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Free-Floating Attention

ATTENTION

The Healing Power of Real Human Attention

Attensity is the conceptual frame that helps us understand human attention

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KEY POINTS

- The term empathy was coined alongside the term attensity, but only one entered the therapeutic lexicon.
- Behavioral psychologists in the early twentieth century transformed and narrowed the definition of attention.
- Our modern definition of attention led to the attention economy, creating untold social and individual harm.

One hundred years ago, the word *empathy* entered the English language, coined by largely forgotten Cornell psychologist Edward Titchener, a disciple of Wilhelm Wundt. Over the ensuing decades, use of the word empathy exploded beyond the field of psychology, becoming central to how humans discuss understanding one another.

Most therapists understand empathy to be foundational to therapeutic practice and essential to its success. Research has demonstrated that empathy is a primary contributor to the [strength of positive therapeutic outcomes](#). It's a term so well-researched and operationalized that we rarely even question the origin of this obvious human faculty of fellow-feeling.

tensity” in the course of that work. He wanted a word for the power of attention itself—separate from the mere force of sensory perception. You could measure the strength of a stimulus—its “intensity” (how loud or how bright?). However, measuring the power of actual attention was something else.

To access that special quality of the mind and the senses engaged with the world required, he believed, a focus on the experience of our attention. His term “attensity,” then, can be considered the conceptual frame that enables us to understand human attention as the stuff of our inner lives.

But unlike empathy, attensity disappeared from history and from our field.

Disappeared until now, when a group of attention scholars and activists have proposed to revive it as an answer to some of the most pressing issues of our time. The book **“Attensity: A Manifesto of The Attention Liberation Movement”** will be published this week.

Why Did Attensity Fail to Catch On?

1. The science of attention took a different path

With the rise of modern warfare and advertising, attention research became dominated by a kind of experimental psychology, behaviorism, that embraced a definition of attention that was more applied and quantifiable. The idea was to distill the concept of attention into **a cognitive and perceptual process** that could be measured with screen-based eye-tracking instruments—so that consciousness could be understood, fighter pilots could be trained, and advertising could be more efficient.

2. The attention economy commodified attention

While capitalism never figured out how to extract profit on an industrial scale from empathy (so it was largely left alone by market forces to flourish in the fields of psychology and therapy), capitalism did figure out **how to extract profit**, at an unimaginable industrial scale, from attention.

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At first, attention was valued in the economy because it enabled advertisers to direct us to objects we might buy. However, the digital age introduced the idea that our attention was itself the thing that could be bought and sold. The **six largest corporations** in the world today are not firms that develop cars, pharmaceuticals, clothing, or food. They are all in the business of extracting this particular kind of mechanistic attention and turning it into profit. They are in **the business of human fracking**.

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3. The rise of the wellness industry

The mechanistic lens that turned attention into a commercial commodity led to reductive understandings of attention in psychology, pop-psychology, and counseling. From clinical evaluations of ADHD to the language of wellness culture, we have relied heavily on that **quantifiable, mechanistic definition of attention** (and *inattention* or so-called *distraction*). The bigger social picture of attention through the lens of deficit, improvement, productivity, focus, and other executive functions and dysfunctions is the direct result of this narrow definition.



Attention: Establish a Ritual



Reclaiming of Attention

This narrow definition has fed a larger social context in which people are not “paying” enough attention and so have been told to pay for any number of products, apps, and other nostrums that might ostensibly rehabilitate or optimize *focus, productivity, or cognitive performance*.

4. We are chronically online

The phenomenon of being chronically online has developed its own language to talk about human experience, including attention.

The popular language reflects the computational metaphors of our time: we *lack bandwidth*, we have *too many tabs open*. We have *life hacks* and *sleep hacks*, and we *bio-hack* ourselves for optimal efficiency; we get wired, and then we unplug.

In the midst of these digital metaphors, an organic metaphor has recently become ubiquitous. When we describe being sucked into the endless, mind-numbing anesthesia offered by the algorithm at the expense of other activities, we *rot*.

We bedrot, we parallel rot, we rot on the weekends (*Sunday rot*). While often repurposed as a cheeky rebellion against the other pervasive mechanistic paradigm of the hyperproductive *grindset*, the metaphor is revealing. When our attention is extracted, our whole system decays.

Attensity, Revitalized

We have inherited a world in which our understanding of attention is narrowed in many societal and individual domains without our realizing it. And as such, we risk losing something foundational to our humanity. As the mechanical conception of attention takes over, our organic bodies and minds...rot.

However, revitalizing this concept of attensity can halt the decay. Exhumed and revived by **attention activists** as “the free movement of attention in its fullness, freely

attensity in the therapeutic alliance and in our potential interventions. Because powerful forms of attention are at the heart of the therapeutic encounter. Freudians refer to *free-floating* attention; Rogerians emphasize *person-centered* attention. Many of the best interventions come from Eastern mindfulness practices, which value the witnessing *observer self*.

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Let's stop talking about *attention* as something we lack or that needs to be optimized, but rather as **a human faculty constitutive of experience itself**, bolstering our capacity to be with each other. Practicing therapists understand this at a deep level, because we understand the way human attention gives shape to the therapeutic encounter: attensity, in the end, is a precondition for empathy.

References

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