



Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious

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An engaging explanation of the science behind Malcolm Gladwell's bestselling *Blink*

Gerd Gigerenzer is one of the researchers of behavioral intuition responsible for the science behind Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller *Blink*. Gladwell showed us how snap decisions often yield better results than careful analysis. Now, Gigerenzer explains why our intuition is such a powerful decision-making tool. Drawing on a decade of research at the Max Plank Institute, Gigerenzer demonstrates that our gut feelings are actually the result of unconscious mental processes—processes that apply rules of thumb that we've derived from our environment and prior experiences. The value of these unconscious rules lies precisely in their difference from rational analysis—they take into account only the most useful bits of information rather than attempting to evaluate all possible factors. By examining various decisions we make—how we choose a spouse, a stock, a medical procedure, or the answer to a million-dollar game show question—Gigerenzer shows how gut feelings not only lead to good practical decisions, but also underlie the moral choices that make our society function.

In the tradition of *Blink* and *Freakonomics*, *Gut Feelings* is an exploration of the myriad influences and factors (nature *and* nurture) that affect how the mind works, grounded in cutting-edge research and conveyed through compelling real-life examples.

Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious Details

Date : Published July 5th 2007 by Viking Books (first published June 28th 2007)

ISBN : 9780670038633

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Format : Hardcover 280 pages

Genre : Psychology, Nonfiction, Science, Biology, Neuroscience, Brain

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Andrea says

After hearing this book described as the "science behind Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*," I thought that it might be inaccessible and filled with jargon. Instead, I found that Gigerenzer directs his entertaining and controversial book to the average reader.

His scientific study of intuition in decision-making is fascinating. Throughout the book he defends simple, unconscious thought processes (what we would call intuition), which are usually ignored in favor of complex formulas. For example, many scientists—and average people—believe that looking at and carefully weighing twenty factors will lead to a better decision than relying on only one or two factors. But as Gigerenzer illustrates, a basic evolutionary rule of thumb, like “one good reason is enough” often leads to better predictions than an involved multiple regression!

Every chapter had something to surprise me. Besides offering an easy-to-read version of his scientific evidence, Gigerenzer also provides some real world applications of his theories. I'd still like to read *Blink* and see how Gladwell draws upon or expands on Gigerenzer's ideas.

Allysha Moulton says

This book definitely opened up my mind to how my mind actually works. This book was kind of like "The Tipping Point" by Malcolm Gladwell, but instead of how you think, it's about how the brain works. I loved this book. It is so interesting and it makes you want to read more and more. I learned some things I had never heard of before, and it cleared up a few things I had questions on, but was never motivated enough to go check out or research. Knowing the trick to playing tic-tac-toe is never fun because you always know how to win, and the other person feels bad about losing ALL THE TIME. Or if it is two people that know the trick, it becomes a tie every single game. "...knowing the optimal strategy is exactly what makes the game boring." This book ruined the game of tic-tac-toe for me! But that's okay. I've learned so much from this book that it doesn't even matter! I've gained more than I have lost you could say. I recommend this book to anyone who likes to learn about things people usually don't think about on their own. It's not that long and gives you more information than you think.

Ninakix says

I just didn't find myself very compelled by this book. Unfortunately, the material covered in this book is covered by a lot of books these days, and the way this book does so is not very compelling. The writing itself was bland, and the book didn't necessarily delve into these things in a way that made you understand it better than many of the much better books covering the material.

YoSafBridg says

In order to make sense of Gerd Gigerenzer's *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* you kind of have to stop making sense (to borrow from the Talking Heads) or at least let go of the idea that everything has to make sense. It is a very interesting book, and if you just let yourself go with it, highly readable.

Gigerenzer's basic principle is that many of our decisions are based on unconscious and instinctual heuristic processes and that these processes are often more efficient than statistical and/or logical decision making processes (until you try combining the two). He makes an interesting observation in the first chapter, that I have found true in my own life~if you take the time to apply Ben Franklin's "Reasons of Motive" (basically making a list of pros and cons~if I ever take the time to do so) at the end of the ordeal you often find you've already made your decision, even if it goes against reason (though you sometimes needed to go through the exercise to find that out.) He also talked about the gut instincts of baseball players who estimate where a fly ball will land while running rather than making a mathematical calculation and then waiting for it at its destination (what he calls the "gaze heuristic"~and which seems a tad obvious for me, but is illustrative for many of the other points he makes.)

He offers evidence for less knowledge often being more help than hindrance for predicting things like stock markets and sports winners as well as behaviours of opponents. Gigerenzer is the director of the Center for Adaptive Behavior and Cognition at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, Germany but he makes this text highly accessible for the layperson (even concepts that may at first seem daunting deserve perseverance, for it takes just a paragraph or two). His extrapolation into the health care field and moral behavior is especially enlightening.

Rafael Parreira says

O autor explica muito bem como o pensamento simples e intuitivo pode ser usado para resolver os mais diversos problemas e situações, inclusive prever quais serão as melhores alternativas. A intuição é tão precisa quanto opiniões de especialistas em economia, medicina e direito. Os argumentos são fundados em estudos científicos que muitas vezes provam o senso comum. Acho que a maior crítica que fazem ao pensamento intuitivo, e que Gigerenzer rebate sempre no livro, é que uma análise profunda e racional deve ser levada em conta, mas a proposta do livro não é acabar com ele, mas identificar situações em que a simplificação pode gerar melhores resultados em menor tempo. Ótimo livro para quem gosta de pensar e ser contestado.

Martha Love says

GUT FEELINGS: THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS. I just enjoyed re-reading Gerd Gigerenzer's book "Gut Feelings". The reason I wanted to re-read it is to compare what Gigerenzer says about social instincts to what Matthew Lieberman has explored and written about in his recently published book "Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect". Lieberman seems to take up where Gigerenzer left off on the subject, fills in and expands further details of neurological studies (including his own) on the subject of human social instincts and our need for social networks driving our evolution and behaviors, as well as being at the core of our human nature. I highly suggest reading these two well written and important books together.

Gigerenzer has made a major contribution in presenting the idea of our social instincts and depicting human nature as caring for each other due to the instinctual social need for belonging and protecting both family and community. It is this more positive view of humankind that Gigerenzer should be applauded for, as it flies in the face of traditional psychological thought by giants such as Freud who viewed humankind as driven by more "selfish" motivations. While it was a brief introduction to the idea, Gigerenzer's last chapter in this book opened a new door for understanding human nature in a more hopeful view.

While this book is not about actual somatic gut feelings or the feelings in the gut area of the body, it does explore in depth the subconscious decisions that inform our choices and for that it is an important read. My own life's work has been in the area of exploring gut feeling through somatic reflection with people and how that informs a healthy decision-making process. However, I did appreciate learning more about the mental functions that Gigerenzer so clearly writes about and I enjoyed reading his many examples and stories the second time as much as the first.

If you are interested in psychology--cognitive, evolutionary, or even more somatic studies--I think you will enjoy reading this book and find that it adds an important insight to your overall understanding of what it means to be human and the process of living and evolving in our fundamental "human condition".

Martha Love,
Author of What's Behind Your Belly Button? A Psychological Perspective of the Intelligence of Human Nature and Gut Instinct and
Increasing Intuitional Intelligence: How the Awareness of Instinctual Gut Feelings Fosters Human Learning, Intuition, and Longevity

Vanessa says

I started to read Gut Feeling when I was half way through Thinking, Fast and Slow. These two books were developed around the same theme: human intuition. While Thinking, Fast and Slow exposes the dark side of intuition, Gut Feeling reveals the bright side: how intuition can facilitate our decision making.

The notion of "rules of thumb" is the leitmotif of the book. It goes like this: we make decisions following unexplainable rules that engraved in our consciousness. These rules are usually extremely simply, yet most of us cannot articulate the formulation or rationale of them. Author of this book argues, when making decisions that involving a myriad of information and highly unpredictable outcome, people who use the simple rules are more likely to get favorable outcome than people who over-analyse. He dubs this simple decision making "fast and frugal".

The traditional analytic method tells us to list all the criteria that matter, score every criterion then add the score up and pick the option with the highest score. But in real life context, we often encounter circumstances when we have to decide without knowing what we should analyze. Take an example from the book to explain: a father is picking a school from two for his son and he wants to pick a school that makes his son less likely to drop out. With the absence of drop-out rate from both schools, what should this father do? Should he tabulate every criterion of schools, even though he has no idea which ones have effects on drop out rate? The author introduces "sequential reasoning" to solve this kind of problem. Instead of endlessly tabulating criteria, he asks us just to focus on the big criterion, in this case, things that have conspicuous relation with drop out rate, like say attendance rate. Compare two schools' attendance rate, if one school has a substantially higher attendance rate, say 15% higher than the other one, stop and pick the higher one. If the discrepancy is not wide enough, you scroll down the list and compare the second most essential criterion until you find the wide enough discrepancy. In addition to being drastically less nerve-

wrecking, this method of decision making has been proven to have a higher successful rate to reach favorable result than that of the traditional method.

Knowing how to make a “snap” judgement facilitate your decision making process, and knowing people make snap judgements all the time make you understand human behaviors and how to “manipulate” social change. The notion that most of the people follow “rules of thumb”, even making crucial decision, is very powerful. This notion can explain why companies will throw huge sum of money on commercials: because consumers follow the rule “buy the brand they recognize. This notion can also explain why German soldiers in Nazi era carried out the order of executing the Jew even though those soldiers were repulsed by the order and had the chance to opt out: because they followed the rule “don’t break rank”. The best illustration of this powerful force comes from organ donation system. In France, roughly 90% of the population is potential organ donors whereas the percentage in the US is 20%. You may wonder it is cultural or religious reason to cause this discrepancy, but in fact, the major culprit is the system. The organ donation system in France and most of the European countries is an opt-out system: every person agrees to be a donor by default and can opt out the system by filling out a form. The system in the US operates vice versa. The majority of people didn’t put much of thoughts on the philosophical and moral codes on the idea of organ donation; they only followed a simple rule “the default option is better”. Yet this tiny design difference between two systems result in whether ten of thousands of people’s lives can be saved. The author argues, to apply this intuitive tendency of people into social and moral context, we can reduce unwanted events by making people less likely to choose decisions of which can lead to those events.

To say “think less” is useful doesn't mean the author is championing ignorance in this book, and he acknowledges that gut feeling doesn’t always work. However, he argues, in the age of rationality, when we rationally analyse everything, we inadvertently restrict our imagination undercut our capability and underestimate what we can achieve. He says, at the end of the book, if we don’t know what we cannot do, we may bring wishful thinking come true.

Alaeddin Hallak says

It was great in the first few chapters. I learned some very interesting ideas (which I will summarize at the end of this review), but then it got too scientific and philosophical and I totally lost interest and goodwill once the author started attributing everything to so-called "evolution" and even started suggesting improvements to "shortcomings" in the creation of the human eye at some point.

Nevertheless, the following are my main takeaways from the book:

Recognition Heuristic: relying on what you know best and what you're familiar with to make a choice. That's why corporations invest in uninformative ads so they can build brand recognition.

Unconscious Intelligence: that's why I can know if a sentence is grammatically incorrect without knowing the rules that apply!

A gut feeling ("a hunch") is a feeling that:

1. Appears fairly quickly to the conscious
2. Have no reasonable underlying justification
3. Is strong enough to act upon

When investing your money in multiple assets like stocks and real estate, the 1/N rule (divide equally) is the most simple and optimal than all other complex methodologies. Page 27

Page 30: Interesting: have you heard of the "zero-choice diner". The menu has only 1 item that they prepare very well and lots of people love it and come there quite often. Better than menus that resemble encyclopedias! People apparently love choice but less choice often leads to more conversion.

Page 33: OMG! That's why when I start thinking about my actions when driving I tend to drive poorer or lose confidence in my driving, whereas if I just drive without thinking I drive as good as always. Turns out that experts at any given task perform worse when they try to employ their conscious when executing the task, but they perform better when distracted, thereby leaving their unconscious to do all the work. Beginners are however the exact opposite. Therefore if you wanna have a chance of defeating someone who is a master in say sport ask him to tell you how he "swings his hand so accurately" or something, forcing him to consciously recall the steps he takes thereby increase his chances for failure!

Page 42: This misguided author attributes human creation to "evolution" and then says the design of the eye could have been better only if!

Page 42: when given insufficient information, our brains make things up based on our assumptions about the world. This explains why people in vet parts of real stories if they don't remember exactly the entire story.

Page 43: "unconscious inferences" weave together data from the senses using prior knowledge about the world.

Page 47. Gut feelings may appear simplistic, but their underlying intelligence lies in selecting the right rule of thumb for the right situation.

Page 105. Framing is a useful tool for saying something in different ways depending on the desired outcome. Like this operation has 90% success rate or there is a 10% chance you will die from this operation. The first is more appealing because it suggests optimism.

Bob says

Basically, the theme of the book is that thinking in patterns of relations in domains of partial knowledge can be more effective than thinking sequentially through logical associations of all that is known. Toward the end of the book this message started feeling repetitive, so I felt that I was learning less as I read more. Condensed, it would make a great piece in Readers Digest.

Tucker says

Chapters of particular interest:

- Chapter 7 on the recognition heuristic. Merely by recognizing the name of a foreign city or a consumer brand, we have some information about it: the city must have a lot of inhabitants; the brand must be fairly reliable. (I wonder how this might be applied to the recognition of moral "rules of thumb" discussed in subsequent chapters.)

- Chapter 10 on moral intuitions. He says we have an unconscious "moral grammar," but our rules can conflict with each other and they can be misapplied. Claiming to describe how people actually think and

behave, rather than how they should behave, Gigerenzer identifies rules of thumb such as sticking by your peers (e.g. not bowing out if your military commander gives you the option to excuse yourself from killing civilians) and sticking with default options (e.g. not volunteering to donate your organs). He says we should not be disillusioned by this knowledge of human behavior and instead use it to our advantage to sway outcomes.

- Chapter 11 on the power of social awareness. He pointed out that sometimes we imitate the majority of our peers and sometimes we imitate only successful individuals. Apparent acts of moral bravery sometimes emerge from our ignorance of unwritten social rules. (The Berlin Wall fell after a false rumor was seeded.) He concludes the book: "The quality of intuition lies in the intelligence of the unconscious: the ability to know without thinking which rule to rely on in which situation."

Just before reading this book, I'd re-read Burton's *On Being Certain* which criticized Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* for praising intuition over scientific deliberation. This primed me to be skeptical of much of the praise of gut feelings in this book. However, Gigerenzer balanced his focus on gut feelings with the admission that some kind of evaluative process is needed to make good decisions.

Lisa says

Lots of interesting research about how our gut instinct is often as good predicting right answers or even better than some educated guesses. However one might read Haidt's work on moral reasoning or Kinneman on decision making to get the same information. This book just isn't as well formed or readable as the ones above. It has patches that are great, but lots that's just hard. Still, lovely to be reassured that just because something isn't double blind study verified doesn't mean it isn't true.

Steven Peterson says

This is an intriguing work on human decision making. The argument is that evolution has given us an adaptive toolkit of decision making tools. Based on experience over eons, shortcuts for making decisions came about. And, according to the author, studies suggest that these can be more effective than statistical analysis. For instance, "Take the Best." In making decisions, you simply accept the first choice that looks like it will work. That's it!

Well written and relatively short. Quite useful indeed.

Dinah says

So, if you want to save yourself the time and expense of taking a Cognitive Science 101 course, this book is a pretty good solution. Gigerenzer offers up some theories on how human decision-making actually works (hint: it's not by drawing up a big list of pro's and con's and doing a weighted analysis), why we evolved to make decisions this way (VOMIT. instant -1 star.), and presents evidence that these innate methods of decision-making are often "better" than advanced statistical models.

The first third of the book was basically a primer in how corporations exploit the recognition heuristic to promote sales and brand loyalty, by plastering their logo on every imaginable surface because humans are

more likely to "like" or "buy" something they recognize over an unknown. Only Gigerenzer didn't explain it like that, he was actually talking about the processes that inform intuitive, morally-neutral decision making... I just can't read a book morally-neutrally.

Listen, this book is fine. I'm sure the science behind it is solid and I think Malcolm Gladwell used it as a jumping-off point more than once. Reading it just made me uneasy because once the more we understand about the way people make gut decisions, the more that understanding will be exploited. Which could be a good thing! Gigerenzer even gives some examples of how it could be a good thing, like how it could increase the percentage of organ donors or help doctors better prioritize the symptoms and care of patients! But I am forever cynical, and read this whole book thinking about how it gets easier every day for those with power to subtly control those without power.

In conclusion, this book made me sad in ways a book of statistically-driven, non-narrative nonfiction should not. But the processes of intuition described in this book are probably things we should know about ourselves, and things we should call out corporations/the government/etc for exploiting.

[Today's review brought to you by the word "exploit" and the number "paranoia.":]

ML says

With reservations, recommended.

Overall, Gut Feelings is a fascinating discussion of human social behavior by a well respected expert. Although Gigerenzer's unifying theme / central idea remains unproven, nevertheless his insights about social behavior, including interesting anecdotes and descriptions of research findings, is worthwhile and useful. It's amusing and ironic to notice that his all-or-nothing heuristic conclusion apparently does not follow the presented evidence and arguments.

Gigerenzer's explanations of social decision heuristics -- what we do versus what we think we are doing -- are compelling and thought-provoking. On the other hand, it seems that his central proposition -- a judgment that partially informed, sub-conscious decision-making is **always** superior to reasoned argument -- does not follow and seems ill advised. Heuristic decision making driven by social / emotional factors may be more common, and in certain cases may even be more accurate; however, Gigerenzer has not provided evidence for his central claim that less information is **always** better. Could that claim have been editorial hyperbole? After all, the text generally exercises more caution than the opening statements and backs off a bit from that initial claim.

It may be a minor point but is noticeable that some of the logical arguments are a little bit flawed. For example, Gigerenzer's discussion of the recognition heuristic claims that familiarity with the name Chernobyl, and not reasoning, permits most people to estimate accurately the relative size of the city: "its nuclear power accident ... has nothing to do with its size." It can be argued, however, that the public can rely upon reasoning: there was wide publicity that Chernobyl was generally evacuated in response to the accident, therefore, the city population must be relatively small. It's difficult to understand why Gigerenzer would claim that the accident and population size are unrelated. Non-experts like me may wonder what other weaknesses may exist, and whether these affect Gigerenzer's claims.

Although with various reservations and questions, I would recommend Gut Feelings for its many novel ideas.

Next on my list: David G. Myers' Intuition: Its Powers and Perils.

Jeff Kelleher says

We seldom have full information, and we seldom have enough time to deliberate. Pure reason, in other words, is impractical in a bustling world. But we must decide, every hour, matters that affect us. So we exercise our gut feelings.

What is intuition, and where do we get it? Its very nature makes it elusive. Gigerenzer's contribution is to try to answer these hard questions.

The archetype is the fielder chasing a fly ball. A logical solution would require an intricate calculation of speed, distance, motion, and trajectory. No time. So the fielder applies an instinctive rule that he has learned from having chased thousands of fly balls: "keep the ball at a constant bearing from yourself". (Mariners, by the way, apply the rule consciously: a moving ship at constant bearing will hit you.) It works.

Such rules of thumb work in millions of other applications, from the mundane ("pick the stocks of companies you recognize") to the potentially deadly (heart attack or heartburn? Five simple one-at-a-time questions will yield a more reliable answer than a 50-variable formula that tries to account for everything).

Intuition is simply the mind filling in blanks. It has learned to do this from a combination of evolution and experience. For example, thousand of years of evolution have fixed in our minds that most light comes from above. Therefore, when we view circles drawn on a flat sheet, top-shaded circles appear as indentations, bottom-shaded circles appear as pop-outs.

Experience has taught us that brands we recognize are better quality than brands we don't. That rule is imperfect. Advertisers have learned to exploit it. But we don't have the time or ability to do scientific research on objective quality, so we indulge the (perhaps unconscious) assumption that such research by others filters down to us in the form of brand recognition. It works better than guessing.

My main criticism of the book is that it exalts intuition and disparages reason too much. The point the reader should take away is that intuition should be relied on in preference to logic only when there is not time enough or information enough to reach a truly reasoned judgment; or when the decision is inherently uncertain, as whom to marry.

Amateur investors with moderate knowledge will beat professional fund managers by exercising their hunches. But Warren Buffet will beat all of them by putting in the labor to be sure he REALLY knows what he is doing. Gigerenzer understands this, and alludes to it in the book, but the point is obscurely made.

For the good of society, reason must always trump intuition in the long run. Most of the lousiest episodes in history are the result of applied intuition, from the impaling of Christians, to the burning of witches, to the bleeding of the diseased. Racial prejudice is an intuitive rule-of-thumb in action. Gigerenzer surely recognizes this, too. He points out that reason works better than intuition in hindsight. But today's hindsight can be tomorrow's foresight, and I wish that point had been more emphasized.
