn as much from the lack of knowledge of those who came before us as from their wisdom. But, as we have explored, the power we assume through a deliberate practice of attention can bring about positive change or destruction and it is contingent on *intention* and *depth of self-knowledge*.

It follows that the moral and ethical dimensions of this are immeasurable. Put simply, would we choose to send our young ones to learn to drive from a driving instructor who can drive but does not quite know what they are doing or how things work? Would we trust our loved ones to pick up good practice through osmosis and not also, by osmosis, adopt unconscious and potentially dangerous behaviour? It is no different when we consider the practice of attention. It can help or harm, safeguard us and put us at risk just as readily through unconscious behaviour as a person behind a wheel, yet this obvious fact does not seem to be generally accepted. So how can it be that attention, which is so central and vital in our lives, is not considered a faculty that requires conscious practice by anyone who is responsible for the development of conduct and education of others?

This study has revealed that there is no unified theory of attention across any of the major fields. In management learning, we found that only a very limited number of scholars talk explicitly about attention and even fewer give indications as to how it might be practiced. This study found no examples of academic works in which the practice of attention is explored in the context of the workplace from an empirical practitioner-based perspective. I have suggested that the lack of a shared understanding and language of attention may be one of the reasons why we are generally not talking about the *practice* and the *ethics* of it.

Attention, in this study is simply defined as *the phenomena of being with* and my proposition is that we do not need to explain and understand exactly what attention is in order to develop deliberate practices. Becoming aware of and actively engaging with the phenomenology of attention in everyday life, even where it differs from person to person, is sufficient in order to start developing a practice. Interest and active engagement is all we need in order to begin sharing with others how such a practice might serve our personal and professional paths. We can also work on the Negative Capability (Bülow and Simpson, 2019) required to accept the uncertainty and mystery of attention – as indeed Weil (1952, 2000) might have suggested.

5.1. So What?

I would like to propose that the reluctance to give attention to attention is linked to the state of *acedia* (Johnsen, 2009), so prevalent among us in today's attention economy. A "sinful dejection in the exercise of virtuous activities" (p. 88), the *daemon* of *acedia* was the forerunner to the deadly sin of *sloth* and is described by Thomas Aquinas as a *lack of care* in the monk, leading to the mismanagement of self. When suffering *acedia*, *worldly* sorrows would overshadow the virtue of feeling the *godly* sorrows, which any dedicated and self-respecting monk should be sharing with Christ at all times (ibid.).

Taking us down this route of *acedia* is not an attempt to get us lost in medieval self-flagellation, nor is it to condemn the role of idleness in our lives (which I consider to be important). Rather, I am pointing to a current, yet largely unaddressed, *symptom* that I suggest lies at the root of some of the issues we are facing in the attention economy today. Here, I agree with Johnsen who observes how melancholy, stress and depression seem to play a major role in our story of how we participate in the modern socioeconomic reality (p. 6). It is all too rare that we get an upbeat positive answer to the question, '*how are you?*' In the workplace, it is seen as *right* to give the answer that we have over a thousand unanswered emails, that we are overworked and underpaid; it is seen as *wrong* to say that we are content, managing our workload and taking our allocated leave.

My proposition is that the lifestyle we are choosing or, indeed, born into in this part of the world has contributed to a feeling of existential lethargy and exhaustion. As a result, we are less inclined to commit to the challenges of the path to self-knowledge and the deliberate practice of attention in the workplace. It is of course not uncommon to seek therapeutic interventions, or other kinds of professional help, when things are difficult, or we experience trauma. Some people even build mindfulness or meditation into the day. Yet, when we are in the midst of the multiple issues of everyday work-life, we do not naturally seek to pause and take a breath or connect to purpose.

Previously, my own experience of coming home after a day of work was that I was too wired to sleep but too exhausted to engage in anything that required more *hard work*, which is what is required for any form of focused, distributed or evenly suspended attention. I sometimes felt a sense of self-pity, or just unhappiness, which often led me to conclude that what I really needed was a couple of episodes from my favourite TV series. In that moment, it seemed only fair to provide myself with comfort in this way – after all, I knew the importance of self-care after a long day of giving all the different kinds of attention I could muster to the colleagues,

the vision and the purpose I aimed to serve. Rarely would I have the energy to even read a book.

I am not suggesting here that we need to create a regime of relentless self-examination after hours, but I am proposing that the workplace needs to become a milieu that offers time and space for the inner work, flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2009), the development of mastery (Crawford, 2015) and *convivial sociality* (Fabre Lewin, 2019). Convivial sociality, says, Fabre Lewin, underlies the embodying of both cognitive and affective capacities, ensuring that our moral and social existence is never split between our thoughts and feelings, mind and body (p. 64). This felt split between thoughts, feelings, mind and body so commonly experienced in today's workplace, is what I have called *mental fragmentation* in this study and it is this that I would claim leads to the acedia we suffer after hours. With the pressures we are under, the daily onslaught of digital stimuli and what seems to be a losing battle against distraction, acedia is at risk of becoming a state of *normality* for us and thus begin to rule our limited time away from work.

The reluctance we may feel about tackling this problem, or developing a deliberate practice of attention perhaps, may be caused also by the lack of guidance on how to even begin that journey. By putting the practice of attention in the workplace on the map, this study is opening up a conversation among colleagues and inviting us to develop communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Rather than waiting for the expert to show up and tell us *how to do it*, this study proposes that a deliberate practice of attention in the workplace can grow out of one person's initiative, a focus group or cooperative inquiry, conversations between colleagues, journaling, just trying it and not hiding it.

In this study, I deliberately provide no ready-to-use toolbox of methods for a particular practice as a result of my research. Rather, I simply invite each individual to take responsibility not only for their own path of self-development but for the positive difference that every courageous and conscious role model (Gordon and Bülow, 2012) can make in the workplace. Coming out and advocating a deliberate practice of attention in the average workplace is not an easy thing to do – this study recognises that – but I have described in detail here why *walking the path regardless*¹⁵ is essential at this time.

In this study, I have focused specifically on the working lives of managers who are faced each day with significant responsibilities, decisions and actions but not commonly supported to

¹⁵ Dedication, p. 2

develop practices for moral and ethical conduct. Still today, it is assumed that if you are good at your job, you can also be a senior manager. Promotions are granted to people who may excel in one or other area but not commonly on the basis of the particular qualities I proposed earlier – integrity, authenticity, courage, Negative Capability and so on. I would like to claim that the lack of respect for management practice as an *art* and *craft* that requires *mastery*, and the resultant lack of practical wisdom in the conduct of management practitioners, is what has led us to some of the most disastrous events in our most recent environmental, political and financial history.

5.1.1. Contributions

Attention, I have argued, is a *privilege* that must be given or received by consent, not imposed or captured, tracked, traded and exploited. If we do not develop ways of *being with* that embody a healthy response to the current pace of mental fragmentation, we may lose our ability to make deliberate choices with our attention from a place of individual integrity and authenticity. It is our faculties of discernment that are at risk and it is the ethics of our actions that is affected when we allow our attention to be captured and our values to be influenced without wise judgment.

This study positions the deliberate practice of attention in the workplace at the very centre of the discipline of management learning with a call to action. It responds to the lack in this field of both theoretical and practical contributions to the study of attention and the ethical implications of its practice.

Grounded in the insights emerging from a longitudinal empirical study of ten senior managers and a five-year written record of a journey with rigorous self-examination, the findings of the research I have presented here are not only a contribution to knowledge but an invitation to senior managers – and those who are co-responsible for their learning – to develop attentional freedom and cultivate the practical wisdom this demands.

The methodological contribution offered in this study is the reflexive engagement with attention, demonstrated particularly in the autoethnographic accounts and in the thesis as a whole, which is itself written as an autoethnographic journey with the practice of attention.

These accounts tell the story of my personal journey of transformation as a practitioner and invite the reader to discover the epistemic significance of attentional reflexivity as a significant step on the path to self-knowledge.

5.1.2. Implications

The most significant implications of this study for management learning relate to the emphasis on self-development. The findings of this research suggest that self-reflection, reflexive practice and the development of what I have called an *attitudinal infrastructure*, are necessary conditions for virtuous management practice. I have proposed that these three keystones offer senior managers the foundations for a deepening understanding of the inner landscape and the cultivation of an ethical attitude of attending (Weil, 1952; Bowden 1998).

Senior Managers, whose stories have been shared in this study, expressed their deep concern about the state of the workplace today. It is not an environment that generally allows the space and time needed for discernment and moral decision-making. They recognised, however, that individual action would be needed if we want to change these circumstances (Cooperative Inquiry).

These keystones link attention to the following three elements that require constant awareness, persistent scrutiny and the continuous dedication of senior managers if we are to be conscious role models in the transformation of today's workplace:

Attention and Ethics

We create and terminate connections and facilitate moments of recognition with our attention within a constant flow of other activities and distractions. The landscape of captured attention is at risk of undermining our natural abilities to discern and control how we attend in everyday life. It is our moral obligation to consider the consequences of our attentional behaviour and engage in an active dialogue with our environment about what a consensual attitude of attention might be. By that I mean that we need to develop an ethical attitude of consent in our practice of attention and this requires of us that we create spaces in the day to ask – *who might I be hurting or helping by paying attention in this or in that way?* As we have explored, the power we hold by having the capacity for *attention* and *consciousness* at the same time is immense – it comes with an obligation to hold ourselves to account in every moment.

Attention and Intention

If management practice, as I have proposed, requires a commitment to self-development then we have work to do to create environments where such a practice is not constantly undermined. We need to dedicate *actual clock time* to the exploration of our inner landscape and we need to create a milieu in which we can safely *peel off the different layers of the onion*

(Saint Teresa of Avila, 2003). Without scrutinising our intentions in this way, we cannot be sure that our decisions and actions are morally justifiable.

Attention and Self-knowledge

If we do not engage in ongoing and rigorous self-examination, we are at risk of letting unconscious fears and thinking habits capture our attention. If our behaviours are indeed “reflexes – habitual and instinctive” (Cuncliffe, 2008, p.134) then a deliberate practice of attention would bring such habitual patterns to light over time and contribute to heightened awareness of that which is essentially an internal archive of preconceived social responses that surreptitiously influence and control organisational life. We need to identify and acknowledge latent fears and give attention to the narratives that inform prejudice and assumptions so that we can challenge and transform them. This entails a deep commitment to ongoing self-reflective and reflexive practice – this is the path to self-knowledge.

By inviting senior managers and their colleagues on a journey with these keystones, we are taking a big step towards creating a culture of moral integrity and ethical attention practice in the workplace. I am clear, however, that the implementation of such an idea is complex in most places of work today and that there are many aspects to this that warrant future study and research.

5.1.3. Future Research

As for the relevance of this study for future research, I take my cue from the practitioners I had the privilege of working with during the empirical research phase. Who better to tell us what senior managers need and how the study of a practice of attention in the workplace can develop in the future?

In the second Cooperative Inquiry, Daniel makes a powerful call for a set of practices that can help managers connect with moral decision-making (Cooperative Inquiry).

I have made the case that there are certain keystones that we can engage with and that the development of a practice of attention in the workplace simply requires that we *start doing it* and share our practices. One of the reasons why I am not proposing *a particular practice* in this study is that I do not wish to add yet another ‘toolbox’ designed for senior managers to replicate and repeat on team away-days or inset days. What I think is crucial, however, is further action research in which senior managers and their colleagues discover together and

co-create *situated* practices – practices that come out of the particular circumstances and workplaces they are in and which align with the shared vision and purpose held responsibly and collectively by the people who work there. We learnt this also from Mackay et al. (2014) whose study of *mētis* suggests that it is an attitude of *situated* resourcefulness that we need to develop. *Replicated practices* can become *dislocated practices* and whilst there is great value in looking at core principals and keystones, it is the specificity of the individual situation that must inform how a practice is developed and taken up in freedom by each person. My response to Daniel's idea would therefore be to suggest peer-networks in different workplaces where action research can take place and practice shared both within and across organisations.

Later in that same Cooperative Inquiry, Stella asks how we can begin to understand the stories we tell about the world and the relationship that exists between such personal narratives and how we attend. Her point here is that our narratives about trust in particular affects the way we engage with the world and what we choose to attend to. She also raises the point – echoed swiftly by John – that gender, nationality and culture play into those narratives and consequently, how this informs different ways of attending (Cooperative Inquiry).

The research invitation I see in this is to inquire into what kind of spaces, practices and ideas we need to develop in the preparation for management, which seems to me to be the place for these investigations. Gender and culture differences have not been in focus in this study, but this is not to say that it is not of crucial importance. I think the points made by Stella and John warrants further dedicated study.

Lastly, I am personally convinced that the issue of the ethics of attention practice is one of the most pressing matters for future research and that this goes well beyond the context of the workplace. Among all the other possible questions yielded by this study that would merit our attention, were I to embark on another research journey now, it would be the question of how we develop an ethical attitude of attention that would be my focus. I cannot think of a more urgent and important subject to explore with others in response to the changing story of our world and all the beings that dwell in its beauty.

6. Epilogue

I walked out into the dusk and over to the churchyard. The sky was unspeakably beautiful. A newish moon surrounded by stars was emerging as the sun went down. I walked, as I often do, away from the light and into the darkness behind the church. I do that so that I can return, facing the sinking sun or its aftermath, walk through the archway that separates the two wings of this unusual church and welcome the view of the town below. As I walked among the trees in the graveyard in the dark, I noticed that I was not afraid. I was considering the journey I am on. This is one of coming to terms also with contentment, joy, happiness, wellbeing, health, confidence and safety.

This is a new narrative, I thought.

As I turned around on the path to start walking back, I passed a couple of people with a dog. They couldn't see me, as I was wearing black and wrapped in the darkness. One of them said a nervous hello when I was suddenly there walking past them. As I came closer to the archway, another two people and a dog came up the path further down the hill and one of them pointed a flashlight directly at me. I am sorry, she said, I didn't mean to illuminate you. That's ok, I said, I am not trying to hide. I walked through the archway and embraced the view of the town below with an orange-turquoise horizon behind it, the waning light of the sun and the strong reflection on the moon and the stars.

It is a new narrative: I am. (Illumination: 4 December 2016)

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Appendix A

Associated Research Activities 2014-2019

Conference keynotes/papers

- Bülow, C. v. (2015). "The Practice of Attention in the Workplace". Forum for Advanced Studies and Research in Education and Epistemology,
- Bülow, C. v. (2015). "Soil-Searching – a Symphonious Ethnography". Facilitation of research workshop: *Soil Culture Create* (the Create Centre, Bristol)
<http://www.ccanw.co.uk/create/soilsaturdays/fallow-field.htm>
- Bülow, C. v. (2015). "Understanding and Communicating Leadership in Uncertain and Complex Times" <http://englishlanguageglos.net> *Education for Leadership* Workshop for Undergraduate Students at University of Gloucestershire
- Bülow, C. v. (2015). "Qualitative Research Methods" a workshop for Postgraduate students at Alanus University at the Emerson College Campus, East Sussex
- Bülow, C. v. (2016) "The Practice of Attention in the Workplace". Forum for Advanced Studies and Research in Education and Epistemology, 2nd of September 2016, hosted by Alanus University for Arts and Social Sciences and Crossfields Institute.
- Bülow, C. v. (2017) Keynote: "Leadership in Uncertain Times" and two-day workshop facilitation at conference in Bochum (Germany) "*Initiative Menschlichkeit – ein Fest der Begegnung*", workshop co-facilitated with Professor Marcelo da Veiga on "*Being Human Today – an exploration of Liquid Modernity and Negative Capability*"
- Bülow, C. v. (2017). "The Leadership Narrative and Working with the Attention". University of Gloucestershire BA in Linguistics (Dr Arran Stibbe) Communication for Leadership www.glos.ac.uk/courses/descriptors/pages/hm6201-communication-for-leadership.aspx
- Bülow, C. v. (2017) Keynote: "Leadership in the Balance – the art and craft of a practice between knowing and unknowing". *Leadership, Ethics and Working with Unknowing*. Crossfields Institute with University of the West of England, University, Alanus University <https://www.crossfieldsinstitute.com/event/leadership-ethics-and-working-with-unknowing/>
- Bülow, C. v. & Simpson, P. (2017) "Envisioning a future by paying attention to the past: rediscovering the work-of-leisure". *International Studying Leadership Conference*, 10-12 December, Richmond, Virginia, USA
- Bülow, C. v. & Simpson, P. (2018) "Negative Capability and Conflicting Narratives in Leadership Practice". *The Poetics of Leadership International Conference* - Crossfields Institute, UK and IFLAS, University of Cumbria, 7-8 September, Lake District, UK.

Conference Organisation

- Gloucestershire University, Alanus University and Crossfields Institute: 17-18 October 2014: Re-imagining the University http://www.crossfieldsinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/5903-ReimaginingUniConfFlierA4_May14.pdf
- The Role of Arts, Humanities and Transdisciplinary Practice in Higher Education. Crossfields Institute with Alanus University, University of Applied Sciences Niederrhein. 29-30 May 2015 <http://www.crossfieldsinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/conferenceflyer-25-02-2015.pdf>.
- Transforming Moments: Dissonance, Liminality and Action as Learning Experiences. Crossfields Institute with Alanus University, University of Kent, www.crossfieldsinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/TransformingMomentsFlyer1.pdf
- Inner and Outer Dimensions of Thinking. Crossfields Institute with Witten-Herdecke University, Alanus University, 20-21 May 2016 http://www.crossfieldsinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Flyer_innerOuterDimension_Mail_final.pdf
- Leadership, Ethics and Working with Unknowing. Crossfields Institute with University of the West of England, University, Alanus University, 10-11 March 2017 <https://www.crossfieldsinstitute.com/event/leadership-ethics-and-working-with-unknowing/>.
- The Poetics of Leadership: Creativity, art and story in enabling meaningful change. Crossfields Institute with University of Cumbria's Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) and Alanus University's Institute of Philosophy and Aesthetics (Germany), 7-8 September 2018

Conference Attendance

- Westminster Higher Education Forum, 23 October 2014: the HEAR reports and the GPA www.westminsterforumprojects.co.uk/forums
- ESRC Seminar 24 October 2014: Ethical Leadership; UWE / Middlesex University collaboration <http://www.ethicalleadership.org.uk>
- Forum for Advanced Studies and Research in Education and Epistemology, 22 January 2015 (a bi-monthly Research Forum hosted by Crossfields Institute and Alanus University for Arts and Social Sciences)
- Professor Keith Grint: On looking for a Map and finding a Mirror: The contradictions and complexities of decision-making. Distinguished Professorial Address, UWE, 03 June 2015
- Ecolinguistics – a workshop with Dr Arran Stibbe, Reader at the University of Gloucestershire, 16th of July 2015 at Crossfields Institute <http://insight.glos.ac.uk/academicschools/dh/undergraduatecourses/EnglishLanguage/englishlanguagestaff/Pages/DrArranStibbe.aspx>

- Forum for Advanced Studies and Research in Education and Epistemology, 3rd of September 2015 (hosted by Alanus University for Arts and Social Sciences and Crossfields Institute)
- Forum for Advanced Studies and Research in Education and Epistemology, 1st of April (hosted by Alanus University for Arts and Social Sciences and Crossfields Institute)
- ESRC Seminar 21 October 2016: The Development of Ethical Leaders
<http://www.ethicalleadership.org.uk/news/11/58/Seminar-8-The-Development-of-Ethical-Leaders/d,SeminarDetail.html>
- Forum for Advanced Studies and Research in Education and Epistemology, 15th of December 2016 (hosted by Alanus University for Arts and Social Sciences and Crossfields Institute)
- EGOS Copenhagen Colloquium 6-8 July 2017
www.egosnet.org/2017_copenhagen/general_theme

Appendix B

Related Publications 2018-2019

Refereed Journal Article

Bülow, C.v. & Simpson, P. (Under Review) 'Managing in Uncertainty: the contribution of Negative Capability', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*.

Book and Book Chapter

Bülow, C.v. & Simpson, P. (forthcoming) *Negative Capability in Leadership Practice: Implications for Purpose, Passion, Work and Leisure*. London: Palgrave.

Bülow, C.v. & Simpson, P. (in press) 'Negative Capability and the Care of the Self', in Tomkins, L. (ed) *Paradoxes of Leadership and Care: Critical and Philosophical Reflection, New Horizons in Leadership Series*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar

