

ATTENTION, COOPERATION, PURPOSE

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COOPERATION, PURPOSE
An Approach to Working
in Groups Using Insights
from Wilfred Bion

*Robert French and
Peter Simpson*

KARNAC

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For
Wendy, David, Clare, Isobel, Simon, and Laura

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert French is a writer and organisational consultant and Visiting Research Fellow at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England. He has co-edited *Rethinking Management Education* (with Chris Grey, Sage, 1996), and *Group Relations, Management, and Organization* (with Russ Vince, Oxford University Press, 1999), and edited the papers of David Armstrong (*Organization in the Mind*, Karnac, 2005).

Peter Simpson is Associate Professor in Organisation Studies at Bristol Business School. He co-edited *Worldly Leadership: Alternative Wisdoms for a Complex World* with Sharon Turnbull, Peter Case, Gareth Edwards, and Doris Schedlitzki. He has also published widely in international journals on leadership, change management, organisational complexity, group dynamics, and workplace spirituality.

PREFACE

Every group, however casual, meets to “do” something.

—Bion, 1961, p. 143

Most people spend a fair amount of their lives working in groups. For some it is a generally enjoyable experience; for others just an ordeal to be tolerated. However, our emotional responses can mask a more important evaluation. If we come away from a group event thinking only about whether it was enjoyable or not then we have probably missed the point. There is a more significant question: did the group achieve what it set out to do? It is easy enough to say the phrase “working in groups” but actually *doing* it can be quite another matter. It can even be hard to know whether a group really *is* “working”. This has been our experience in all types of group, small or large, formal or informal.

At every moment, each one of us can contribute to helping the group work at the “something” it is meeting to do. Too often, however, we do not do so—for reasons that may be conscious or unconscious. For example, the discussion moves away from the agenda and onto other, sometimes trivial, issues: why do I say nothing? Similarly, in one organisation that we know well no meeting ever starts on time. Rather than

challenging this habit everyone has merely adjusted their behaviour and turns up late to every meeting. New members soon learn to arrive late or to tolerate waiting for others to arrive. Why is this pattern of behaviour not addressed?

In many such group settings we can find ourselves compelled to compromise our beliefs and to do things we would rather not do; it is as though we have no choice. We stay silent in the face of decisions or behaviours which, when we think about it, we believe are inappropriate or even wrong. There are many reasons why we do not speak up: fear of conflict, apathy, a tendency to compromise, the desire for an easy life, the pressure to collude or conform, or worry about our own competence, and—underpinning all of these—the anxiety that these states of mind tend to evoke. Equally common is to become blind to what is happening: we are so used to the way the group works that we no longer think about it and just assume that this is the way it has to be. Surely, however, it would be better to assume that the group should actually do what it is meeting to do.

Overview

Our purpose in writing this book is to describe an approach that we have found can indeed help individuals and groups to work more effectively on what they meet to do. We draw upon the insights of the English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1897–1979) to guide our understanding of group dynamics. The approach that we describe relies on the use of attention by group members in order to cooperate in pursuit of their common purpose. It can be summarised in two questions: Are we attending to what the group is meeting to do? If not, have we become distracted from the actual purpose and begun to behave as if we are meeting to do something else?

The idea of attending to the group purpose is so simple that it might seem as though there is little else to say on the matter. However, there are two reasons why this is not the case. First, the deceptively simple notion of “meeting to do something” is in fact complex and problematic as a result of its constituent parts: the complexity of defining the “something” that the group will do, its purpose, and the complexity of “meeting”. This sets up a broad range of dynamics that stem from the interplay of multiple factors, such as emotion, motivation, individual histories, patterns of behaviour, power relations, and politics.

Second, the idea that I can simply attend to what the group is meeting to do is not simple at all because of our remarkable capacity to deceive ourselves. Our relationship with the truth is complex. To pursue the truth and to make sense of what is happening in a group requires both courage and the insight to see beyond self-deception. For example, if it appears to me that a group is doing the wrong thing, who is to say that I have not just misunderstood the situation or missed something that was said earlier? If I speak up I could look a fool which might have implications for being taken seriously in the future, for friendships, or even for my career. However, others may in fact be thinking the same thing but also staying silent and so the group continues in its error and deception.

Chapter One: We start with an explanation of the state of mind we talk of as *attention*. A key moment in our writing came when we recognised that we were working with two forms of attention: “evenly suspended attention” (Freud, 1912e, p. 111) and focused attention. The exceptional quality Bion brought to his endeavours seems to have come from his ability to work with both forms simultaneously. With a contemplative eye he was able to work with evenly suspended attention, constantly open to the truth of the moment; this he combined with a scientific eye, giving focused attention to what was happening and concentrating on specific elements of individual and group behaviour.

Chapter Two: *Distraction* is the state of mind that can take over when attention is lost and the group purpose forgotten. This usually occurs because strong emotions, especially anxiety, throw the group off track.

Chapter Three: To pursue *truth* is to be “on track”. Bion was writing from within a tradition going back at least to Ancient Greece, which firmly gives the search for truth through the contemplative gaze precedence over action or even thinking: “the beginning of it all is contemplation”. (Pieper, 1990, p. 72) Because evenly suspended attention remains open to the truth of the moment it can have a transformative impact that leads to the development of new knowledge, although it may feel more like intuition than certainty.

The remaining chapters describe Bion’s insights into the aspects of working in groups that require the application of *focused attention*.

Chapter Four: The ability to *cooperate* is fundamental to the experience of working in groups. We draw on Bion’s idea of “groupishness” to explore the tensions that arise from the fact that each group member is a unique individual but also a part of the group. This individual–group

tension is not only embodied in our external relationships but is also an ever-present tension in our internal worlds between the desire to belong and the desire to be separate.

Chapter Five: We have already alluded to the pivotal role of *purpose*—the “something” a group meets to do. Effective cooperation requires attention to a complex interplay in each group member’s experience of purpose. The quality of attention given to purpose will influence each member’s ability to maintain a more or less clear sense of their own purpose, and to manage any tensions and conflicts that may exist between that and the common purpose of the group.

Chapter Six: We turn to what is almost certainly the best known aspect of Bion’s theory of group dynamics, namely, the three fundamental *forms of interaction* that he observed in groups: dependency, pairing, and fight–flight.

Chapter Seven: One of Bion’s most significant contributions was to insist on the unconscious dimension of the dynamics of attention and distraction. *Learning the work of attention* is a complex undertaking and we finish the book with two examples where groups were working specifically on this task. The final example is from a so-called “group relations” event, an approach to learning that was directly influenced by Bion’s work.

Insights from Bion

The approach that we describe draws on a range of Bion’s writings but the most relevant is the theory of groups that he introduced in his book *Experiences in Groups* (1961). For those who are familiar with Bion’s work, it is worth noting from the start that we do not share his focus on dysfunctional group behaviours. Whilst we give great importance to dysfunctional states of mind, our main focus is on the way attention can help groups to work effectively on what they are meeting to do.

Bion’s ideas on groups were developed whilst working with colleagues to help soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, with so-called “leaderless groups”, and then as a psychoanalyst at the Tavistock Institute. Although he had faith in the general robustness of groups, his primary interest was in identifying and describing the factors that undermine effective group functioning. Most of what others have written that draws on *Experiences in Groups* has tended to focus in a similar way on dysfunctional behaviour. We are seeking to redress the

balance by giving equal weight to factors that are evident when groups work well.

In focusing on working in groups we have in mind different possible meanings of the word “work”. It can mean labour or effort, as in “hard work”, but it can also mean functioning OK, as when we say, “It may be a bit old and battered but it still works fine.” In work contexts it is all too often assumed that groups function OK through lots of work-as-effort, but it is not as simple as that. Sometimes trying really hard to make a group work can get you nowhere while at other times people can work amazingly well together but seemingly without effort—more like play than work.

The approach we describe here does indeed require a high degree of application—hard work. However, attending to what is important *in the moment*, which is central to the approach, depends on more than just the positive capabilities that express themselves in decisive action. It also requires a state of mind that has been called “negative capability” (Keats in Bion, 1970, p. 125), which depends on the capacity to listen, wait, absorb, reflect, and to remain relaxed yet alert before moving to action (see Chapter One). The fact that a group sometimes works with apparent ease, but at other times puts in huge amounts of effort to no avail, may in part be explained by the presence or absence of a quality of attention rooted in negative capability.

The approach has developed out of our experience of using Bion’s ideas in many different capacities—as group members, managers, leaders, teachers, consultants, and researchers. We hope our approach will help make his ideas accessible to readers with a general interest in understanding how to work in groups, as well as to those who are already familiar with Bion’s ideas. In this regard it is relevant to mention that throughout the book we use stories from our experience to illustrate the ideas and their implications for practice. All of the stories are true even though some combine elements from more than one event. The identities of all individuals and groups have been disguised.

CHAPTER ONE

Attention

Wilfred Bion had a remarkable capacity for attention—that is, for attending to what *is*, rather than to what used to be or might be, to reality rather than to his or others' aspirations for reality. It enabled him to see things that most of us simply do not notice. This capacity for insight seems to have been based on an ability to give a particular kind of attention, by which he sought to understand his emotional experience in the moment while in the presence of the group—free from hope and expectation, and without memory, desire, or even understanding. (Bion, 1970, p. 43)

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. It is a disciplined way of thinking and being in groups that goes beyond what is required when told to “Pay attention!”

Bion borrows from Freud in describing the pursuit of truth as requiring an approach rooted in “evenly suspended attention”. (Freud, 1912e, p. 111) More commonly attention is understood as being “focused”, for

example on problems, issues, or events. Whilst both forms of attention are important to the work of groups, attention that is “evenly suspended” allows for a greater openness to truth. Milner describes discovering this distinction, finding “that there were two kinds of attention, both necessary, a wide unfocused stare, and a narrow focused penetrating kind, and that the wide kind brought remarkable changes in perception and enrichment of feeling”. (Milner, 1987, p. 81) As Williams (2014, p. 35) puts it, “We need to attend, in order to allow what is in front of us to make its impression—not just to scan it for what fits our agenda and interest.” Once the “wide kind” of attention has changed how we perceive the truth of a particular moment then focused attention can allow its implications to be explored.

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.

There are times, however, when strong emotions, such as anxiety or frustration, can cause individuals and whole groups to lose touch with their capacity for either focused or evenly suspended attention. As a result, they can become distracted from their purpose and end up dispersing their energies in ways that are not productive. At such moments, working in groups can involve members in a lot of effort to little effect.

In relation to groups, Bion is best known for theorising this dynamic of distraction. He showed how the complex tensions of group life can cause group members to lose the focus of their attention and to divert their efforts away from their intended purpose onto something else. In the following chapter we will describe in detail this state of mind, which Bion called “basic-assumption mentality” (1961)—an impoverished form of attention that is not directed to the pursuit of truth. A characteristic and perhaps surprising feature of this kind of distracted group mentality, or failed attention, is that group members seldom

notice what has happened. If it is pointed out to them that they have allowed themselves to be sidetracked, some or all may recognise that they were indeed feeling uncomfortable and may, as a result, change direction. However, they are just as likely to be convinced that they are working well and already doing what needs to be done.

We have chosen the following story to illustrate something of the relationship between these two states of mind: attention on the one hand, and distraction or misplaced attention on the other. It involves Robert's first ever consultancy assignment when he facilitated a two-day group workshop for the staff of a small business. It shows how he and the group members lost the focus of their attention and allowed themselves to be distracted from the agreed purpose. It turned out to be an object lesson in just how easily such shifts of attention can happen.

I was consulting to a small co-operative, which was stretched financially. Group members were uncertain about their guiding vision and also experiencing some strain inter-personally. In fact, relationships had deteriorated to such an extent that it had even proven difficult to get everyone together in one room at the same time. However, bringing in an outsider—a “consultant”—was felt by some to be an admission of failure and a betrayal of their co-operative ideal.

It was the first day of the two-day workshop. Right at the start of the morning, before everyone had even arrived, an issue arose in relation to the refreshments. One of the co-op's founding members tasted the coffee and thought it was undrinkable. I felt totally responsible, even though this coffee-loving individual and I had chosen the venue and planned the arrangements in detail. Almost before I knew what had happened I found myself cycling through the town centre searching for a bag of strong, “real” coffee. At 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning I was surprised to find the place almost empty and all the obvious shops still closed.

We will return in a moment to tell the second part of the story but would like to comment first on this turn of events.

This was a moment of real, physical distraction. Robert was literally separated from the group, “pulled” out of the room and into the street. If the pressures or discomfort in a group are strong enough then it is by no means uncommon for group members to shift their focus

away from these emotional difficulties. As in this case, they then disperse their energies instead onto some other issue—sort out something to eat or drink, for instance, just get out of the room or push someone else out, anything to escape the uncomfortable moment. For Robert and the group, this manifested as a seemingly innocuous quest for some decent coffee.

What was unusual and somewhat bizarre in this instance was the fact that this literal dispersal happened before the workshop had even begun. On the one hand, Robert felt he was caring for the group in a way that was entirely appropriate; hospitality and mutual care were clear values for co-op members, as well as for him in his role as consultant. At the same time he was unable to care for the group because he was not actually in the room to work with them. He was so quickly put off his stride that it is hard in retrospect to believe he did not notice what was happening; that he had shifted attention from the actual purpose of the workshop—to help co-op members to cooperate more fully—onto providing sustenance for the group.

This series of events points to a key characteristic of such moments: the group dynamic can be hard to spot because you are *in it*. It operates at a deep level, both conscious and unconscious. Paying attention is not always as easy as it sounds. In this case, it seems that in the run-up to the workshop Robert had already experienced a range of emotional tensions that led to his attention being immediately distracted. The strength of the emotions underlying this experience and the reasons for them became clearer as the day progressed.

During the workshop it became evident that the high anxiety levels that surfaced at the start had their roots in several years of difficult experiences, and may even have been present from the very foundation of the company. In addition, the deep-seated fears of individuals and sub-groups had been boosted by discussions and gossip in the weeks that led up to the event itself. It proved hard to get going before the lunch break and to focus on the task at hand, and the group kept being pulled away from difficult issues and encounters. Jokes and flippant comments were frequent distractions.

However, the tensions gradually eased as the morning progressed especially when certain key individuals saw that their worst fears were not being realised, and that they could talk directly to each other without being blamed or attacked. The emotional issues that had

been festering beneath the surface could be aired and understood. Consequently group members were able to address some important political and practical challenges. In addition, specific action points were developed on the final afternoon and deadlines, roles, responsibilities, and financial implications identified and agreed. As things turned out, the two days went well.

At this time the co-operative was on the brink of collapse but now, twenty-five years on, it is thriving. For us, this experience has proven to be a most powerful piece of learning. It was a very early training in the speed and ease with which attention can shift from one thing to another. In one moment, the focus of attention can be lost and the group's energies dispersed onto something else. However, the situation can also be reversed: if the group's anxieties are well enough contained then awareness of purpose and a sense of task can be re-established. In fact, despite Bion's main focus on distracted states of mind, he retained great confidence in the group's capacity to perform its tasks effectively and in the "vigour and vitality" of group cooperation. (1961, p. 100)

Robert's wild coffee-chase illustrates the way that attention can shift seamlessly and apparently quite naturally from one purpose to another. In this case, the quest for improved cooperation was replaced by the quest for satisfying refreshment. Ironically, one of the problems the group had identified before the event was lateness and now, even before the workshop had begun, Robert's absence made it impossible to start on time. There is little doubt that something was lost as a result but it is also possible that the levels of tension and anxiety in the group at the beginning of the workshop made it necessary for something to be pushed out, as it were. As with a pressure cooker, there may have been a need to let off steam in order to avoid the whole from exploding. For the group even to stay together, they may have needed to put to one side for a moment their fear of the more or less hidden conflicts that might be about to emerge.

This dynamic movement between attention and distraction lies at the heart of Bion's insights: the recognition that when humans come under pressure we tend to respond in one of these two ways. We either stick with it, which requires attention, or we allow ourselves to be distracted from the purpose in order to escape the situation, physically, emotionally, or mentally. Whether we remain attentive or become distracted depends on just what it is that we experience as a threat,

on how we experience anxiety, and on our inner capacities and resources as individuals and as a group.

Although it is individuals who maintain or lose attention, these individual responses are influenced and become amplified by the responses of others. As a result, whole groups can appear to demonstrate attention or to lose it. The way any particular group works or does not work can therefore be attributed to the interplay between its members' capacity for attention and their ability to manage the dynamics of distraction.

Bion insisted that these two "states of mind" or "mentalities" exist alongside each other at all times, but he also observed that at any one moment every group tends to be dominated by one or the other. The emotional state of the group is the trigger for movement between the two. Thus, a group dominated by attention will be working more or less well whereas a group that is distracted will tend to make only limited progress in relation to its task because, without anyone realising it, some new purpose has been assumed in place of the real one. In the story above, the new purpose—the quest for coffee—might be taken as a symbol of the quest for the comfort and security of the known. The group avoided the "something" that they were meeting to do because of a fear of conflict and the emotions evoked by the new and unknown.

Working with attention

Attention, then, means sticking with what is—present now, in the moment—however unsettling that may be. If this mentality can be sustained then new patterns of thought and understanding may emerge. Attention depends on *the capacity to stay with the experience of the unknown as well as the known*. In a sense, this formula encapsulates our approach.

The following story illustrates what it can take and what it can feel like to stay in touch with the reality of one's experience. The challenge is to continue to think in the moment when confronted with considerable pressure to be distracted from the purpose, and to retreat from the discomfort of the situation. We see this demonstrated in the way Stephanie did not allow herself to be distracted by the pressure to conform. Instead, she stuck with a question that encapsulated her lack of certainty and, most importantly, she did not give up on what she did not know.

Stephanie was a part of a team that was working under significant time pressures. Her consultancy company's range of services was a little outdated and the management team had made the commitment to redesign the key development programme they ran for senior executives. The design team included four senior client managers, Rupert, Nigel, Miriam, and Stephanie, and was led by the Director of Programmes, Beatrix. Rupert was also working with Beatrix on the design of an innovative programme for the company's most recent new client, an international media company.

Early in one meeting Rupert suggested that the principles underpinning the design of his new programme could form a good starting point for the redesign of the existing senior executive programme. Stephanie thought this was an interesting idea and made a note of it. Miriam said something but Stephanie lost concentration after about 30 seconds, unable to follow the point. She reflected on Miriam's reputation for talking for too long and rambling without any sense of direction. Rupert eventually interrupted, seeming a little irritated, and leaning back in his chair with both hands behind his head. Stephanie noticed his foot was twitching as he outlined the design principles he had developed with Beatrix for the media company. Nigel, who had managed several of the most highly rated senior executive programmes in recent years, responded by reminding the group of some of the successful features of the existing design. The discussion continued in this vein for twenty minutes with contributions from various group members, some adding to earlier suggestions, others treading new paths.

Then Stephanie asked the question that had been forming in her mind: "Do the principles of the media company programme actually match the needs of the market for the senior executive programme?" There was a brief pause before Miriam began another monologue, this time on the changing nature of the market. Eventually an opportunity arose for Stephanie to interject and say she felt it was the specifics that were important—and she repeated her question. Rupert's foot started twitching again. Beatrix explained once more the principles behind the new programme and emphasised how excited the client was about the design so far, and Nigel commented positively about the aspects of the design that he particularly liked. However, no one answered Stephanie's question about the market—whether a

generic senior executive programme had the same needs as those of the media company.

Stephanie was made acutely aware of her own sense of calmness in contrast with the continuous twitching of Rupert's foot. She asked her question for a third time, on this occasion adding, "This is a genuine question. At the moment I just do not see it and I need someone to explain it to me." Rupert blustered that it was "obvious" and that "we just need to get on with it". Nigel, however, looked at Stephanie thoughtfully and replied, "I think I see what you mean. I'm not sure we really understand well enough the needs of the potential market for the senior executive programme. Perhaps we need to commission some research."

We see in this story how the pressure to simplify a complex situation can lead to taking an answer from elsewhere and applying it to a new problem. The group was behaving as if the two markets were the same, in effect diverting the focus of attention away from the unknown onto a different and better known object. This dynamic involves an escape into explanation and is a common response to an experience of the unknown—a flight into "knowing" by means of a ready-packaged solution. In Rupert's behaviour, by contrast, and perhaps in Beatrix too, we observe a response based on the frustration of thwarted certainty caused by the inability of others in the group to understand what they see as simply being "obvious". This reaction is also an attempt to escape from the discomfort of the moment; it can be understood as an escape into emotion.

Stephanie's approach, on the other hand, was motivated by the desire for truth. Having become aware of her own uncertainty she is able, after a period of listening, to articulate a clear question, which contains a hypothesis about an aspect of the truth: that there is greater uncertainty within the group than is currently being acknowledged. The hypothesis is uncomfortable for the group because it implies the need for delay, for further thought and debate, and inevitably more expense. Other group members find it hard to respond positively to her question because they just want to get on and do something. This reaction represents a third common way to try to avoid the pressure they are feeling: the escape into action. (On "dispersal" into explanations, emotional reactions, and physical action, see Needleman, 1990, p. 167.)

When a group is compelled to admit “we do not know what to do” it can provoke high levels of anxiety. Stephanie countered the anxiety within herself through disciplined attention to her experience in the present moment. As well as being attentive to the content of what was being said, she also monitored her own feelings of irritation and competitiveness and the feelings and behaviours of others: Rupert’s restless foot, Miriam’s rambling, Nigel’s desire to offer support, and Beatrix’s repetition of the benefits of the new programme. Each on its own may have been a reasonable behaviour or intervention but together they formed a pattern that produced a niggle in Stephanie which would not go away. By carefully attending to her inner process she slowly became certain of the importance of her growing sense of uncertainty so that eventually her feelings coalesced into a question.

Stephanie’s capacity for evenly suspended attention enabled her to stick with the awkward reality that none of them knew what to do. In this way she took an important step towards a possible answer by formulating a good question, thus giving the group the option of making this question and its implications the object of their more focused attention.

Nigel appeared to understand what Stephanie was getting at and his suggestion of commissioning research into the needs of the market marked a significant shift in direction for the group’s work. However, Stephanie did not know in that moment whether this was enough to change the dynamic of the whole group and get her colleagues to appreciate her understanding of their purpose. This was certainly what she hoped when she left the meeting; she even allowed herself to believe it would lead to new thinking from the whole group.

We had no more contact for some months so when we met Stephanie again in another context we were interested to hear how things had turned out. It transpired that shortly after that meeting the company had restructured a range of roles and responsibilities; amongst other things Stephanie had been moved out of this particular group. She told us that the programme review had been scaled back and the market research idea dropped altogether. Instead, Beatrix and Rupert were adapting the format of their new client’s programme to match what they thought were the needs of the wider market. In this case, it seems that her intervention as an individual had not been enough to shift the dominant group mentality.

Of course, as we share this illustration we do not know which solution would have been most cost-effective or successful for the purposes of this consultancy group—to follow Rupert’s lead or Stephanie’s. What we do believe, however, is that as the meeting unfolded it was Stephanie’s approach that was most clearly based on attention in the moment.

The two forms of attention

“Attention” and “inattention” are classed in *Roget’s Thesaurus* (Kirkpatrick, 1987) as exercises of the mind that underpin the way we form our ideas. The words and phrases listed under “attention” reflect a significant depth and richness to the idea and indicate that the word can be used in both active and passive senses:

give attention, pay attention, devote/give one’s attention to, think worthy of attention, be attentive; draw/attract/hold/engage/focus the attention, strike one’s attention, arouse notice, interest/excite/invite/claim/demand attention, make one see, bring to one’s notice/attention, call attention to, point out, point to.

The word also has certain overtones that help to bring out the contrast with distraction. It can suggest “standing alongside” as an “attendant” does; that is, cultivating a certain detachment from results or outcomes and putting one’s own ego or needs to one side for a moment in order to meet the needs of another or of the situation: “A well-developed capacity for attention allows us to be present to what is other than ourselves ... without trying to turn that other into ourselves.” (Paulsell, 2005, p. 136) Bion’s approach suggests a further level to this idea: that a certain quality of attention allows us to be present not only to what is other *than* but also other *in* ourselves. It allows us to become aware of aspects of our inner experience in the moment that have their origins in the group or the wider situation. The capacity for attention makes it possible to perceive these connections, making it less likely that we will simply assume that the other is to blame for our feelings.

The image behind the idea of attending also carries a sense of “waiting”—French, *attendre*—rather than just reacting. To wait can create a space in which new thoughts or insights may arise, a pause during which habitual ways of responding may be suspended. This is an

emotional and intellectual stance that is often not easy or comfortable, which may, for example, require me to “bite my tongue”. Although waiting can involve difficulty and sometimes extreme discomfort, faith in its potential also makes it possible to hold open a hopeful space in which something new may emerge. In his book, *The Stature of Waiting*, Vanstone vividly captures these conflicting aspects of the experience: “an agonizing tension between hope and dread, stretched and almost torn apart between two dramatically different anticipations”. (1982, p. 83)

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. Many aspects of the natural world, from the tides to the upright stature of a tree, only function as a result of tension. In animals, the tendons—also derived from *tendere*—help to translate muscle power into movement. Over time, as so often happens with language, this image from the physical world began to take on more abstract or mental and emotional associations. In Latin, the literal sense of stretch came commonly to be used together with the word for mind, *animus*, in the phrase *attendere animus*, that is, to stretch the mind or apply it to something. Eventually, *attendere* on its own came to mean pay attention or listen to, implying an enlargement of one’s inner capacities, a stretching and broadening of the mind, which can then be applied to the object of attention. (Barnhart, 1988)

The words and phrases in *Roget’s Thesaurus* can be read as reflecting the two forms of attention we have described as evenly suspended and focused. The former is more receptive and suggests an initial process of “taking in”, while the latter is more active and implies a secondary process of “working on” whatever has been received. In *Roget*, however, the descriptors of these contrasting modes of attention are merged but they can be distinguished by creating two separate lists.

First, evenly suspended attention—the ability to observe and take in all manner of sense impressions—is reflected in *Roget* in the following terms and phrases:

take notice of, listen, sit up and take notice, take seriously, miss nothing, watch, be all eyes, be all ears, look into, hear, keep in view, not lose sight of, read, notice, mind, care, take trouble/pains, put oneself out for, be mindful, have time for, not forget.

Second, focused attention—the capacity to process what has made its impression on us and been taken in—is reflected in *Roget* in the following:

give one's mind to, think, keep one's eye on the ball, focus one's mind on, concentrate on, review, revise, study closely, reread, digest, keep track of, note, recognise, spot, keep/bear/have in mind, think of, take care of, have an eye on, take into consideration/account, consider, reconsider, weigh, judge, comment upon, remark on, talk about, mention, recall, deign to notice, acknowledge.

There are many contexts in which a central role is given to methods for developing the capacity for attention, although they rarely distinguish between these two movements in the dynamic of attention. For example, the first movement in the development of knowledge is the scientist's capacity "to hold in contemplation the self-regulation at work in nature", (Stephenson, 1995, p. 8) which can in turn form the basis of the second movement, the minute and focused observation of natural phenomena. The Kalahari bushman's intense observation of and identification with his prey precedes the focused activity of the hunt. The trained attention of open meditation found in all spiritual traditions—"mindfulness, bare attention, a capacity to be in the moment" (Emanuel, 2001, p. 1082)—can be the basis of a disciplined religious practice. The state of mind Freud described as evenly suspended attention, "an open mind, free from any presuppositions", (1912e, p. 114) precedes and is the source of the detailed and rigorous formulation of hypotheses concerning the patient's condition.

All too often, however, the distinction between these two forms of attention becomes blurred or lost as a result of the tendency to move too quickly, even immediately, to focused attention. Distraction or "failed attention" can arise when focused attention is not based on the observation of truth. Evenly suspended attention is therefore fundamental for sustaining the pursuit of truth and awareness of the group purpose. Without this, the scientist develops knowledge that works against nature as much as with it; the hunter fails to acknowledge the delicate balance between all living creatures and respect for *all* life is forfeited, not merely the prey's; disciplined religious practices become an iron cage of rules that imprison and restrict rather than giving life

and freedom, and the analyst merely avoids having to do any more thinking in the diagnosis of the patient's condition.

This state of evenly suspended attention—*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*—which has been described as “the analytic attitude”, also translates as “evenly distributed”, “hovering”, “circling”, “free-floating”, or “poised” attention. (Snell, 2013, p. 39) Bion talked of this mental capacity in the analyst as “reverie”, describing it as “paying attention to what is happening here and now” and involving respect for truth, for oneself, and for others. (Bion, 1994, p. 139) However, he was not thinking only of the psychoanalytic attitude; he believed that attention of this kind is also “of value in many tasks besides analysis” even stating that it is “essential to mental efficiency, no matter what the task”. (Ibid., p. 216)

Attention, then, is a mentality that is central to the group remaining purposeful and reality-based. Its presence can help a group to do what it is there to do, to stick to its overall intention or task, even when under pressure, and to deal with internal and external difficulties and differences without being thrown off track. It is “reality-based” because it does not hide from the truth, however uncomfortable, including the truth of what is not known.

Evenly suspended attention is rooted in the desire to seek the truth and expresses itself in a range of mental dispositions that have been variously described as: patience, observing, waiting, listening, reverie, watchfulness, discernment, and the capacity to stay in the moment without memory or desire. These states of mind have one feature in common: they depend on the capacity to contain emotion without being unnerved by it. This capacity is captured in the phrase “negative capability”, which Bion borrowed from the poet John Keats, who described it as a state in which a person is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” (Keats, 1970, p. 43)

Negative capability is only negative in the sense that it implies holding back from making a judgement or taking action, if only for a moment. Cornish suggests that this is achieved by suspending “the active intellect which seeks to categorize and therefore limit what it finds”, thereby making it possible to refrain from forming “a premature understanding and interpretation of what we experience”. (Cornish, 2011, pp. 142–143) Bion argues that underlying a lack of quality of attention in groups

is “the failure to observe and [this] is intensified by the inability to appreciate the significance of observation”. (Bion, 1970, p. 125) Negative capability underpins the capacity to observe in this way. To work effectively in groups therefore requires the capabilities to practice both forms of attention: first, negative capability which underpins the capacity for open, free-floating attention or contemplation; second, the positive capabilities that allow one to sustain focused attention.

It is worth quoting at length from Freud’s description of psychoanalytic technique because he describes so clearly how the capacity to notice is the precondition for the ability to go on thinking afresh:

The technique ... consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same “evenly-suspended attention” (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears. In this way ... we avoid a danger which is inseparable from the exercise of deliberate attention. For as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations. This, however, is precisely what must not be done. In making the selection, if he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows; and if he follows his inclinations he will certainly falsify what he may perceive. It must not be forgotten that the things one hears are for the most part things whose meaning is only recognized later on. (1912e, pp. 111–112)

These words reinforce the idea that there are different levels to our intention and experience. At one level, we can bring a very focused and minute attention to detail, and at another the kind of broad, unfocused attention described by Freud and Bion. Simone Weil described the former as “a kind of muscular effort”, as in the instruction: “Now you must pay attention”. However, she viewed the broad and specifically human faculty of contemplative attention as having a far deeper importance. She described it in terms that are reminiscent of the analytic attitude: “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object”, adding, in an evocative phrase with strong echoes of Bion’s writing, “it means

holding our minds within reach of this thought". (Weil, 1951, p. 58) In perhaps her most extreme formulation we are challenged to consider that, "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer". (1986, p. 212)

Attention therefore implies a depth of awareness and level of engagement beyond just focused concentration. It means accepting the need to work with both conscious and unconscious phenomena and with the tension between the longer-term purpose and the experience of the here-and-now. As a result, its impact can be wider than discovering a solution to immediate problems; it can also be seen in terms of development, learning, movement, openness to change, and moments of refreshment in knowing.

Care and attention

When attention is practised in pursuit of the truth and in both its forms—evenly suspended and focused—it demonstrates a quality of care that is unusual and can lead to surprising outcomes. The everyday phrase "care and attention" captures an important dimension of attention in a group context as it raises questions about motivation: What are we attending to and why? What do we care about or for? Bion's concern was to attend to and care about the truth or reality of this group at this moment with the implication that attending in this way can make a difference.

In a group setting the texture of care can often be seen in the attention given to detail—where the devil is said to be. However, according to tradition, the devil cannot influence humans without our collaboration; his talent is to exploit any gap where a detail has been missed. Because it seeks to ensure that the complex reality of this situation at this moment in time is kept in mind, evenly suspended attention is the precursor to focused and detailed attention. The work is thorough, short-cuts are not taken, and previous experience is not necessarily assumed to be a reliable basis for understanding the needs of the current situation.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a group situation which, given the choice, we would rather not be in. However, there are occasions when it is necessary: institutionally and individually we are committed to a course of action and we need to see it through. Such occasions can arise, for example, in groups that have to manage situations where there is a high likelihood of failure, disappointment, or trauma—parts of the health care system, for example, such as a hospice or an accident and

emergency department, or those parts of the judicial system that deal directly with the trial and sentencing of offenders. At times, of course, all organisations and communities will have to deal with very difficult situations and they will need groups to meet and take responsibility for doing the right thing. A high quality of attention in such circumstances can be extremely helpful in ensuring that a difficult situation is not made worse by the carelessness that can arise from a climate of distraction. Indeed, it is possible to bring a certain beauty to a difficult experience that is handled with genuine care and attention.

The following illustration tells the story of a challenging situation of this kind in an educational context.

Appointed as Independent Chair at a forthcoming PhD viva voce examination, Martin was preparing for what promised to be extremely challenging for all involved. It seemed likely that this would be the first occasion in his experience where the candidate would be given an outright fail—despite having had a year to rework her dissertation after a difficult first viva. Martin did his usual preparations but with an added level of care and attention. He made sure that he understood with absolute clarity his role and responsibilities, and the relevant regulations in relation to a failed second viva (never having had to use them before). The week before the viva he visited the room that had been booked making sure that it was appropriate (seating, noise levels, etc.).

On the day of the viva, he arrived fifteen minutes early and noticed that drinking water had been provided by catering services, organised by the research office. At first sight this did indeed seem like care—glasses and water for all. Then, however, he realised that there were only five glasses for six people. (The director of studies, who sits in as an observer and support to the candidate, is not infrequently overlooked.) He also noticed that there was only one bottle of water. Aware that the examination as a whole might last for several hours (in the event, it was four hours long), he arranged for an extra glass and more water to be delivered.

The event was indeed just as difficult as he had anticipated but also went about as well as the situation allowed. After the viva had finished and the candidate had left the room, the examiners would normally take a maximum of thirty minutes to reach their final decision. In this case they deliberated for an hour and a half. Typically

the Independent Chair's role requires him or her to keep quiet, only answering specific questions or clarifying procedural issues that seem not to be understood. However, after an hour the examiners were going around in circles, seeming to know what they must decide but unable to finally commit. Martin used his knowledge of the regulations to ask pertinent questions. They answered each one clearly and decisively. After several questions Martin informed them that in his judgement there were no other avenues for them to pursue. He suggested that this meant that under the regulations they were judging the thesis to have failed. They agreed. With difficulty they made the decision.

When it is good news, the honour of telling the candidate the result typically falls to the senior External Examiner. Bad news is delivered by the Independent Chair. Martin checked that the examiners understood the process. He prepared himself by rehearsing the particular words that he would use. He was aware that by taking up the authority of his role with care and clarity he could make this easier for all parties. Martin tidied the room and before calling the candidate and the director of studies to return he made sure that there were two seats side by side for them to sit in. In the event, the candidate was gracious in her response to the result. It was clear that she was still hoping against hope that the result might have gone in her favour but she understood why it had not. Martin looked at the examiners—all male, all with tears in their eyes. This was hard for everyone. After the candidate had left, the examiners thanked him with real sincerity.

The anxiety provoked by emotionally difficult situations like this can sometimes provoke attention that is focused but misdirected. Without evenly suspended attention Martin might have missed important aspects of this situation and fixated, perhaps, on his own feelings and the challenging aspects of his role. By attending to the details of the meeting and demonstrating care for the process and for all those involved, Martin was able to establish a containing environment for the difficult emotions evoked by the failure of a student. We see the tension in the situation particularly manifest in the examiners, who clearly did not want to do what their roles required them to do. This tension between their individual desires and the group purpose was eventually overcome by attending to reality—by pursuing truth in the moment.

Care and attention therefore require work from the start, which may imply giving attention to detail long before a group actually meets. Typically, such preparation can include not only clarifying broad, contextual issues, such as the purpose, roles, and tasks but also more down-to-earth matters, such as the physical conditions of the setting. In the example below, a manager described to us her first experience of a group relations workshop as a result of which she came to understand in an entirely new way the importance of giving care and attention to detail and the impact of doing so. (See Chapter Seven for an extended discussion of this approach to experiential learning influenced by Bion.)

The first session of this eight-day group relations workshop began at 2.30 p.m. There were around forty of us and we continued to chat as we filed down the narrow staircase from the coffee room. When we sat down, the workshop director who was sitting with the seven other staff members facing us, the participants, said something like, "At 2.30 I set a time boundary but as there was only one participant here I decided to wait before beginning." Now I guess it was true that we had all left the coffee room at around 2.30, thus making it impossible to arrive on the dot of 2.30, but it cannot have been more than a couple of minutes after. Compared to the rest of my working life we were on time and I felt as if I had been metaphorically slapped on the wrist!

This opening seemed to me to be slightly aggressive and definitely controlling. It just did not seem necessary. This initial impression was reinforced in my mind by the way the staff behaved generally. I found them distant, uncaring, and even manipulative, so that it was hard to trust them. However, on the fifth day there was another event in the room in which we had first met. It started on time as every other event had done up till then except for that opening session. The only difference was that one member of staff had to pop out to fetch a chair because the room was one chair short.

One chair missing. In the normal run of group life, mistakes of this kind are so common that it is unlikely anyone would even have noticed it, let alone read any significance into it. However, this experienced manager described the moment as a total revelation. She suddenly realised that

for five days, with around six different events each day, each of which required a different number of chairs and always laid out in a different configuration in every one of the eight or so rooms that were being used, this was the first time that the staff had not put out exactly the right number of chairs in preparation for a session.

Scales, she said, that had grown over her eyes for more than forty years of life in groups and organisations, instantly fell away. She realised with a shock that, far from being controlled and manipulated as she had thought, this was the first time she had experienced a group of managers who were trying with as much integrity as possible actually to do what they had said they would do. On this occasion they had got it wrong because one chair was missing but their slip-up only served to make her recognise that for the rest of the time they had stuck to what they said—to the letter. If we say we are beginning at 2.30 p.m. then that's what we mean and what we will do; what you, the participants, do is your responsibility. And what applied to the details of timing and chairs applied to everything else. The staff members' attention to detail was not a nit-picking over unimportant details, as she would have thought before, but rather an expression of care for the enterprise as they understood it; that is, care for the kind of learning the whole conference was designed to bring into view. She began to see that this was a complex undertaking and required considerable effort on the part of the staff team. Working effectively with this level of complexity requires a high quality of both evenly suspended and focused attention.

To take one example of this learning, it was the first time that this manager—and many other participants, as it turned out—had had the opportunity to examine the impact of lateness and absence and the hidden motivations that can lie behind them. She realised that the observation of timeliness was not merely a rule to be obeyed but was an opportunity to observe habitual patterns of unthinking behaviour. Until then, she had always described lateness and absence as “just one of those things”. Now she realised that her projections onto the conference staff as being devious and manipulative belonged rather to the rest of her life—including her own behaviour and assumptions as a manager. From feeling taken for granted and controlled, she now felt cared for. However, she also had to re-evaluate what exactly she meant by “care” because it certainly had not felt like care in the everyday sense of the word. She realised that it was the expression of genuine care for the task or purpose of the conference. The staff's attention to

the complexity and detail of the learning process represented care for everyone—but in relation to the overall purpose, not in terms of trying to protect them from pain or discomfort. As the missing chair showed, this did not mean they always “got it right”, but attention was certainly the dominant approach of the staff group.

Her final comment to us was enlightening:

I saw in a kind of flash that they meant what they said. They had made it clear from the start what they were there to do and had done it as best they could—even if on this occasion they had “failed” by counting the chairs wrong. I had come along with a completely different mind-set. I wanted to learn but in reality I somehow expected them to be responsible for what I learned. Now I saw that all they could do was to “offer an opportunity”, as the brochure put it so clearly. It was up to me to take that opportunity.

Those two moments—“trivial” lateness and “just” one chair short on one occasion—completely changed how I viewed my whole role as a manager and team leader.