

Maya Boyer

Professor Sumpter

English 1010

7 December 2021

Women's Intuition: How and Why the Stigmatization of Intuitive Thought Puts Women at Risk

Gut feelings and intuitive thoughts are a part of human nature and everyday life. The origin of these gut feelings may not make immediate sense, but they are often informed by a long line of unconscious observation and thought. There are limitations to how far intuition can take one as a basis for decision making, but at the same time ignoring one's gut instinct disregards much of the analysis and thought process that happens below awareness. As researchers Naresh Khatri and H. Alvin Ng write in "The Role of Intuition in Strategic Decision Making," intuition "allows us to synthesize isolated bits of data and experiences into an integrated picture. It is a Holistic perception of reality that transcends rational ways of knowing" (60). The ability to tap into intuitive thought is a strength; gut feelings supply information on that which isn't yet completely known or understood and can be a useful tool for navigating social situations and one's personal safety and health.

This paper aims to explore the ways in which the invalidation of intuition affects women specifically, and to take a closer look at intuitive thinking as it connects to gender theory and feminist ideologies. Although the experience of having a gut feeling is quite universal, the general perception of intuitive thought differs for women and men. When it comes to decision making involving instinct or intuition, men are more likely to be rewarded for this implicit knowledge whereas women's decisions and/or theories based on instinct are often met with

doubt or resistance, despite the fact that some studies have found that women tend to have better social cognition and are more likely to pick up on nonverbal cues. Women are often taught to suppress these instincts in favor of other, supposedly more rational, ways of thinking and processing information, or in favor of compliance with social and gender norms. Intuition is a valid and essential aspect of life and human thought, and the dismissal of intuitive thought, specifically and especially with women, by others or by oneself is a dismissal of more holistic observation and thought, and directly compromises women's personal safety and health.

Establishing Intuition as a Credible Thought Process

The concept of intuition is complex and is used and defined in a variety of different ways, but intuition is at its core a valid form of thought mostly backed by unconscious observations that should be recognized and appreciated as a strength of human cognition and the human experience. The definition of Intuition is not fixed or singular. There are different levels and different ways to approach and explain the root cause or meaning of these gut feelings. There are scientific definitions of what is commonly known as a gut feeling and there are more liberal and vague usages of this idea in writing concerning mindfulness and art, but it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact origin and nature of intuition.

Dr. Lois Eismen writes about intuition and takes different interpretations of intuition's nature into account, but focuses mainly on the more scientific side with her explanation of what makes up the intuitive thoughts and feelings in her book *Intuition: A Journey In and Out of Science*. According to Dr. Eisman, intuition is composed of three aspects or stages:

At one level, *the content level*, intuition refers to insights that pop into mind without effort and reorient understanding in important, novel, and sometimes radical ways. At another level, *the processing level*, it refers to a specific way of integrating information

that generally occurs below awareness and supports direct knowing, or knowing without

conscious thinking. At yet another level, *the evaluative level*, it refers to a largely unconscious mode of evaluation that allows us to judge whether our own or others' ideas are true. (Eisman 1, 2)

This whittles the idea of intuition down from some unknown source or enigma and establishes and validates it as a kind of thought process, albeit a scattered and difficult to pinpoint one. It is “several different but interrelated aspects of certain mental activity” that together result in or make up the idea of intuition (Eisman 1).

Intuition is not random delusion; it is a thought, an idea, one that takes a different and less clear cut path to our conscious mind, but a thought that like many others is built upon observation and evidence collection. As written in *The Role of Intuition in Strategic Decision Making* “intuition is not the opposite of rationality” and “It is a sophisticated form of reasoning” (Khatri and Ng 59). It can sometimes seem illogical to listen to a feeling or an urge that doesn't immediately appear to have clear reasoning behind it. But in reality, there is substantial unconscious work that goes into the development of these feelings. One just may not be accustomed to paying much mind to these amorphous instincts until they have been processed, packaged, and spelled out in a clear and succinct line of thought. But in *Intuition in Decision Making - Risk and Opportunity* the argument is made that this different form of intuitive thought is positive and necessary, and they are not just undeveloped ideas: “human cognitive abilities are indeed a good match for the environment in which we live: one where uncertainty characterizes many important, factors and where, therefore, rational computational abilities may not be the most important, knowledge about cause and effect relationships being incomplete by its very

nature” (Adam and Dempsey 5). This is to say that supposedly rational and more ordered lines of analytical thought need not be given priority and that there is merit in this alternate way of understanding one’s environment. Intuition is a valid and credible form of thought that is built upon unconscious observation and analysis that is and should be regarded as an essential part of human cognition.

Women and the Capacity for Intuitive Thought

Intuition is a universal cognitive strength, but beyond this, some research shows that women tend to tap into intuitive thought at an especially high rate in the more specific forms of emotional awareness/intelligence, social cognition, and accurate recognition of or attention to nonverbal cues. A study published in *European Neuropsychopharmacology* found that women involved in their study were generally more accurate than men at recognizing emotions based on eyes using the ‘Reading the Mind in the Eyes’ test. The paper cites others’ arguments that “Women are better nonverbal encoders and decoders (Hall, 1978, 1984), especially of facial expressions (Rosenthal et al., 1979),” and in their study, “Women were faster and more accurate in their expression recognition compared with men” (Hall et al. 629). Another study about the different ways women and men tended to focus and what they paid attention to in conversation published in *Vision Research* journal tracked women and men's points of focus during a viewing of recorded interviews taken in public. Based on data from the study, “women rely more on features relating to the social nature of the scene to direct attention, whereas men rely more on motion features” and there was a “male preference for motion and a female preference for areas that may contain nonverbal information about the speaker” (Shen and Itti 75). Based on these studies researchers observed that women tended to pay more attention to that which was not outwardly or explicitly stated or the more abstract pieces of information, possibly based on body

language, tone, general demeanor, etc.

Some research suggests that these proclivities for deciphering things like nonverbal cues in social situations are adaptations, not necessarily black and white differences between anatomy, and that differences in culture necessitate or have brought about different forms of thought and/or focus. A study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Journal writes that “female brains are designed to facilitate communication between analytical and intuitive processing modes” based on the observations of around one thousand diffusion MRIs of women and men (Ingallhalikar et al. 823). The study finds that “Sex differences in human behavior show adaptive complementarity: Males have better motor and spatial abilities, whereas females have superior memory and social cognition skills” (Ingallhalikar et al. 823). Social cognition being “the way in which people process, remember, and use information in social contexts to explain and predict their own behavior and that of others” (Bulgarelli and Molina 1). This is the ability to read a situation or the awareness of underlying details and/or the more hidden aspects of social interaction. As written in “Complementarity theory: why human social capacities evolved to require cultural complements” adaptive complementarity “explains the psychology of cultural diversity as a product of evolved social proclivities that enable-and require-people to coordinate action in culture-specific ways” (Fiske 76). This is to say that this observed difference in the way men process thought from others has been influenced by the general culture. These are nuanced ideas on the way people have come to exist and experience environments and other people in different ways which goes far beyond supposedly natural differences in the human brain based on sex. This is an important clarification: that intuition is not necessarily ‘naturally’ a female trait, and that the gendering of a universal experience can potentially disguise the role of sexism and misogyny at the core of many arguments against intuition. This tendency towards intuitive

thinking is more likely the product, not the cause of social and gender norms. But this is even more telling about how and why those who identify as women or more with women have adapted or needed to adapt to process their surroundings and environments based on a multitude of social influences and factors, and women's current need for this ability will be discussed further later in this paper. This is all to say as intuition is a largely credible tool, and women developing these skills for social cognition and the interest in reading or ability to read nonverbal cues and facial expressions is a developed strength and not a flaw in cognition. Everyone experiences or taps into varying levels of intuitive thought and have varying degrees of accuracy when it comes to social cognition and emotional intuition but some studies reveal a general trend of specifically women having adapted to tap into these forms of intuition at a high rate.

Limitations of Intuition & The Sexist Implications of Common Critiques on Intuition

There is research showing contemporary women's tendency towards a high level of social cognition and emotional intuition as well as research validating intuition is an integral part of the thought process, but as discussed previously intuition has drawn criticism over its perceived lack of credibility based on the argument that intuition can be less informed, more subject to bias, and in conflict with more analytical and logic-based thought; there is the potential for bias with intuitive thinking, but experts argue that intuition is just as subject to bias or misinformation as more analytical forms of thought. Furthermore this criticism of intuition versus analytic thought can to a certain extent be traced back to its association with more feminine thought. There are limitations to intuition, and it should not always be the sole factor in decision making. Because much of the mental process of an intuitive feeling/thought is unconscious, or not reached through conscious analysis, there is room for personal biases to intrude and muddle the final thought. It can be difficult to separate genuine reasoning and personal bias when the result or outcome of

the unconscious thinking is the only thing one is immediately aware of. The article “Good Intuition or Fear and Uncertainty” published in *Informing Science Journal* notes that “there are a number of cognitive and environmental biases that also affect decisions. These biases, in combination with other contextual factors, can radically affect the way information is gathered and processed within the informing system” (Jamieson and Hyland 50). Bias can distort the way information is processed and received, and can be a misleading influence on decision making, or be conflated with genuine intuition which is why unconscious cognition, as important it is to decision making, should be approached with care, or may sometimes need to be reexamined.

However, the main issue of bias interference that may affect intuition also affects other forms of thought and should not be seen as a fault of intuitive thinking exclusively. Bias does not exclusively exist in subconscious thought: “If intuitive synthesis suffers from biases or errors, so does rational analysis (Seebo, 1993; Harung, 1993). ‘Remember that “quantitative” approaches are based upon perceptions and assumptions that are not necessarily accurate and correct (Seebo, 1993; 27). Thus it is not without error; it can produce extreme error” (Khatri and Alvin 61, 62). Bias is an issue or can be an influence over all forms of thought, yet this flaw in human cognition has been associated mostly with intuitive thought. This narrative strengthens the previously discussed doubt concerning intuitive thinking’s credibility, despite the fact that a “growing body of research suggests that intuition is not necessarily a biased process; it can be uncannily accurate” (Khatri and Alvin 61). Again, this argument is waged specifically against the more female-associated intuitive thought and not the more masculine-associated analytical thought when both are susceptible to the same issues. In fact, this mindset can be especially dangerous as it implies that these more analytic lines of thought are free from bias, or that they need never be examined or questioned. Intuition is not always going to be one hundred percent accurate, but

neither will analytic, or logic-based conscious reasoning.

This tendency to criticize intuition over analytic thought when they are both important parts of human cognition has some roots in sexist stereotypes concerning female emotion and intelligence. Generally, intuition has been associated with the feminine and as Mozely and McPhillips write in “Knowing Otherwise: Restorying Intuitive Knowing as Feminist Resistance,” “Patriarchal discourses in modernity have positioned intuition as a feminine process. This has resulted in a systemic devaluing of intuition through the privileging of its constituted masculine counterpart, objective rationality” (Mozely and McPhillips 1). As discussed previously, intuition can get a bad rap for its perceived lack of accuracy or credibility. This is due to multiple factors, a significant one being its negative historical association with feminine thought. Intuition is often separated from the scientific; “to many scholars, intuitive processes, perhaps, fall into the realm of the irrational or paranormal. As a result, they believe that intuitive processes are beyond the scope of scientific study” (Khatri and Alvin 58). This separation frames intuition as the obstruction of logic by emotion or a result of paranoia. Many critiques of intuition are coded sexist sentiments based on stereotypes of women’s over-emotionality or inability to separate emotion from fact, and this allows for or can be a gateway to the invalidation of female intelligence and/or women’s ability to accurately understand their environments and bodies.

There can be a double standard when it comes to intuition as intuitive thinking is rewarded or encouraged almost exclusively in male-dominated spaces. Those who excel with male-dominated typically masculine fields/activities that rely on or are influenced by intuition are often praised for their natural intelligence or instinct whereas there is often a negative connotation, a sense of irresponsibility, foolishness, or naivete when others, namely women, use intuition in daily life. Gambling can be used as an example here. As written in “Gambling,

Respectable Masculinity, and Male Sporting Culture,” “Gambling celebrated and encouraged a ‘bachelor’ form of masculinity and the qualities of courage, audacity, and risk taking” and “various forms of essentially competitive games capitalized on notions of ‘macho risk taking,’ aggressive behavior and courage” (Morton 69, 70). Gambling, as Morton explains, has historically been associated with the masculine, and seen as more of a male activity. There is of course strategy to gambling, but there is almost always an added element of instinct or intuition. Maybe a suspicion that someone is bluffing, a feeling that this is one’s lucky hand, or that there’s a lucky number in a game of roulette. Those who have found success and made a profit off of gambling -predominantly men- are admired. It is as if these players simply have a gift, that they can make predictions based on their unmatched intuitive thinking abilities, that they are more perceptive or have a unique understanding of their shifting environment. But even when it comes to higher stakes situations women are less likely to be rewarded for tapping into their intuition or their instincts even acknowledged. Intuition is seen as rational analysis’ weaker counter, and there are valid reasons why intuition should not be the sole basis for decision making, but both forms of thought can suffer from similar issues and they are both generally credible forms of thought; much of the criticism or doubt surrounding intuition can be traced back to sexist sentiments and the next section of this paper will explore how women’s intuition is not rewarded in popular culture and how most specifically women must re-teach themselves to value or trust in their intuition and how others must learn to listen as following and believing instincts in social, public, and medical situations can be a matter of immediate safety.

Women and the Dangers of Discrediting Intuition

Despite some potential pitfalls of intuitive thought, it is still an essential part of human cognition and should be regarded as such especially for women who are often forced or

conditioned to prioritize politeness and passivity over instinct and have their health and safety compromised by others' dismissal of their intuition and ability to read their environment, others, and their own bodies. As previously discussed women may tend to tap into intuitive thought more than men but they are often discouraged from acting upon it. This need for women to lean into their intuition despite those who counter it has been a topic of discussion in the medical field where there are countless stories of women, most specifically women of color, being ignored or dismissed over ideas concerning their own health. A study published in the journal of *Academic Emergency Medicine* found that "Compared to men, women had a similar mean pain score," "but were less likely to receive any analgesia," "less likely to receive opiates," and women had to wait longer than men to receive pain relievers for severe gut pain in the ER" (Chen et al. 415-416). The article "It Is Hard Work Behaving as a Credible Patient: Encounters between Women with Chronic Pain and Their Doctors" is a study of women with chronic pain and their experiences interacting with and explaining their condition to doctors. The authors write that "health care providers, husbands, and friends still did not meet them with comprehension, respect, or acceptance. Some mentioned, when consulting health care providers, being 'tested', 'checked', or 'assessed' for mental rather than somatic factors." And "the informants were not only struggling to appear credible. Their stories illustrated how they struggled for self-esteem or dignity as patients and as women" (Werner and Malterud 1412). Women struggle to be taken seriously and to have their ideas and intuition taken seriously in medicine and the scientific fields as patients. Intuition in this context is perceived as paranoia or a product of a lack of scientific knowledge or understandings of their own body and mind. Many women are forced to fight to have their questions answered or their theories listened to, and as indicated in the study this can cause a struggle 'for self-esteem or dignity as patients and as women.' This treatment can result

in self-doubt or more insecurity in one's instincts, further harming female patients.

As exemplified by occurrences in the medical world, many women are taught to second guess or distrust their instincts, but beyond this women are also often conditioned from a young age to put manners and general passivity above personal desires, comfort levels, and instinct in social situations and interactions with others. The refusal of a hug from a family friend or a friend of a friend no matter the person's desire for this close form of interaction isn't acceptable behavior for a young girl. Many are taught that it would be rude to refuse this no matter the person's comfort level or wants. For women specifically, patriarchal gender roles encourage or rather require that women be more aware of the possibility of upsetting others than of their own safety or even survival instinct. Debra Anne Davis focuses on this in the essay "Betrayed by the Angel: What Happens When Violence Knocks and Politeness Answers?" about her assault where she writes "I'm 25 years old. I'm alone in my apartment. I hear a knock. I open the door and see a face I don't know. The man scares me. I don't know why. My first impulse is to shut the door. But I stop myself. You can't do something like that. It's rude" (Shaw 572). The essay is about this idea that women are conditioned to ignore their own instinct, their own safety or fear, to silence their intuition telling them that danger is imminent, to run, or to shut the door in favor of the 'angel' who keeps them passive and agreeable. The article "On the Nature of Creepiness" similarly states that "It would be considered rude and embarrassing to run away from an odd person who has done nothing overtly threatening, but, on the other hand, it could be perilous to ignore your intuition and remain in an interaction that is dangerous" (McAndrew and Koehnke 11). This need to adhere to social norms over genuine instinct or care for personal safety encourages the suppression of intuition, going against one's own body cues, leading to a distrust of instinct that is counterintuitive for everyone. Women are taught to be hyper aware of others'

perception of them, and intuition's reputation as un-scientific or as a product of unfounded paranoia makes it difficult for women to justify the instinct to protecting themselves over the need for 'manners' to others, no matter the perceived danger of the situation. Women are taught from a young age to distrust their bodies, their ability to read their body's cues, and their social and survival instinct through others' distrust, which constrains and can potentially harm women in daily life.

Conclusion

Patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes surrounding intuition, natural, emotional, and social intelligence serve to suppress and undermine women's intelligence, and in many cases compromise women's safety. Intuition is a key part of human thought and cognition, one that should be given attention and credibility. Not listening to one's own intuition, or brushing aside others' limits natural human capacities for observation and data collection ignores the unconscious knowledge one gathers and is counterintuitive to fully informed decision making. This issue is especially relevant for women who have been encouraged to cultivate distrust in their own bodies and natural intelligence through negative reinforcement based on sexist stereotypes and patriarchal gender norms. People must trust themselves, their bodies, their minds, and learn to respect their and others' instincts rather than base their ideologies on outdated and sexist narratives.

Works Cited

Adam, Frederic, and Eugene Dempsey. "Intuition in Decision Making - Risk and Opportunity." *Journal of Decision Systems*, 2020, pp. 1-19.,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/12460125.2020.1848375>.

Bulgarelli, Daniela, and Paola Molina. "Social Cognition in Preschoolers: Effects of Early Experience and Individual Differences." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 7, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01762>.

Chen, Esther H., et al. "Gender Disparity in Analgesic Treatment of Emergency Department Patients with Acute Abdominal Pain." *Academic Emergency Medicine*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2008, pp. 414–418., <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1553-2712.2008.00100.x>.

Fiske, Alan Page. "Complementarity Theory: Why Human Social Capacities Evolved to Require Cultural Complements." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2000, pp. 76–94., https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0401_7.

Hall, Jessica K., et al. "Sex Differences in Scanning Faces: Does Attention to the Eyes Explain Female Superiority in Facial Expression Recognition?" *Cognition & Emotion*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2010, pp. 629–637., <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930902906882>.

Ingahalikar, M., et al. "Sex Differences in the Structural Connectome of the Human Brain." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 111, no. 2, 2013, pp. 823–828., <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1316909110>.

- Isenman, Lois. *Understanding Intuition: A Journey in and out of Science*. Academic Press, an Imprint of Elsevier, 2018.
- Khatri, Naresh, and H. Alvin Ng. "The Role of Intuition in Strategic Decision Making." *Human Relations*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2000, pp. 57–86., <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700531004>.
- McAndrew, Francis T., and Sara S. Koehnke. "On the Nature of Creepiness." *New Ideas in Psychology*, vol. 43, 2016, pp. 10–15., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2016.03.003>.
- Morton, Suzanne. "Gambling, Respectable Masculinity, and Male Sporting Culture." *At Odds: Gambling and Canadians, 1919-1969*, University of Toronto Press, 2003, pp. 69–88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287wfr.7>.
- Mozeley, Fee, and Kathleen McPhillips. "Knowing Otherwise: Restorying Intuitive Knowing as Feminist Resistance." *Women's Studies*, vol. 48, no. 8, 2019, pp. 844–861., <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1676746>.
- Shaw, Susan M., et al. "Betrayed by the Angel." *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, McGraw-Hill, Education, New York, NY, 2015, pp. 571–574.
- Shen, John, and Laurent Itti. "Top-down Influences on Visual Attention during Listening Are Modulated by Observer Sex." *Vision Research*, vol. 65, 2012, pp. 62–76.,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.visres.2012.06.001>.

Werner, Anne, and Kirsti Malterud. "It Is Hard Work Behaving as a Credible Patient: Encounters between Women with Chronic Pain and Their Doctors." *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 57, no. 8, 2003, pp. 1409–1419., [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536\(02\)00520-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536(02)00520-8).