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When It Comes to Empathy, Your Gut May Be Failing You

By Jesse Singal



If you want to understand what someone else is feeling, you don't sit down and think rationally about it. Rather, you *feel* what they're feeling; you infer it from the tone of their voice and the arch of their eyebrows and their body language. That's the folk wisdom, at least. And this sort of logic, well, *feels* right. After all, we are constantly attempting to intuit the thoughts and feelings of those around us — around us, and the process usually feels pretty automatic.

As Christine Ma-Kellams of the University of La Verne and Jennifer Lerner of Harvard write in a study they have [just published](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, this belief has thoroughly penetrated the mainstream. "Indeed," they write, "praise for intuitive processing can be found in a wide range of popular books, some from serious scholars ... others from professionals and practitioners. The presumed advantages of intuition for empathic accuracy is also endorsed in several national security contexts, as evidenced by the U.S. Navy's \$3.85 million dollar program of research on intuitive thinking processes."

But what if this common sense is wrong? What if the way to better understand what someone else is feeling — to enhance your empathic accuracy, to use the term researchers use — is to sit down and think about it in a more rational, logical way? That's what the researchers have found, in three experiments they [just published](#).

There were four experiments, total. The first one used an Amazon Mechanical Turk sample to lend support to the idea that most people do, in fact, believe that intuitive approaches are better — 74 out of 100 participants said that an "intuitive" approach would be better than a "systematic" one for "help[ing] employees to accurately infer the feelings of others."

The other three experiments drew on samples of from executive-education programs at Harvard, and all sought to determine whether systematic or intuitive thinking led them to be better at inferring others' emotional states (if all this talk of of intuitive and systematic thinking is reminding of you of the dual-process idea promulgated by

Danny Kahneman and others — that is, [system 1 and system 2](#) — yeah, we’re basically talking about the same thing).

In the studies, respondents were given a so-called cognitive-reflection test designed to gauge their level of systematic versus intuitive thinking in which “All three items are math problems with intuitively appealing but incorrect answers.” For example, “A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs \$1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?” This question is often used to explain the distinction between “fast” and “slow” thinking. The “fast,” intuitive answer is \$.10 — that answer *feels* right. The actual answer is \$.05. The higher respondents scored on the CRT, the more systematic their thinking, figured the researchers.

And being high in systematic thinking, in turn, predicted empathic accuracy on a variety of tasks in all three studies. “These findings have important implications,” the researchers write:

Lay assumptions about what makes a good emotional mind-reader diverge from the empirical evidence shown in the present findings. Across very different contexts, from mock interviews to controlled environments where only limited facial cues are available, an effortful mode of thought is associated with empathic accuracy. Thus, the many settings in which the value of intuition is extolled (e.g., job interviews) may need to be assessed with a more nuanced perspective, if intuition in fact has limited value in certain aspects of social interaction. On a larger scale, the aforementioned U.S. federal programs designed to demonstrate the value of intuition in national security settings may need to take a moderated approach, in light of the present evidence.

Toward the end of their paper, Ma-Kellams and Lerner ask why, if systematic thinking leads to greater empathic accuracy, so many people think intuitive thinking is the way to go. They come up with an intriguing suggestion: “One possibility is that in much of everyday life, people make inferences about targets for which they have access to a broad array of preexisting information; in such situations, opting for the intuitive and stereotypical default may prove to be a useful strategy.” When you’re in an argument with your partner, in other words, intuitive thinking might work fine — you have so much experience with them, and such an informed sense of who they are, that you might not need the extra *oomph* of systematic thinking.

The problems may arise, Ma-Kellams and Lerner suggest, when we assume that this same technique can work in less familiar situations, when “individuals do not sufficiently and systematically adjust from these intuition-based automatic responses when facing a novel situation or target.” Just because you can intuit what your boyfriend is feeling doesn’t mean you’ll have the same success with that grumpy co-worker, in other words.

As with any study that takes place in a controlled lab setting, the process of applying these findings to the real world are a bit fuzzy. But as with so many other forms of bias and “fast” thinking falling short for us, simply knowing that this is a problem could potentially help, as long as you don’t — for severe lack of better phrasing — forget to know this. Challenge yourself: Do I *really* think I know what this person is feeling? Does my theory about their motivations make sense? In particularly important cases, maybe even sit down and write out your thoughts about the matter. Force yourself into slower thinking, that is. You can’t always feel your way out of a given situation.

Sources: [JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY](#) 

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