

Title: Should You Really Trust Your Gut?

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Trust your gut. How often do you hear that? In a country whose military is spending over \$3.8 million a year on intuition research (Ma-Kellams & Lerner, 2016; Channing, 2012) it is evident that following our gut is the superior mode of thought, right? Perhaps not. The article written by Christine Ma-Kellams and Jennifer Lerner, published on July 21st, 2016, entitled, Trust Your Gut or Think Carefully? Examining Whether an Intuitive, Versus a Systematic, Mode of Thought Produces Greater Empathic Accuracy, discusses otherwise. This body of research puts intuitive reasoning to the test and concludes that a more methodical way of thinking produces the most accurate results when deciphering the emotions of others.

In the article, the researchers asked the question, “Are empathic people more likely to rely on intuition, or a systematic thought process when perceiving others?”. They argued that contrary to popular belief, we may actually be more accurate when it comes to the emotions of others while holding a more systematic mindstate. We all have immediate thoughts when perceiving situations or people. However, people using empathy are more likely to withhold their judgements and contemplate the levels associated with the emotional state of those around them. The research paper included four individual studies, each possessing a confirmation regarding their hypothesis. However, I will be discussing two of the studies.

In the first study, the researchers wanted to establish the common, underlying idea that intuition is the superior mode of thought. They did this by recruiting 314 participants, each getting one of three mock job descriptions and asked them how they would appropriately coach someone interested in that particular job. In one of the descriptions, the job valued empathic accuracy very highly. In the second one, it deemphasized empathic accuracy, and in the third description, empathy was not mentioned. They were then asked to choose between two coaching options. One reading, “Tell employees to think in an intuitive and instinctive way.” The other reading, “Tell employees to think in an analytical and systematic way.” (Ma-Kellams & Lerner, 2016). In the description where empathy was emphasized, the participants were told that their goal was to increase the employees’ ability to accurately infer the feelings of others, while in the second group, the participants were told they wanted to hinder the employees’ empathic ability. In the third, no particular goal was given. The results showed that in the empathic accuracy group, 74 participants chose the intuitive approach and 26 chose the analytical approach. While in the group that deemphasized empathy, 22 chose intuition and 84 chose the systematic approach. In the control group, 46 chose intuition and 62 chose systematic thought. These findings are significant because when empathy is incorporated into a certain context, people are more likely to want to use their intuition. However, when empathy is not included in a situation, people are likely to use their analytical minds. So, participants had the idea that using their intuition produces greater empathic accuracy. However, the researchers wanted to find out if this agreed upon idea was true.

In the second study I will be discussing, the researchers wanted to test the causal relationship between deep thought and correctly reading the emotional states of other people. The study consisted of a group of 74 international and native born participants in executive level positions. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. In the intuitive thinking condition, they were asked about a time in which following their intuitions resulted in a positive outcome. In the systematic thinking group, they were asked to do the same thing except instead of their intuition, they were asked when their careful reasoning led them to the best outcome. So, the participants were purposefully manipulated into either using intuition or a systematic thought approach. They were then asked to write approximately 10 sentences about their experience and given 3 minutes to do so. Their answers were then graded using a numerical value system, testing for integrative complexity, or the ability to hold two opposing viewpoints and the ability to see situations from differing perspectives. Using this system helped to operationalize depth of thought and to make sure that those in the systematic group actually engaged in more reflective thought. The scale measured as follows:

1: Little or no integration - 7: High integration

Then all of the participants were asked to take part in a mock interview. They were randomly assigned to be either interviewer or interviewee and were given three common interview questions. After the interview, they were given a couple of questionnaires, one assessing their own emotions during the interview, and the other assessing their partner's (either interviewer or interviewee's) emotions. This was to gauge how empathically accurate the participants were.

Ma-Kellams and Lerner's instincts were correct. In the question portion of the study, those in the systematic-thought condition exhibited greater integrative complexity than those influenced to think in a more intuitive way. Also, the participants who scored higher on the integrative complexity test were also the ones who most accurately read the emotions of the other person during the mock interview. So, those manipulated into thinking in a systematic way, displayed greater empathy than those in the intuition group. These findings are significant because although following our gut may be helpful in some contexts, like scanning for immediate danger, in others it is more of a hindrance. This study showed that empathy is not something that is immediate, like what most of us believe. We have to deliberately reflect about emotional states of other people, contrary to popular belief. Throughout the entire study, the researchers, "consistently observed that engaging in systematic, as opposed to intuitive, thinking is associated with increased accuracy when reading the feelings of others" (Ma-Kellams & Lerner, 2016).

I found this article to be important because in the first experiment they conducted, it showed that a majority of the participants have a strong pull to view intuition to be a completely sound way of thinking when empathy was incorporated. For most of them, it was preferential. However, the results of the second study showed that trusting our gut is not always the best choice. We have always been led to believe that in order to be a good emotional mind reader, the tendency to do so is instant. We either have the skill or we don't. However, according to the results of this experiment, it is much more nuanced than we think. Spontaneous reading of social cues are important, but it is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to correctly perceiving emotions. We have a lay belief that our first perceptions are always correct, but maybe if we

replaced that belief with reflective thought, we would have a much better understanding of one another.

Ma-Kellams, C., Lerner, J. (2016) Trust Your Gut or Think Carefully? Examining Whether an Intuitive, Versus a Systematic, Mode of Thought Produces Greater Empathic Accuracy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

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