

The Powers and Perils of Intuition

Instinct has the power to hush reason. But when is it safe to go with your gut? Researchers may remain uncertain about the reliability of intuition, but it is a difficult force to deny.

By David G. Myers, published on November 1, 2002 - last reviewed on August 21, 2013

After a career spent pondering the connections between subjective and objective truth, feeling and fact, and intuition and reality, I'm predisposed to welcoming unbidden hunches. I once took an instant liking to a fellow teenager, to whom I've now been married nearly 40 years. Upon meeting job applicants, before I can explain my feelings, my gut sometimes reacts within seconds. As a sign in Albert Einstein's office is rumored to have read, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

But from science and everyday life, I know that my intuition—an effortless, immediate, unreasoned sense of truth—sometimes errs. My gut tells me that Reno is east of Los Angeles and that Atlanta is east of Detroit, but I am wrong. "The first principle," said Einstein's fellow physicist, Richard Feynman, "is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool."

There is also the quandary of mining untapped intuitive powers. When hiring, firing and investing, should we plug into our "right brain" premonitions? Or, with bright people so often believing demonstrably dumb things, do we instead need more "left brain" rationality?

Here, I present psychology's assessment of intuition's powers and perils. Consider the importance of intuition to a judge or juror determining the fates of individuals, an investor affecting fortunes or a clinician determining a client's suicidality. Intuitions shape our anxieties, impressions and relationships. They influence the president's judgments, a gambler's bets and a personnel director's hiring decisions. Our gut level intuitions have helped us all avert—and sometimes enabled—misfortunes. "Nobody can dictate my behavior," said Diana, Princess of Wales, in her

last interview before her fatal accident. "I work through instinct, and instinct is my best counselor."

The Powers

Prince Charles once said, "Buried deep within each and every one of us, there is an instinctive, heartfelt awareness that provides—if we allow it to—the most reliable guide as to whether or not our actions are really in the long-term interests of our planet and all the life it supports." We need, he continued, to listen "more to the common sense emanating from our hearts." In this postmodernist New Age, Prince Charles has plenty of company. Writers, counselors and speakers galore offer to develop our sixth sense, harness our inner wisdom and unlock our subconscious mind. Books guide us toward intuitive healing, learning, spirituality, investing and managing.

Deciding what to make of this new cottage industry is tricky. "Intuitives"—intuition authors and trainers—seem largely oblivious to new scientific explorations of how the human mind processes information. Are their intuitions about intuition valid? Consciousness is sometimes invaded by uninvited truth, there to behold if we desist from rational thinking and instead listen to the small voices within. Or are intuitives' writings to cognitive science what professional wrestling is to athletics?

Today, cognitive science is revealing a fascinating unconscious mind that Freud never told us about: Thinking occurs not onstage but offstage, out of sight. Studies of automatic processing, subliminal priming, implicit memory, heuristics, right-brain processing, instant emotions, nonverbal communication and creativity unveil our intuitive capacities. Thinking, memory and attitude operate on two levels: the conscious/deliberate and the unconscious/automatic. "Dual processing," researchers call it. We know more than we know we know.

This idea—that much of our everyday thinking, feeling and acting operates outside conscious awareness—is a difficult one to accept, report psychologists John Bargh, Ph.D., of New York

University (NYU), and Tanya Chartrand, Ph.D., of Ohio State University. Our consciousness is biased to think that its own intentions and deliberate choices rule our lives. But consciousness overrates its own control.

Take something as simple as speaking. Strings of words effortlessly spill out of your mouth with near-perfect syntax. It's as if there were servants upstairs, busily hammering together sentences that get piped down and fluidly shoved out of your mouth.

Even as I type this paragraph, my fingers gallop across the keyboard under instructions from...somewhere. And if a person enters my office while I'm typing, the cognitive servants running my fingers will finish the sentence while I start up a conversation. We have, it seems, two minds: one for momentary awareness, the other for everything else.

Reading "Thin Slices"

Do you ever find yourself sizing someone up in an instant, noting their animation, gestures and manners of speaking? These "thin slices" of someone's behavior can reveal much and form lasting impressions. Harvard psychology professors Nalini Ambady, Ph.D., and Robert Rosenthal, Ph.D., discovered as much after videotaping fellow instructors. Observers viewed three thin slices of each professor's behavior—10-second clips from the beginning, middle and end of a class—and then rated the professors' confidence, energy and warmth. They found that these ratings predicted with amazing accuracy the average student rating taken at semester's end. Thinner slices—three two-second clips—also yielded ratings similarly congruent with student evaluations.

Even microthin slices tell us something. When Bargh flashes an image for just two-tenths of a second, his NYU students respond to it instantly. "We're finding that everything is evaluated as good or bad within a quarter of a second," he says. So before engaging in rational thought, we may find ourselves either loathing or loving a piece of art or our new neighbor.

There is ancient biological wisdom to this express link between perception and response. When meeting a stranger in the forest, one had to instantly decide: friend or foe? Those who could read a person quickly and accurately were more likely to survive and leave descendants, which helps explain why humans today can distinguish at a glance between facial expressions of anger, sadness, fear or pleasure.

Indeed, thanks to emotional pathways that run from the eye to the brain's emotional control centers—bypassing the cortex—we often react emotionally before we've even had time to interpret consciously. Below the radar of awareness we can process threatening information in milliseconds. Then, after the cortex has had time to interpret the threat, the thinking brain asserts itself. In the forest, we physically jump at the sound of rustling leaves, leaving the cortex to decide later whether the sound came from a predator or the wind.

Clearly, human intelligence is more than logic, and comprehension is more than consciousness. Psychologist George Miller illustrated this truth using a conversation between two ship passengers: "'There sure is a lot of water in the ocean,' said one. 'Yes,' answered his friend, 'and we've only seen the top of it.'"

Women's and Men's Intuitions

When Jackie Larsen left her Grand Marais, Minnesota, church group one morning in April, 2001, she encountered Christopher Bono, a clean-cut, well-mannered youth whose car had broken down. Larsen suggested he use the telephone at her shop to call for assistance, but when Bono later appeared, she felt a pain in her stomach. Sensing that something was wrong, she insisted they talk outside. "I can tell by your manners that you have a nice mother," Larsen said. Bono's eyes fixed on her. "I don't know where my mother is," he replied.

Larsen casually ended the conversation, directed Bono back to the church, then called the police and suggested they trace his license plate. Bono's car was registered to Lucia Bono, his mother,

in Illinois. When police discovered Lucia dead in her bathtub, Christopher Bono, 16, was charged with first-degree murder.

Was it a coincidence that Jackie Larsen doubted Bono's calm exterior, or was it women's intuition, which so many believe is superior to men's? When surveyed, women are far more likely to describe themselves as empathic than are men. The gender gap in empathy also extends to behavior, though to a lesser degree. For instance, women are more likely to cry at another's distress. And the gap helps explain why both genders report that their friendships with women are more intimate, enjoyable and nurturing than are their friendships with men. When seeking understanding, both men and women usually turn to women.

One explanation for this is women's seemingly superior skill at reading others' emotions. In an analysis of 125 studies on sensitivity, Judith Hall, Ph.D., a Northeastern University psychology professor, discerned that women generally surpass men at decoding emotional messages. When shown a silent, two-second film clip of a woman who seems upset, women guessed more accurately that she was discussing her divorce rather than criticizing someone. Women's nonverbal sensitivity also gives them the edge in spotting lies. Research suggests they surpass men in discerning whether a male-female couple is genuinely romantic or a posed, phony couple.

This gender gap can be easily overstated—some men are more empathic and sensitive than the average woman—but it generally appears real and is celebrated by some feminists as one of "women's ways of knowing." Women more often base knowledge on intuitive and personal grounds. More than half of today's intuition books are authored by females. By comparison, in the "science and the paranormal" section of a 2001 Prometheus Books catalog, only four of 110 authors were female.

Psychologists debate whether the intuition gap is truly intrinsic to gender. Whatever the reason, Western tradition has historically viewed rational thinking as masculine and intuition as feminine, notes feminist historian Evelyn Fox Keller. Women's ways of knowing, argues feminist writer Mary Field Belinky, give greater latitude to subjective knowledge. She contends

that women winnow competing ideas less through hostile scrutiny than by getting inside another's mind, and often by way of friendly conversation. Some personality tests show that nearly six in ten men score as "thinkers" (claiming to make decisions objectively, using logic), while three in four women score as "feelers" (claiming to make decisions subjectively, based on what they feel is right).

The Perils

It's true: Intuition is a big part of human decision making. But the complementary truth is that intuition often errs.

In July 2002, a Russian airliner's computer-guidance system instructed its pilot to ascend as another jet approached in the sky over Switzerland. At the same time, a Swiss air-traffic controller—whose computerized system was down—offered a human judgment: descend. Faced with conflicting advice, the pilot's intuitive response was to trust another human's intuition. Tragically, the two planes collided midair, killing everyone onboard.

The history of science tells story after story of challenges to human intuition. To our ancestors, the sun's daily travels had at least two plausible explanations: Either the sun was circling Earth, or Earth was spinning while the sun stood still. Intuition preferred the first explanation. Galileo's scientific observations demanded the second.

Psychology, too, is replete with compelling examples of how people fool themselves. Even the most intelligent people make predictable and costly intuitive errors; coaches, athletes, investors, interviewers, gamblers and psychics fall prey to well-documented illusory intuitions. It's shocking how vulnerable we are to forming false memories, misjudging reality and mispredicting our own behavior. Our intuition errs.

Studies suggest, for instance, that people mispredict the durability and intensity of their emotions after a romantic breakup, losing an election, winning a game and being insulted. Harvard

psychologist Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D., and his colleagues have studied at length our ability to affectively forecast. They've found that while most people facing a personal catastrophe expect emotional wounds to be enduring, such expectations are often wrong.

Take hungry shoppers, for instance, who buy more impulsively than those who shop after dinner. When hungry, we mispredict how gross fried doughnuts will seem when we're full. When sated, however, we mispredict how yummy that late-night doughnut might be. Various other studies have found that people tend to overestimate how much their well-being would be affected by warmer winters, relocations, football victories, losing weight, and having more free time. Even extreme events—winning the lottery or suffering a paralyzing accident—affect long-term happiness to a lesser degree than most people suppose.

Our intuitive theory seems to be: We want; we get; we are happy. If true, this article would be shorter. In reality, note Gilbert and his colleague Timothy Wilson, Ph.D., of the University of Virginia, we often "miswant." People who dream of a holiday on a deserted tropical island may in fact be disappointed when they see "how much they require daily structure, intellectual stimulation or regular infusions of Pop Tarts." Our intuition tells us that if our desired candidate or team wins we will be delighted for a long while, but studies repeatedly reveal that emotional traces of good tidings evaporate more rapidly than we expect.

It's after negative events that we're particularly prone to misintuiting the durability of our emotions. People being tested for HIV expect to feel misery over bad news and elation over good news for weeks after hearing the results. And yet, just five weeks later, the recipients of bad news are less distraught and the recipients of good news are less elated than they first anticipated.

This occurs because people neglect the speed and power of their "psychological immune system," say Gilbert and Wilson, which includes strategies for rationalizing, discounting, forgiving and limiting trauma. Being largely ignorant of this emotional recovery system, we accommodate illnesses, disabilities, romantic breakups and defeats more readily than

we intuitively expect. "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning," reflected the Psalmist.

Intuition is bigger than we realize. It feeds our expertise, creativity, love and spirituality. It is a wonder. But it's also perilous. Today's cognitive science aims not to destroy intuition but to fortify it, to sharpen our thinking and deepen our wisdom. Scientists who expose intuition's flaws note that it works well in some areas, but needs restraints and checks in others. In realms from sports to business to spirituality, we now understand how perilous intuitions often go before a fall, and how we can therefore think smarter, even while listening to the creative whispers of our unseen mind.

Intuition is essential to optimal social and interpersonal functioning. Individuals have to both produce and enact behavior as well as process and perceive the behavior of others. These complex processes occur smoothly, for the most part, because they are intuitive. They are rapid, nonconscious, and automatic. In this article, I focus on one particular type of social judgment: inference about others from brief glimpses or "thin slices" of behavior. Thin slices of expressive behavior are random samples of the behavioral stream, less than 5 min in length, that provide information regarding people (p.158) Chapter 11 The powers and perils of intuition. Source: *Tall Tales about the Mind and Brain*. In realms from sports to business to risk assessment, people now understand how perilous intuitions often go before a fall, and how they can therefore think smarter, even while listening to the creative whispers of their vast unseen minds. Keywords: intuition, spirituality, right brain, instinct, creativity, automatic behaviours. Oxford Scholarship Online requires a subscription or purchase to access the full text of books within the service. Public users can however freely search the site and view the abstracts and keywords for each book and chapter.