An introduction to intuition theory and practice: a summary and a research agenda

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Welcome to the third handbook in the intuition series by Edward Elgar Publishing. It took ten years to get to this point – and what a journey it has been. We celebrated a decade of annual intuition symposia at the Academy of Management meeting last year, where new collaborations were struck and innovative approaches to intuition research explored. It confirms that intuition is gradually entering the mainstream, as theorists and practitioners alike call for new ways to conduct business and survive in the twenty-first century. It also shows that the initial research has shifted from our original narrow focus on expert intuition using psychology-based tools to a broader investigation of topics that includes a variety of qualitative methods to offer additional richness and depth. Work in the expert stream continues on a more fine-grained scale but it is complemented by insights from other streams and disciplines, reaching as far as neuroscience, quantum physics or clinical studies. Finally, more empirical work started emerging. This does not mean that all conceptual differences have been reconciled but there is a sufficient consensus to move forward under the original premise of our intuition community to ‘agree to respectfully disagree.’

This overall development has been reflected in the progression of topics covered in the handbooks. While the first volume addressed mostly conceptual issues, the second volume reviewed an array of applicable methods underpinned by conceptual considerations. Now, with the third volume, it is time to explore what is happening at the workplace and how we can capture it for practice. This is in response to the growing concern about the existing gap between theory and practice. While new intuition theories are being developed and (sometimes) tested, very few of them are converted into practical training tools. On the other hand, intuition practitioners find it challenging to explain what works for them and their clients by the existing theory. A question arises whether these parallel views can be somehow reconciled for the benefit of all. The current handbook takes the first step in this direction.

It was quite challenging to organize the included chapters into individual parts. Many of them contain several themes that bind the whole book together, making their categorization somewhat arbitrary. At the same time, this is encouraging. The fact that some contributions could be placed under multiple headings resonates with the conclusion that intuition does not function in isolation but tends to be integrated with other processes, prevalent in a multitude of professional settings. Interestingly, most of these have been discussed at the intuition symposia since the last handbook. One common theme is the interaction of intuition and reasoning, although for the latter some researchers use different terms that do not always fully overlap, such as rationality, deliberation or analysis. Sadly, this phenomenon is still mostly investigated in the context of decision making, which seems to be the dominant research focus of this handbook. Not enough attention has been paid to problem solving so far,

represented only by a few chapters. Another common theme interwoven throughout the handbook is the presence or absence of affect and/or physical sensations that reinforces previous findings about the cognitive and affective components of intuition but goes further than that. It identifies, and in one instance even measures, the impact of specific affective stimuli; it also suggests an explanation of the relationship between (affect-laden) sensing and (cognitively-oriented) sensemaking as part of intuiting. Overall, more researchers started to make a clearer distinction between intuition as the outcome of the process and intuiting as the process itself. Another emerging theme, albeit still in its infancy in terms of empirical research, is the dynamics of intuition as a group phenomenon. Let's have a closer look at how each part contributes to our current knowledge in the field.

Part I profiles a series of empirical studies focused on decision making. As a corollary, many of them explore the role intuition plays in expertise (or lack of it). These studies encompass a variety of professional settings, ranging from finance to nursing and military crisis management. Most of them focus on decisions of strategic nature in traditional industry or service sectors, one chapter takes a microscopic view to examine intuition prevalence in individual stages of the strategic process. But there are also a few contributions that investigate specific characteristics of such decision-making processes among entrepreneurs. This part represents a wide range of field settings and methods, yet all chapters have something in common. They paint a picture of a sophisticated interplay between intuition and reasoning, confirming that these often function in tandem for an optimum result. Another emerging theme of relevance for practice is that of contextuality. Several chapters illustrate that the deployment and/or effectiveness of intuition depend on the situation or configuration. Among the most frequently mentioned factors are task familiarity and complexity, degree of uncertainty, and level of experience.

Part II investigates the 'neurophysiology' of intuition and how it relates to affective and sensory aspects. Contrary to the previous notion of affect as an umbrella term, it discerns different types of feelings and sensations, and attempts to link them to specific phases or expressions of intuition. It also demonstrates that non-conscious emotional stimuli may influence decision-making behavior and deployment of intuition, especially when cognitive resources are tied up elsewhere. A rather provocative idea is that humans may process intuitive information differently through three nervous centers: brain, heart, and gut, where empirical research suggests that the overall balance across the centers may impact performance. Interestingly, heart appears to be the only receptor with a distinct gender difference. This conclusion is supported by findings that affect-laden factors trigger a stronger intuitive response in women, which also raises caution about the use of theoretically congruent instruments. Regardless of gender, affect is heavily present also in moral intuition with practical implications for leader development. The overall message encapsulated in this part is that various forms of affect and sensations need to be studied in specific contexts and/or configurations; the original 'generic' approach is becoming obsolete.

Part III provides an incomplete but much needed introduction to cultural and collective views on intuition. Non-Western research in the field, at least what is

published in English, has been scarce so far. In this handbook it is represented by two chapters that hint at an unexplored richness of perspectives. The Japanese contribution offers a rare glimpse into workplace development of intuition through experience in conjunction with logical and holistic thinking. As one of the co-authors noted, intuition in Japanese workplaces is a given (while logic is not). The Chinese study demonstrates on cases from the aerospace industry how a delicate interplay between intuition and deliberation can lead to a breakthrough when conventional thinking is 'stuck.' What both chapters have in common is their high-level holistic approach to different thinking modes. Contrary to the Western paradigm, they do not see them as mutually exclusive and integrate their fractional contributions with more ease. Interestingly, both chapters draw in their theoretical framework on Western concepts and combine them skillfully with traditional native philosophy; a holistic approach seems to permeate even the methodology.

The collective view on intuition is represented by a single chapter that explores not only whether group intuition can occur but if it is possible non-locally, that is, among people who are not physically in the same location. This kind of research is challenging since it assumes interpersonal interaction at a distance that is difficult to explain by means of psychology. To move the investigation forward, some researchers developed a theoretical framework based on quantum physics but there are very few management scholars active in this space. Drawing on such a framework, this chapter suggests new ways of how to study the group phenomenon that has been explored by a few other researchers in local settings but not thoroughly studied so far. It also offers a new explanation for the role of intention, which has been debated in entrepreneurial intuition.

Part IV explores more closely how intuition is used and/or developed in practical settings. The study of work engagement highlights the importance of off-setting intuitive peak moments with relaxation or 'down time' to prevent employee burnout. A great emotional burden is placed also on first-response workers who seem to strengthen their intuition by means of mental simulation that helps them prepare for tragic emergencies. These are examples of work-related situations that nurture intuition but it can be also developed in the classroom, as attested by a university-level entrepreneurship program designed for a finance company. A question arises whether such training could be delivered effectively on a large scale at a younger age. A study of Italian primary school children couched in problem finding suggests that it is indeed possible. It appears that an effective approach to intuition development encompasses problem definition and other problem-solving activities, in which decision making is embedded. This supports the previously noted conclusion that intuition research needs to be broadened beyond the narrow scope of decision making. What all chapters in this part demonstrate is that the use of intuition can be strengthened by training and/or a nurturing environment. They also suggest that effective training can be designed in a multitude of ways, shaped by the specific context.

Part V introduces several new research perspectives. Two of them draw on a verbal approach to surfacing intuition into consciousness so that it can be talked about and shared (which has implications for researching group intuition). One way to do it

is to give the surfaced intuition a persona so that it becomes an independent entity, which is fairly common in artistic circles but less so in management. Another way is to use metaphors (captured in words or images) that are ‘floated’ into consciousness with the help of a language protocol. Both approaches are useful for verbalizing intuition so it can be included in conversations, and thus taken more seriously. They also provide an internal validation for the intuition recipient that makes him/her more willing to speak about it. Finally, practical methods started emerging that give intuition more legitimacy, especially in work situations.

To underline the handbook’s focus on bridging theory and practice, the final chapter attempts to reconcile the opposing views of intuition scholars and practitioners on the role of spontaneity in intuition by attributing the effects to different stages of the process. Moreover, it cautions researchers to examine objectively all phenomena (including various aspects of intuition) before labeling them unscientific. This is seconded by the decision to include in the handbook also studies using methods that have been surpassed by later development because we can learn something of value from their findings.

The outlined content resulted in a truly international handbook, made possible by 43 contributors from 18 countries. Our intuition community continues to grow. Yet, non-Western perspectives are still under-represented and we need to engage with more researchers from other parts of the world. The first step is a further integration and/or reconciliation of Western and Eastern perspectives, based on the currently available research. Another area that requires more attention is creative intuition as boundaries between intuition and creativity remain porous and their interaction has not been fully explored. Similarly, intuition in problem solving has been under-researched, especially in non-creative contexts. It is time to expand the prevalent focus on decision making, which could have implications also for the design of training programs. The initial research into collective and group intuition is promising but more needs to be done in this respect as well, utilizing possibly quantum physics, verbal protocols or other yet-to-be developed methods. And there is more work ahead of us. As researchers started exploring the sensing aspect of intuition, clarity needs to be shed on how it relates to felt sense, interoception and the gamut of terminology used in psychotherapy, movement therapy and other practices under the umbrella of clinical intuition. But until we have at least some of these answers, let’s learn from the chapters in this handbook what we know so far.