



# Meta-intentionality: Further Developments and Clinical Relevance

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## Abstract

In this article, I further develop my account of the phenomenon meta-intentionality, which refers to the notion of “wanting the other to want what I want.” It is a sophisticated feature of interpersonal relationships that is based on the subjective bonding of the persons who want to affect the intentions of each other and projection of one’s Self into that of the Other. It is my claim that meta-intentionality is a concept that is highly relevant for the field of psychology, both in theory and in psychotherapeutic practice. Meta-intentionality provides insight into potential sources of conflict within interpersonal relationships, both in private and professional contexts — at the base of meta-intentionality lies our inherent human need to feel connected to others on a deep and sincere level. To deepen the understanding of meta-intentionality, I draw on the history of intentionality as well as theories such as Karl Bühler’s semiotics of language theory as well as Dialogism that can integrate the assumptions of the other in the meta-intentional encounter. Furthermore, to show the utility of meta-intentionality in psychotherapy, I present the notion of semiotic blockers and their role in the transference and countertransference dynamic of psychodynamic therapy.

**Keywords** Meta-intentionality · Intentionality · Semiotic blockers · Mediation · Psychotherapy · Countertransference

## Introduction

The psychological phenomenon of *meta-intentionality* refers to the notion of “wanting the other to want what I want”. It is a sophisticated feature of interpersonal relationships that is based on the subjective bonding of individuals who want to affect the intentions of each other. It is an important phenomenon, as the intentions behind actions are crucial to human sociality — we do not want others to do or feel as we intend if it is not sincere or somehow **aligned** with our own meta-intentions. No one wants to discover that a person they cherish is not their friend because they value you as a person and friend, but rather that the friendship is based on pity or perhaps that your friend is using you for ulterior motives, such as being friends with others in your proximity. Most people will be able to think of a time

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in their life where they have discovered another's true intentions and have been left with feelings such as disappointment, sadness, or betrayal. Furthermore, meta-intentionality shows us an important aspect of the human psyche; the need to feel connected with others, not only on a superficial level, but on a deep and profound level where our intentions are *aligned*. This is most elaborate in the act of getting married. Both partners are getting married because we *both* love each other; we are friends because we *both* cherish and value each other as a people; we are working on this project together because we *both* want to contribute with our ideas, which leave the starting place of “mine” and “yours” and establish the collective unity of “us”. These few examples demonstrate that meta-intentionality is an important concept for psychology as it potentially comes into play in any interpersonal social relation involving others, both in private and public life. Additionally, it is a phenomenon which can easily lead to conflicts in these relationships, possibly hindering the individual in their daily life — they can agitate others by imposing unreasonable meta-intentions unto them, or they can feel that others are imposing unreasonable meta-intentions unto them. Since meta-intentionality is a potentially high-conflict mechanism, it will often be brought up in psychotherapy and thus making it a phenomenon which is not only theoretically relevant but also highly relevant in practice. Thus, the aim of this article is to further develop meta-intentionality as a concept, as it is my claim that it is a concept of great relevance to the field of psychology (Indius, 2022). Yet, even its basis *intentionality* has had a strange history in the theoretical systems of psychology.

## The History of Intentionality

Curiously, even though meta-intentionality is an active aspect of many social situations, it is a phenomenon which lacks investigation within contemporary psychology. Of course, it is also clear that its base concept intentionality has not been a favorite research topic in recent psychology. Yet, the concept of intentionality has been discussed for thousands of years, reaching back to Aristotle, Philo, and Aquinas, who inspired Franz Brentano in the 1870s to initiate the contemporary discussion of intentionality (Brentano, 1874/2014; Moran, 2013). In his work, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano conceptualizes psychology, not as a science of the soul as it was first classified by Aristotle, and which lies inherent in its name “psych-ology” but as a science of mental phenomena. Brentano does not want to discuss whether a soul exists or not, rather he suggests that by classifying psychology as the science of mental phenomena, we avoid metaphysical assumptions and thus the convictions of psychology will have greater certainty.

Mental phenomena are the phenomena of inner perception, such as hearing, feeling, tasting and so on. Brentano distinguishes between inner perception and inner observation, as he claims the second is impossible due to the unity of consciousness. This unity of consciousness does not imply simplicity of consciousness, but rather it states that one mental phenomenon can be composed of several parts, thereby forming one stream of consciousness. Therefore, we can only have a mental phenomenon that is directed towards another of one's own mental phenomena if they are *not* co-occurring. Hence, it is possible to remember ourselves experiencing mental phenomena after they have occurred, but we cannot observe ourselves while we are experiencing them. However, according to Brentano we also experience secondary consciousness, which is directed at the unity of consciousness and therefore also directed at itself — this implies that our knowledge of secondary consciousness is based on experience (Brentano, 1874/2014; Huemer & Landerer, 2010).

Thus, Brentano holds that every mental state is *intentional* in its nature, that is, it is always directed towards something. He explains this in his intentionality thesis:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on (Brentano, 1874/2014, pp. 92–93).

In its most basic form, the intentionality thesis describes an intentional relation projected from an act of thought to its intended object; however, this sets up the intentional relation as unidirectional. Therefore, Brentano developed the model so that it also includes the notion of thought as a reflexive self-intending, which means that while we are thinking about something, we are also aware of our thinking of it (Jacquette, 2004). Thus, Brentano’s intentionality thesis specifically describes the intentionality of one person and the reflexive self-intending that is implied in one person’s intentionality well, yet it lacks the extension of that intentionality to the intentionality of another person.

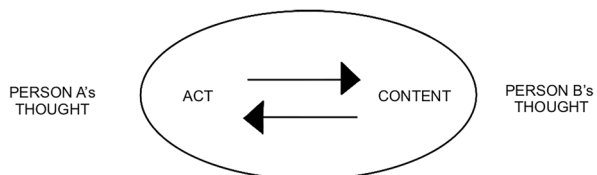
### Introducing Meta-intentionality

I claim that it is possible to build meta-intentionality unto Brentano’s notion of intentionality (Fig. 1):

In this model, the act and content of the person’s thought, as expressed intentionally, is transferred to the other person’s thoughts, and then mirrored back to them in the form of a shared or collective intentionality. To make it clear what is meant by a shared intentionality, I draw on Zahavi and Satne (2015), as they give a relevant account of the varieties of shared intentionality:

Most accounts of collective intentionality assume, though often tacitly, that in thinking of collective intentionality we need to draw a line between individual forms of intentionality, including thinking, feeling, and acting, and collective forms, in which a number of different subjects come together in the performance of such activities. What has been less explored, and often neglected, is the possibility that shared intentionality may come in many forms and, importantly, in forms that in significant ways differ from each other. (Zahavi & Satne, 2015, p. 306).

**Fig. 1** Extension of Brentano’s concept of intentionality



However, an exception to this way of viewing shared intentionality is seen with Michael Tomasello who distinguishes between two different forms of shared intentionality:

1. A type of shared intentionality, which he calls *joint intentionality*, that involves small scale-collaboration and joint attention. This kind of intentionality can be said to be second person joint intentionality, or a we-intentionality. It is an interpersonal engagement between an “I” and a “you”, which has two minimum requirements: (a) the individual is directly participating in the interaction; and (b) the interaction takes place with another specific individual in a dyadic relationship.
2. A type of shared intentionality, which he calls *collective intentionality*, which refers to larger-scale collaboration or competition, which also go beyond the here and now and involve the construction of a common cultural ground and in/out-group distinctions.

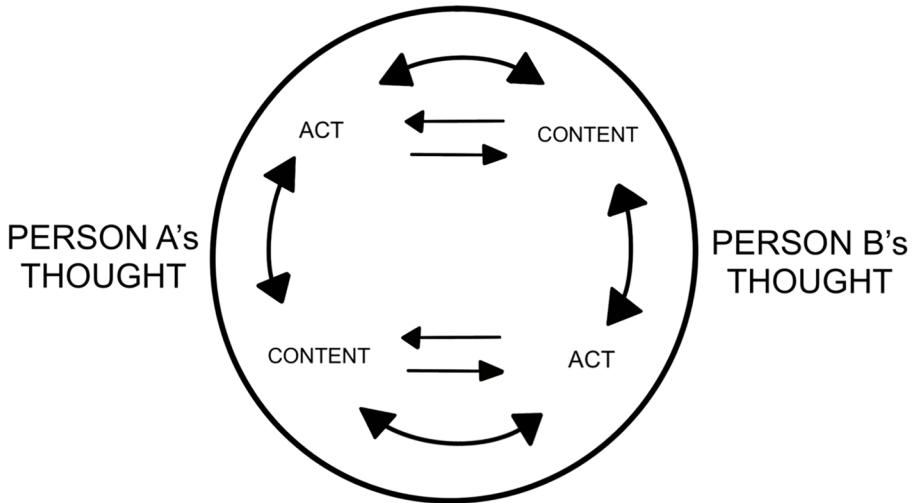
It is especially this first type of shared intentionality, the joint intentionality, which is of interest for this present paper, as meta-intentionality mostly takes place in interpersonal interactions. According to Tomasello, joint intentionality requires both sharedness and individuality, just as joint attention is not a blending of perspectives, but rather an awareness that different perspectives are being brought to bear the same target, while still meaning that each person has their own interdependent role (Zahavi & Satne, 2015). In that way, it differs from meta-intentionality, as the point of meta-intentionality is exactly a blending of the same perspective; that of the meta-intender.

## Joint Intentions

In addition to the phenomenological conception of intentionality, as well as the different notions of shared intentionality, there is the idea of *joint intention* and *we-intention*. A joint intention is to perform a joint action or to bring about a certain state together; examples of this could be that we clean our house together, or I cash this check by acting jointly with you, the bank teller, and so on. The content of the joint intention in the cleaning action is expressible by saying “We will clean the room”, which also describes *what* it is that we are performing together. The pronoun “we” refers to the possible participants of the action, and thus when “we” clean the house together, each of us *we-intend* to do so. Thus, this joint intention is quite similar to joint intentionality, but it is also different. Joint intentions can be further divided into I-mode joint intention and we-mode joint intentions:

1. In the I-mode, there is only the participants’ possibly interdependent, but not necessarily, private acceptance of a content with private commitments to it.
2. The we-mode joint intention is dependent on an alignment of intentions, as it cannot just consist of a situation where each person has their own intentions that end in a joint action, instead they must have a group reason for the actions and not merely their own private reason.

Thereby, it can be said that meta-intentions are concerned with how the I-mode joint intention can be made into a we-mode joint intention, as it is exactly concerned with the desire for the other person to “want what I want”, as it is the case in the we-mode joint intention, and not just desiring for the other person to do as I say while having their own private intentions or reasons for doing so, as it is the case in the I-mode joint intention (Tuomela, 2007) (Fig. 2).

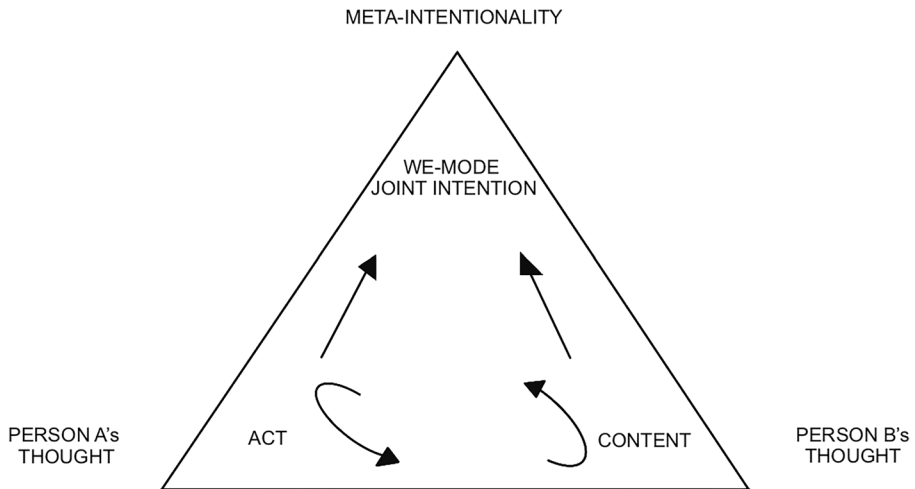


**Fig. 2** Extension of Brentano's Concept of Intentionality showing I-mode and we-mode joint intention. *Note:* This figure illustrates how the I-mode joint intention was already present in Fig. 1 through the bilateral arrows, showing a mirroring of each person's thought to the other. The circular arrows represent the we-mode joint intention, which was not present in Fig. 1, as the we-mode joint intention requires a group reason to be the catalyst of action

### How is Meta-intentionality Different?

Thus, there are many different concepts which come close to meta-intentionality and meta-intentions, but which do not quite hit the mark. The we-mode joint intention is still not the same as a meta-intention, as the meta-intention is more akin to the desire to obtain a we-mode joint intention, and not the action itself. Furthermore, a meta-intention could take the form of many types of "I want you to want what I want" that do not necessarily imply joint intention. For example, a meta-intention could take the form of a wife wishing that her husband brings her flowers without being asked. Thus, the husband and wife do not necessarily have a we-mode joint intention of the wife receiving flowers, but rather the wife has a meta-intention that she wishes for her husband to have a desire to bring her flowers. That being said, a "successful" meta-intention will end up being a we-mode joint intention, thus making the term relevant to understanding meta-intentionality as a concept. Thus, it is now necessary to take the previous model that built on Brentano's intentionality thesis and add to it this new notion of joint intention (Fig. 3).

On the inside of the triangle, we see the manifested and observable parts of the meta-intentional exchange. On the outside of the triangle, we see the internal psychological manifestations of the meta-intentional exchange. The curved arrows between *act* and *content* turn to each other, symbolizing an "as if" of the *act* and *content* of the other's thoughts, which can be exchanged between person A and B. The unilateral arrows point up towards the we-mode joint intentionality that is created as a result of this exchange. However, this model still lacks the assumptions of the other in some part. In meta-intentionality, each person acts as if the other is me. Thus, it is crucial to understand not only the meta-intender in the meta-intentional exchange, as there is also a need to understand the receiver of the meta-intention. What happens if person B does not mirror back the intentions of person A? The aim of this article is to examine exactly this and thereby further explore and shed light unto meta-intentionality as a psychological phenomenon.



**Fig. 3** Synthesis model of meta-intentionality in relation to Brentano's intentionality thesis and we-mode joint intention

## Meta-intentionality and Bühler's Organon Model

When person A wishes to influence the intentions of person B, this is done through their communication, either directly or indirectly. Language can be said to be an organum for one person's ability to communicate with another about things that include three fundamental parts: the person who is communicating something, the other person that it is being communicated to, and the thing that is being communicated. If these three points were arranged in a triangle, and a fourth point could be imagined in the middle, this fourth point symbolizes the organum, which must stand in relation to its' three foundations. Bühler elaborates this simple model with his organon model, which includes the concepts of representation, expression, and appeal. In the centre of these three concepts lies the concrete sound phenomenon of language. Furthermore, the three variable scenarios have the ability to raise the sound phenomenon to the rank of a sign. The language sign includes a multitude of semantic relations and acts as a *symbol* as it is coordinated to objects and states of affairs, and it is an *index* because of its dependence on the sender and a *signal* due to its appeal to the hearer, whose inner and outer behavior it directs.

Thus, Bühler's model goes a step further than Brentano's concept of intentionality, as Bühler includes the assumptions of the receiver, constructing a multi-directional model rather than uni- or bi-directional (Innis, 1982). Bühler's model takes into account the assumptions of the receiver by including concepts that relate to how the receiver experiences communication, whereas Brentano's intentionality thesis is only interested in how the content or object of the intentionality is contained in the act. For example, according to Brentano, in love *something* is loved, but he does not consider the assumptions of that object which is being loved. If the beloved object is a subject, that is, a person — then Brentano's intentionality thesis is not enough to describe the whole picture. However, with the help from Bühler's model, it becomes possible to take into consideration *how* the beloved person experiences being loved; how do they receive the expression of the sender? What appeal does the message of love have to them? This is the contribution of Bühler to the concept of meta-intentionality.

The multi-directional approach allows for flexibility in the connection between person A and B, or sender and receiver in relation to the object and states of affairs, which would be whatever meta-intentionality the sender has towards the receiver. For example, if a wife wants her husband to buy her flowers, she may not communicate this directly through her words — the concrete sound phenomenon — but instead through her expression. She could say something to her husband like “My friend’s husband buys her roses every Friday”, instead of being direct and saying, “I wish that you would buy me more flowers” or “Don’t you like to buy flowers?”. The wife’s expression could be apparent through the tone of her concrete sound language, if she also wants flowers, she may sound upset or jealous in her expression. This expression could then have the appeal to her husband that she is upset and wants flowers, although she does not directly communicate it. However, it is not certain that it will have this appeal to the husband. Perhaps the wife’s words do not express frustration, but rather sound neutral or even happy for her friend. This expression could then give her husband the impression that the appeal of the message is not frustration or dissatisfaction, but rather that she is happy for her friend and wishes to share this happiness, or that she is just making random conversation. In this way, Bühler’s organon model adds an additional layer of understanding to meta-intentionality that Brentano’s intentionality thesis lacks.

## The Dialogical Nature of Meta-intentionality

Bühler’s model also shows us how meta-intentionality is *dialogical* in its nature, human beings are interdependent with each other’s experiences, actions, thoughts, and utterances. We create meaning by interacting with others and the world (Linell, 2009). It is not only the sender, or communicator, who determines the meaning of an utterance, e.g., the wife from the above example may try to communicate her meta-intentionality, but it is also up to the receiver to interpret it. The receiver, or listener, has co-authorship and epistemic co-responsibility when it comes to the meaning that is created in everyday dialogue between equal conversation partners. To illustrate this point, Ragnar Rommetveit uses the example of Mrs. Smith and how one can relate to hearing her say — with a clear conscience — that when her husband Mr. Smith cuts the grass, he *is* working, and then another person hears her say five minutes later when he is still cutting grass that he is *not* working. When Mrs. Smith’s friend states that her husband (Mr. Smith) is lazy, Mrs. Smith replies to her friend that Mr. Smith is in fact working (mowing the law), thereby countering her friend’s claim that he is lazy. Hence, in this context, Mrs. Smith verbalizes the aspect of his activity that her friend has asked about when she focuses on Mr. Smith being lazy. However, when Mr. Jones calls to ask whether Mr. Smith is free to go on a fishing trip, she replies that he is *not* working. She can do this because she accepts her conversation partners as being co-responsible for the interpretive premises in the different meanings and contexts regarding the utterance fragment of “work”. Therefore, when wondering how Mr. Smith can be both working and not working at the same time, the answer lies in the co-constructive and contextual nature of the meaning of *work* that is being created dialogically. Compared to being lazy and doing nothing, as Mrs. Smith’s friend is implying, Mr. Smith is working — but in terms of being able to participate in a leisurely activity such as fishing, Mr. Smith is not working (Rommetveit, 1992, 2020). In the same sense, the wife who wants her husband to buy flowers is not in complete control of how her utterance is received by the husband; the husband has co-authorship in the dialogue, as how he interprets the wife’s wish for flowers is co-constituting for the *meaning* of their conversation.

## Doubt and Semiotic Blockers

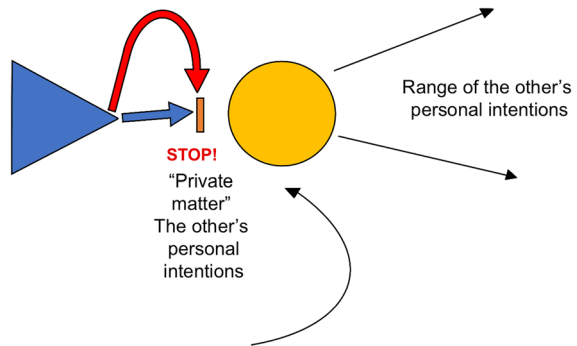
Bühler's model takes into consideration the assumptions of the receiver; however, it lacks the notion of doubt in relation to meta-intentionality. This doubt can be both explicit and implicit in its nature. Implicit doubt can be seen when the sender is doubtful about whether the receiver is ready to receive the message and therefore does not send it to them. The receiver can also be doubtful about whether the implicit message is really what it seems. For example, the message "Do you like to buy flowers?" might not really be asking if the person likes to buy flowers, but rather it means that the sender wishes that the receiver liked buying flowers which results in a misinterpretation of the illocutionary functions of the message. A more straightforward example of the different kinds of interpretations is when someone asks "Can you pass the salt?", they are not asking whether you are able to pass the salt, but rather stating that they want you to pass them the salt — thus "can you do x" really means "will you do x for me?", both in the example with the flowers and the salt. However, this message could be taken at face value, where the receiver truly thinks that the sender is inquiring about their physical ability to pass the salt and reacting by stating "yes, I can" without any action or even reacting negatively thinking that their ability is being doubted. Thus, it is a complex task to interpret the messages of others and there is a high risk of confusion, which can be caused by a muddling of the levels of illocutionary functions. Furthermore, if the receiver asks for the message, the sender can doubt that the request is sincere. An example of this could be a daughter and her estranged mother that are trying to rebuild their relationship after years of not talking to each other. The daughter asks her mother if she thinks sleep training could be a helpful thing to try with her own baby, who is keeping her up at night. This question could trigger implicit doubt for the mother, considering the daughter was unhappy with her as a mother but is now asking her for advice on how to be one. The mother may doubt if the daughter is sincere, and therefore not "send" a message to the daughter, e.g. "I don't have an opinion on sleep training" rather than saying what she really thinks "I do not think it will be helpful to sleep train your baby". Thus, it is very difficult for the receiver to perceive when implicit doubt is taking place, which means that implicit doubt can be highly unconstructive to social relationships; if the receiver does not know that implicit doubt is in action, they risk confirming the biases of the sender's doubts and thus strengthening it. Explicit doubt on the other hand is communicated by the sender, making it directly perceivable for the receiver. If the mother made her doubt explicit and communicated it, rather than keeping it implicit, she might say something like: "Do you really want to hear my opinion? I don't think you care". Explicit doubt makes it more likely that the receiver can circumvent or somehow negotiate the senders doubt; however, it is not certain that the doubt will be circumvented even if it is made explicit, as it is still possible for the receiver to block the doubt through semiotic blockers.

## Semiotic Blockers

In my previous work, Indius (2022), I found that semiotic blockers and regulators can inhibit meta-intentionality, and thus when doubt is communicated in relation to meta-intentionality, it is often done so through a semiotic blocker. For example, the notion of "whatever you say comes from a distrusted perspective" can be said to be a semiotic blocker (Fig. 4). An example of a distrusted perspective could be a perspective that stems from a political ideology, such as Marxism or Conservatism, depending on whatever political opinions the receiver holds themselves. In theory, anything can be a semiotic blocker; however, semiotic blockers are very



**Fig. 4** Model of “private matter” acting as a semiotic blocker of meta-intentionality



much dependent on social norms as well as subjective experience. On the societal level, semiotic blockers are often related to whatever that culture deems private or non-acceptable to try and influence through meta-intentionality. Hence, some societies may find it acceptable for anyone to try and influence another person’s political opinions and who they vote for, whereas other societies deem it too private and therefore unacceptable to hold meta-intentions for other people’s political standpoints. Thus, when a person attempts to block another’s meta-intention through a semiotic blocker, they may make use of social norms through the claim that it is a private matter. For this to be effective, they must draw on norms that are widely accepted within the cultural sphere they belong to.

Another type of semiotic blocker which draws on subjective experience is the idea that whoever holds the meta-intention also holds a distrusted perspective, this could be an ideology or religion which the receiver of the meta-intention does not agree with, or it could simply be that the receiver believes that the sender wants to hurt them in some way and is therefore not trustworthy which blocks the reception of the message.

## Semiotic Blockers in Psychotherapy

Semiotic blockers can be utilized in any situation where one person holds a meta-intention for another, but psychotherapy seems to be an apt example to further explore the utility of semiotic blockers. In our modern world, we take part in many different social and material settings, which Zittoun (2012) defines as *spheres of experiences*. Human beings’ experience is embedded in time and in social and cultural environments. Any person is born into a historical context, and their life takes place in the context of the family they’re born into, the town they live in and the country that town is located in — thus, each person is nested into a social, material and symbolic environment. As the person grows, they will explore that sphere of experience and its boundaries, as well as other spheres of experience. Furthermore, each sphere of experience in which the person is embedded in is structured and organized according to rules which allocate rights and mutual positions to people, which in turn pre-defines specific actions. Therefore, the sphere of experience is often called the social frame of a situation; this social frame is supported and often reinforced by the material arrangements (Zittoun, 2012). In the same way, “going to the therapist” is just one of many things that a person does in their daily life and for a limited period of time. Therefore, being in therapy belongs to only one sphere of experience of the clients’ daily life. The therapeutic setting, and thereby, the therapeutic sphere of experience has some defining characteristics that sets it

apart from other spheres of experience. It usually takes place in an institutional context which legitimizes types of interaction that aim at psychological change. The material setting is also set up to foster change; therapy takes place in a private, silent room and the chairs are often arranged in a manner which is meant to foster psychological change in accordance with the theoretical framework of the therapist. When a new client enters, it is necessary to create an interactive frame wherein the client and therapist collaboratively define the reason for going to therapy, the goal of the therapy and how to achieve it. Therefore, many therapists work on bringing about a good enough therapeutic alliance wherein both therapist and client are oriented towards a shared goal (Zittoun, 2011).

Since psychotherapy takes place in an institutional context, where the therapist and client agree to work together to foster psychological change in the client, it can be said that the client agrees to have the therapist influence them through meta-intentions, such as different forms of psychotherapeutic intervention, trusting that the therapist has educational and practical qualifications which can help the client in one way or the other. This trust is also why it is so crucial to have ethical guidelines for psychotherapy, as well as awareness of the power imbalance that exists in the therapeutic sphere, which can leave the client vulnerable to exploitation. The therapist's meta-intentions may not always be in the client's best interest, and unfortunately some psychotherapists behave unethically towards their clients, taking advantage of them in the form of psychological, covert, and overt abuse. As mentioned earlier, the therapeutic alliance is a crucial aspect of psychotherapy, but it can also be taken advantage of. Therapists who take advantage of their clients often establish a therapeutic alliance where they encourage trust and emotional dependence from the client (Hetherington, 2000). However, in the majority of psychotherapeutic encounters, abuse does not take place and the therapeutic alliance creates a healthy and conducive trust between the client and therapist. Despite this trust, as well as the agreement on working towards a shared goal, clients sometimes block the therapist's meta-intention; there can be many reasons for this, but one example could be that a client is not ready for an intervention yet as it demands too much change which threatens their current psychological regulation. To further explain this notion, I am going to draw on a concrete case example where a therapy client is blocking the therapist's interventions and thus their meta-intentions in the following section.

## Meta-intentionality and Countertransference

Transference is an important term in the psychodynamic approach to therapy, which describes conscious and unconscious repetitions of early important relationships that occur in psychotherapy. Transference in psychodynamic therapy is central for the therapist, since if they go unnoticed, they can become a hindrance to the therapy. Countertransference on the other hand is the therapist's reactions to the client, which originally were seen as an obstacle to therapy; however, they are now considered a useful resource in therapy — the therapist's reactions to the client provides useful information about the patient and about the therapy process. Transference and countertransference are both co-created phenomena, as they are products of the interactions of the two subjectivities of the client and therapist, which are central to psychodynamic therapy (Usher, 2013).

Solano and Quagelli (2020) present the case study of Miss K. to show what can take place in the transference relationship during destructive enactments in therapy. Miss K has been in therapy with the same therapist for 4 years, and the paper presents three therapy sessions from one week during this fourth year of therapy. To illustrate the notion of the semiotic blocker I am going to draw on the 'Monday session'; during this session Miss K

wants the therapist to agree with her that her growing awareness of herself and the work together in therapy was useless. She arrived at the session upset that her ex-boyfriend was getting married; the therapist attempts to empathize with her and mirror her feelings by pointing out the negative thoughts she was having:

After a pause, I told her that there was a very violent behavior pattern at work relentlessly echoing in her mind and leaving her feeling more and more miserable and resentful. Miss K. answered in a low, serious voice, “I’m not envious of him! I just think that our work won’t help me get married. I can be the most self-aware person in the world, but that won’t help me. That is the truth. Our work is useless, and I feel sicker and sicker all the time! I’ve had five different boyfriends, but they all left me. We haven’t accomplished anything here!” I felt angry and frustrated. It was getting more and more difficult to keep quiet and continue listening. “Tell me—what kind of improvement do you see? Tell me! Tell me!” she shouted and then withdrew into a hostile silence. After a few minutes, I found myself attempting to list her improvements in my mind, but as soon as they emerged I discarded them as if “they weren’t good enough” to be put forward. I felt helpless, and the thought of having nothing to give her became more and more insistent. I felt I was engaged in a paralyzing struggle where only her opinion or mine could survive and be violently imposed onto the other’s mind. (Solano & Quagelli, 2020, p. 271).

In this excerpt, Miss K. pours out her explicit doubt regarding the therapist and the therapist’s work with her, and thereby the therapist’s meta-intentions. Miss K. is blaming the therapist for making her sicker, and in so doing implying that the therapist is hurting her rather than helping her, as they should be doing. Thus, Miss K. is using the notion of the therapist hurting her and making her sick as a semiotic blocker and thereby wants to avoid working on improvement through therapy. Furthermore, it is seen in the excerpt how Miss K’s explicit doubt and use of the semiotic blocker is a powerful interactional tool which has a great effect on the therapist — the therapist begins to doubt their own meta-intentionality, doubting if they are good enough and feel overcome with feelings of helplessness.

The therapist also comments on the feeling of being in a paralyzing struggle with Miss K., wherein only one of their opinions can survive. This brings forth an important consideration of meta-intentionality that may be helpful in explaining why the situation feels so intense to the therapist; since meta-intentionality is about wanting the other to want what I want, and not just them doing what I want them to do, only one opinion can survive, as the therapist notes.

It does not have to be strictly either Miss K’s or the therapist’s original agenda which survives, but the point is that they *do* have to obtain a mutual opinion — this could then be either one of their original opinions, or a new shared understanding. The importance lies in the fact that meta-intentionality goes a step further than many social interactions, for example, a boss might not care if their employee wants to do the paperwork or not, they only care that the work gets done and that is enough for the business to operate.

However, it is a basic premise for psychotherapy that the therapist needs the client to be there on their own will and that they need to wish to improve for their own sake and not others; thus, the therapist and the client need to share their intentions. It is not helpful in psychotherapy if the therapist imposes interventions (meta-intentions) unto the client by imposing on them with statements such as “you must want to get better in therapy”, which the client in turn can silently or openly reject by either thinking or communicating to the therapist that “you do not want me to get better”. In this way, psychotherapy is a special setting in which meta-intentionality is of great importance to the outcome. Exactly for this reason, meta-intentionality is often at play when countertransference occurs in therapy; the ‘battle’ of the therapist’s and client’s meta-intentions

leaves the therapist vulnerable since, in principle, the therapeutic status quo is being challenged. The client may be transferring their own feelings and relational patterns from early childhood unto the therapist as a means to resist the therapist's meta-intentions, e.g., "you are making me feel worse" or "you are just like my mother" (semiotic blocker in the form of distrusted perspective) resulting in countertransference where the therapist reacts to the client's transference, as is the case of Miss K. and her therapist. When Miss K. utilizes the semiotic blocker in her therapy session, it triggers a countertransference reaction in the therapist which makes her doubt whether she has anything to offer Miss K. in therapy. This is an example of a case where countertransference provides insight into the therapy process — the therapist's feeling of being in a battle with Miss K. is a cue to the negotiation of meta-intentions which is taking place; the therapist's meta-intention of helping Miss K. through her feelings, and Miss K.'s struggle to protect her present psychological regulation as she is perhaps not ready for or does not wish to challenge it. Of course, the therapist's countertransference feelings are not always related to semiotic blockers or transference from the client. In that sense, this case study also has its limitations, as we are given the therapist's account of what is happening and thus the source material is skewed towards their point of view. Nevertheless, the case of Miss K. provides useful insight into how meta-intentionality and semiotic blockers can present themselves in clinical encounters.

## Conclusion

Meta-intentionality is an important concept for psychology, as it offers valuable insights for theoretical psychology as well as psychologists who are practitioners that engage with therapy clients. It has been shown how historical notions of intentionality, especially Brentano's intentionality thesis, is a base concept for meta-intentionality. Furthermore, Tomasello's two concepts of shared intentionality, collective intentionality and joint intentionality, and their relation to the conceptualization of meta-intentionality were discussed. This discussion led to an exploration of Tuomela's notion of joint intentions which can take place in the I-mode and we-mode; in this line of view, the we-mode joint intention is what comes closest to meta-intentionality. However, meta-intentionality is still different than the we-mode joint intentionality, as it is more akin to the desire of obtaining a we-mode joint intention and not the action itself, which is what makes meta-intentionality a *meta* concept. However, the intention or intentionality aspect of meta-intentionality is not enough to thoroughly explain the concept in action, as these explanations lack the assumptions of the social other. This is where Bühler's organum model comes into play, as it takes into account the assumptions of the receiver by including concepts that relate to how the receiver experiences the communication of meta-intentionality. By taking into account the assumptions of the other person, Bühler's model also shows us how meta-intentionality is dialogical in its nature. It is not only the sender or meta-intender who determines the meaning of an utterance, the listener or receiver of a message has co-authorship and epistemic co-responsibility to the meaning that is being created in the dialogue. The dialogism of meta-intentionality leads to the discussion of semiotic blockers as a mechanism which the receiver of a meta-intention can use to block another's meta-intentions, where implicit and explicit doubt can be especially powerful semiotic blockers. To show the semiotic blocker in action, I draw on the case study of Miss K., which illustrates how it can come into play when transference and countertransference mechanisms are active in the therapeutic encounter. The case study shows how meta-intentionality is a valuable concept for psychotherapy and how awareness of it can be a productive and informative resource in therapy.

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## Declarations

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