Intentionality: reaching out and making sense of my world

We are all beings-in-the-world in the sense that we all share an intentionally derived conscious experience of the world and ourselves, through which we make the distinctions such as those relating to notions of ‘I’ and ‘not I’.

(Spinelli, 1989: 26)

In phenomenology an act of intentionality is the process of reaching out to my world and the stimuli in my world in order to translate it into meaningful experience. Although we are all interconnected we each have our individual ways of perceiving and making sense of our world coloured and shaped by our past. In that sense we inhabit the same world and different worlds.

Intentionality was originally described as a mental phenomenon. According to the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1931) an act of intentionality has two foci, what is experienced and how it is experienced – the mode of experiencing. The former is made up of the content of my experience and the latter how my history and points of reference influence my process of experiencing. For example, I look out of the window and in the street I focus on a parked dark blue car. Meaning is added to my experience of this unremarkable vehicle as I recall my wife’s previous car of a similar colour that was very difficult to keep clean. I’m in touch with my dislike for dark blue cars as the owner of the one I am looking at carefully polishes his. The owner and myself are both reaching out to an object in the world but we are each making different sense of this object. In phenomenology the concept of intentionality implies that in any action there is a definite point of reference, a sharp figure. In my example this could be the dark blue car, and then shift to the apparent difference in attitudes between the owner and myself.

Merleau-Ponty did not see intentionality as solely a mental process but considered sensations and feelings to be ‘the intentional
sense that we all share experience of the world as the distinctions such as ‘not I’.
(Spinelli, 1989: 26)

nality is the process of lying in my world in order to Although we are all internal ways of perceiving and shaped by our past. In different worlds, ed as a mental phenomena Edmund Husserl (1931) it is experienced and how. The former is made the latter how my history of experiencing. For in the street I focus on to my experience of this’s previous car of a similar clean. I’m in touch with one of the one I am looking myself are both reaching each making different the concept of intention a definite point of referring could be the dark blue car, in attitudes between the ality as solely a mental ings to be ‘the intentional tissue which the effort to know will take apart’ (1962: 53). He viewed an act of intentionality as emergent, the person reaches out to their world and a hazy figure begins to form. This is indicative of a movement from id functioning. Perception is an active act and contained within my reaching out to make sense of my world is interpretation without which my world would simply be a confusing mass of ground phenomena, even then I would be interpreting this as confusion. We decide what is figural as we perceive and construct our experiential world as we reach out to it and our world gives itself to us – the glass of water invites drinking, the sunset invites gazing and the tearful client invites comforting or irritation.

By intentionality Husserl meant that all our thinking, feeling and acting are always about things in the world. All conscious awareness is intentional awareness; all consciousness is consciousness-of-something.

Given the nature of an act of intentionality with its two foci of the “what” of experience and the “how” of experience it is no coincidence that in gestalt when seeking description of the client’s immediate experience we do not concern ourselves with a “why” orientation, but concentrate on a “what” and “how” perspective.

(Levitsky and Perls, 1970).