

# EVIDENCE AND EXAMPLES CRITICAL OF A PHENOMENOLOGICAL FOCUS

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## Evidence for the existence of the unconscious

Chun and colleagues (2011) asked American undergraduates to decide which of two cups of the same Shoppers Cola, labelled as either ‘Coke’ or ‘Pepsi’, was tastiest. Before doing the taste test, however, half of the undergraduates were given information about how helpful Americans had been at Ground Zero in New York, while the other half were asked to write about Americans being responsible for distributing anthrax. The researchers hypothesised that the former group, induced to feel pride in their American identity, would show a greater liking for ‘Coke’ (which is seen as a more American drink), while the latter would prefer ‘Pepsi’. This is indeed what they found. More importantly, though, when asked why they had made their choices, the participants did not demonstrate any awareness of the effects of the experimental manipulation. Instead, they gave explanations such as ‘The Coke seemed just slightly sweeter’ or ‘You can taste more sugar, more bubbles, more flavour’ (Chun et al., 2011, p. 7). Hence, to help clients understand the causes of their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, it may be that we sometimes need to go beyond phenomenological experiencing.

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## An example of how primary experiencing can be wrong

Imagine, for instance, the following scenario:

John is a nine year old who has problems with concentration. He has a short attention span, gets easily distracted, and finds it difficult to sit still. John has difficulties with impulse control, and has a reduced sense of danger. He often gets into trouble.

Now, which of the following are most likely?

1. John is from a white middle class background.
2. John is from a white middle class background and has been diagnosed with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

If you consider this question for any length of time, it becomes obvious that the answer must be #1; as #2 is a subset of #1. However, when people are asked such questions, they often opt for the more specified answer, in this instance #2 (Kahneman, 2011). This kind of cognitive error has been hypothesised to occur because people, in their ‘intuitive’ responses, tend to be over-influenced by salient cues. We read, for instance, a description of ADHD-like symptoms, and immediately opt for an answer that matches this, without thinking more rationally about the question. While from this cognitive perspective, then, it would still be considered important to help clients know how they ‘intuitively’ experience the world, an exploration of this primary experiencing, per se, would be considered insufficient for

therapeutic change to occur. Rather, from this perspective, clients need to be taught how to stand back from this experiencing, and to test and challenge their assumptions.

## References

- Chun, W. Y., Kruglanski, A. W., Sleeth-Keppler, D., & Friedman, R. S. (2011). Multifinality in implicit choice. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 101*(5), 1124.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. London: Penguin.